

JESUS STANDING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD

Acts 7:54–8:3

Key Verse: 7:55

“But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”

Have you ever felt like you were about to die? Sometimes life gets so bad, we feel crushed or hopeless, with nowhere to turn. At such moments, what can we do? In today’s passage St. Stephen shows us yet another good example. His life is quickly coming to an end. He’s surrounded by people full of violence and hate. Yet even as they’re stoning him, Stephen entrusts his life to Jesus and prays for their forgiveness. How can he do that? What makes him so gracious, so peaceful, so hopeful? God gives Stephen a vision of Jesus. It may seem unrealistic or impractical. But what Stephen sees and what this vision means can truly help us in our lives today. We also see how God uses Stephen’s martyrdom for his own purpose. May God speak to us through his word.

Full of the Holy Spirit, Stephen has just spoken truth to this religious body. How do they respond? Look at 7:54. They’re not interested at all. In fact, his rebuke hurts their pride. The word “enraged” literally means to be cut through with a saw (5:33). They are grinding their teeth at Stephen like angry animals. It may seem extreme. We rarely, if ever, have people hate us so intensely. But Jesus told his disciples, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). In other words, we are hated simply because we believe in Jesus and belong to him. It may seem shocking. But the Bible tells us we should not be surprised when we are hated by the world (1 John 3:13).

Compared to the haters, Stephen is such a contrast. Read verse 55. “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” What enables Stephen to see these things? Again, it says he’s “full of the Holy Spirit” (6:5). In Acts, being filled with the Holy Spirit is the main theme. Over and over it tells us that anyone can receive the Holy Spirit if we repent, believe in Jesus, and begin to obey him.¹ When we’re filled with the Holy Spirit, we, too, can see the things of God (1 Cor.2:10–13). Stephen could have looked at these people and fallen into fear. But the Holy Spirit helped him to gaze up to heaven. The word “gaze” means to look steadily, intently, and with eagerness. Stephen was looking up to God for help. Then the Holy Spirit gave him spiritual insight that pierced right into heaven. We, too, need to gaze up to God until, through the Holy Spirit, we can see his heavenly glory.

¹ 1:5,8; 2:4,33,38; 4:8,31; 5:32; 6:5; 7:55; 8:15,17; 9:17, etc.

What is the glory of God? Words alone cannot suffice to describe it. God's very presence is his glory (Ex.33:14; Deut.4:37). He is glorious in his nature. He's eternal, all wise, almighty, so loving, so holy, so just, so beautiful. He's also glorious in what he does. He not only created the heavens and the earth, he sustains all things and rules over all. He faithfully keeps his promises. Most of all, he sent his Son to suffer, die, and rise again, to save us from our sins and make us heirs of his kingdom. We get so engrossed in this world. We see only people, material things, human struggles, and ourselves, and become spiritually blind. Only when we're filled with the Holy Spirit can God give us a vision of his glory.

What else does Stephen see? Look at verse 55b. "...and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." To the Jewish Council, this was outrageous. They hate even the name of Jesus. They despised him as "this Jesus of Nazareth" (6:14), a lowly carpenter. To them he was a heretic and a blasphemer. They hated him so much, they disgraced him by publicly having him crucified on a cross. But the very one they hated is now standing at the right hand of God. To them it's another blasphemy, as if he's equal with God. But his standing there means he's risen—alive! He's God the Son. Usually the Bible says he's sitting at the Father's side, but here, he's standing. He's watching over his servant Stephen about to be martyred. He's standing in Stephen's favor. He's standing out of his shepherd's heart for Stephen. He's standing up as Judge to rule in his favor, and to be ready to receive him into his kingdom. This Jesus is not aloof or far off from us. He sees and cares deeply about those who love him, serve him, and suffer for him.

At the moment, Stephen faces a painful end of life, and great injustice. But God shows him Jesus standing at his right hand, in order to help Stephen take refuge in him. We all need to see it: Jesus at the right hand of God opened the new and living way, by his blood and through his flesh, for us to join him in God's holy presence (Heb.10:19–20). Jesus at the right hand of God is interceding for us (Rom.8:34). Jesus at the right hand of God is welcoming us, by faith, to join him there. Psalm 16 tells us that at God's right hand, we will never be shaken by anything or anyone. At God's right hand, we will be full of joy, security, and the greatest delight forever (Ps.16:8–11; cf. Acts 2:25). This hope gives us peace and confidence, no matter what we have to go through. Just a glimpse of this glory prepares Stephen for what's about to happen (cf. Heb.12:1–3).

And there's one more thing here. Read verse 56. Stephen calls Jesus "the Son of Man." What does it mean? Firstly, as the Son of Man, Jesus is fully human. He was made like us in every way, tempted in every way, yet was without sin (Heb.2:17–18; 4:15). Next, "Son of Man" means he's the Suffering Servant. In the Book of Ezekiel, God addresses the prophet as "son of man" 93 times, meaning he's a suffering servant living in the "rebellious house" of Israel. It

was only a foreshadowing of Jesus. Jesus the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God is the one who was humiliated, wounded, crucified and cursed on a cross for all our sins. Thirdly, “Son of Man” means he’s the Sovereign Ruler. The prophet Daniel wrote, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan.7:13–14). Daniel could see that this “son of man” would be endowed with God’s glory as ruler of all peoples, ruler of an eternal kingdom. The Apostle John saw a similar vision (Rev.1:12–16). No earthly powers can withstand the authority and power of Jesus the Son of Man. No one trying to control matters on earth can control, deceive or manipulate our Risen Lord Jesus, change his will, or stop what he will do. Jesus the Son of Man is the Shepherd of all his churches, and he sees everything that’s going on. Most of all, Jesus the Son of Man sends the Holy Spirit to accomplish God’s will to bring people from all the nations back to his glorious kingdom through the gospel.

The people surrounding Stephen are trying to snuff out the gospel. People have always tried to do so. Stephen’s audience refuses even to listen to his vision of Jesus. They cry out with a loud voice, stop their ears, rush together at him, cast him out of the city and stone him (57–58a). They’re like a bloodthirsty mob. But Jesus continues his gospel ministry despite them (5:38–39). There’s a warning here: anyone can become like these people if we refuse to repent.

Luke adds one more detail. Look at verse 58b. “And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” They’re taking off their garments in order to better throw stones at Stephen. Laying their garments down at the feet of someone is their way of acknowledging that person’s authority (4:35,37; 5:2). This young man named Saul already has authority among his peers, due to his unusual zeal for the law (Gal.1:14). Saul is not only watching over their garments but also approving of Stephen’s killing (8:1a; 22:20). To draw the reader in, Luke only mentions the young man briefly here.

The main person is still Stephen. Look at verse 59. “And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” It was like our Lord’s prayer to the Father while being crucified (Luke 23:46). But here, Stephen is praying to the Risen Lord Jesus himself, calling on his name for salvation (Acts 2:21; 9:14,21; 22:16). With the vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, Stephen could finish his life with living faith in Jesus, even while being stoned. Look at verse 60. “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” It was his final similarity to Jesus, who prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive

them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34a). Instead of anger, hatred or revenge, Stephen died with the genuine, forgiving heart of Jesus. It was the Holy Spirit in him who made Stephen like Jesus. Because he cried out these words with a loud voice, everyone there could hear him, including Saul. It says he “fell asleep.” He went to be with Jesus in glory. Stephen’s name means “crown of victory.” He overcame all the powers of darkness around him, all the rejection and hatred, and finished his life with the victory of faith in Jesus (1 John 5:4). In this, Stephen became a shining example for all those who truly believe in Jesus.

Look at 8:1b. “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout all the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” This persecution became a watershed moment in Christian history. Though the original apostles of Jesus stay in Jerusalem for the time being, their large, beautiful fellowship is mostly scattered. In a sense it seems sad. But God is using this persecution to accomplish his own will. As the Risen Jesus told his disciples, “...you will be my witnesses...in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (1:8b). Generally, we would like to build a large, loving church community, where we can feel safe and enjoy. But God’s master passion is to spread the good news of Jesus to all people, and sometimes he does whatever it takes to make that happen.

Still, this situation is painful. Look at verse 2. “Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.” Though it’s forbidden to mourn someone stoned for blasphemy, these devout men cannot help but make great lamentation over this great injustice, the shedding of the blood of Stephen, a witness of Jesus. And this threat to Jesus’ followers is not over. Look at verse 3. “But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” In his rash behavior, Saul has become “a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent” (1 Tim.1:13). As a famous saying goes, “Methinks he doth protest too much.”² It means that somebody denying something very loudly may be hiding the truth. In his zealous persecution of Christians, Saul seems to be suppressing his own guilty conscience, as well as trying to ingratiate himself with the Jewish leadership. At present, Saul’s persecution hits the new Christian movement like a furious storm. But a Christian author from the second century famously wrote: “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.”³ God uses Stephen’s spirit of martyrdom, his undying love for Jesus and courageous faith, to inspire so many who are facing the same threat. God wants us all to live willing to die for Jesus (Rom.8:36).

² From *Hamlet*, similar to the words of Queen Gertrude in Act III, Scene II.

³ Tertullian (AD 160–240).

Let's read our key verse, verse 55, again. May God fill our hearts with this vision of Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God, so that we may really take refuge in him, and give our lives fully for the gospel as he did.