

July 28, 2013
Church Planting

Be Prepared!
Acts 7:54-8:1

Opening words: This summer we are looking at the first eight chapters of the Book of Acts. I have called this sermon series, *Church Planting*. So much has happened to this point. The Holy Spirit was unleashed on the world and the church was created. Lives were being changed. The disciples were transformed into apostles, who began to flex their spiritual muscles. Under their leadership, individuals were healed and thousands were experiencing the power of the resurrected Jesus. Two weeks ago, we learned the church had grown beyond Palestine. Last week, we spent time with the rising star in the church, Stephen. This week his story continues - you remember his story:

Stephen was a convert to the faith and was respected by the entire body. That respect gained him a seat on the first committee in the history of the church. However, he was respected for more than his administrative skills. He was respected for his spiritual prowess. He was the first one, besides the Apostles, who performed miracles. Those miraculous signs and wonders led to his arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin. Prior to our reading today, we are told Stephen had a perfect handle on God's plan of salvation. He told them they were nothing more than pawns. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice; Jesus was the world's only hope of salvation. These words were difficult for the Sanhedrin to hear and they emotionally responded to them. What we heard today is the Stephen farewell scene. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 7:54-8:1. Let me call this message *Be Prepared!*

Acts 7:54-8:1 ⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

¹ And Saul approved of their killing him.

If you haven't heard, it's a boy! The longest pregnancy in the history of the world has finally come to an end. On Monday, July 22, 2013, Kate Middleton and Prince William welcomed their first born into the world and the world was waiting for him.

They named him George. In that crowd of waiters were his great-grandmother Queen Elizabeth and his grandfather Prince Charles. This is the first time in nearly one hundred years four monarchs have been alive at the same time. It really is something! The announcement was a piece of history and the world celebrated. Depending on his longevity, he may be sitting on the throne during the twenty-second century!

It is always exciting when a baby is born. I am not just talking about the royal family. I am talking about commoners like us! The crowd is smaller, but the celebrating is just as sincere. After months of waiting the baby finally arrives. The honored are invited to the hospital. One by one they file in to see the newest addition. Everyone counts ten fingers and toes. Everyone lifts up the tiny cap to examine the few strands of hair. Everyone hopes the baby will open its eyes so they can get a look at the color. Everyone asks the questions. What is the baby's name? How much does the baby weigh? How long is the baby? Is the baby a good sleeper? When do you have to go back to work? I will admit it. One of the things I like best in my job is going to the hospital to see the newest addition to our congregation. It is always exciting when a baby is born. You know it is true. It is easy to talk about birth. It is not so easy to talk about the today's topic, death! If you have a hard time talking about death, say, **"Amen!"**

At the very heart of this morning's scripture lesson is that uncomfortable topic. I feel like we were just introduced to Stephen and now he is gone. He was the rising star of the early church. Everyone respected him, and why not? We were told last week he was the first Apostle to perform a miracle. He was not just telling people about Jesus. He was demonstrating to them that God was still with them. Everyone is happy except one small, yet powerful, group, the Sanhedrin. They were the Supreme Court of the orthodox faith. Like Jesus and Peter in the past, they have Stephen arrested. His trial does not go well. In the section prior to our reading, we are told he addresses them with little respect. In bold words, he tells them about God's plan of salvation. Jesus was the final act of love. The problem is, they arranged his death. This is more information than they wanted. According to today's teaching, they react to his words in a violent way. In an emotional rage, they drag him out of the city and stone him to death. The light that shined so brightly in the beginning of the day was now extinguished. It is at this moment the text begins to speak to us. There is no other way to say it. Stephen is dead. On the day he was born, his world shed tears of joy. Now, his world was shedding tears of sorrow.

Death is never an easy topic to address. I am not sure why. Just like birth, it comes to each one of us. No one gets out of this world alive. The mortality rate of this room is 100%. Some will leave sooner; some will leave later. However, everyone must leave. You are not that special. Death does not discriminate. It takes the young and the old. It takes every race. Have you ever wondered how long you will live? I think I will live to about ninety. Have you ever wondered what month you are going to die? I have never liked the month of March. Maybe that is a clue?

Have you ever wondered what day of the week you will die? I never have liked Tuesdays. Will your death be a long drawn-out affair, spending your final days alone in some institution? Will your death be sudden, like Stephen's? That is how I would like to go.

Today, I want to ask you three questions about your death. I have the license to ask you these questions because part of my job is to prepare you for eternity. How prepared are you for eternity? These are the three questions I want to look at today.

1. Are you prepared to die socially?
2. Are you prepared to die personally?
3. Are you prepared to die spiritually?

The correct answers are illustrated for us in today's text about Stephen. However, this message is not so much about dying. It is about living life to the fullest! If you are ready to look at those three questions, say, "**Amen!**" Mark Twain once said, "*The fear of death follows the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.*"

Are you prepared to die socially?

One of the great Bible stories comes from the fourth chapter of Genesis. How well do you remember your family history? Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. They came from the same biological parents but they, personally, were completely different. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. In time, both men sacrificed to God. Cain brought fruit; Abel brought meat. You can call it favoritism, but God preferred Abel's offering, the meat. (Can you really blame him?) Cain gets his feelings hurt and positions himself to do something ugly. The story ends when Cain kills Abel. This story can teach us a variety of things. One of those things is the value of human relationships. How are all the relationships in your life? Are there any relationships in your life that are near death?

The Bible does not really give us much detail, but it is safe to say Stephen had healthy relationships. Everyone in the church respected him. It is safe to say that everyone in his life respected him. Does everyone in your life respect you? How many damaged relationships are in your life? I am not just talking about your siblings. I am talking about everyone, your parents, children, neighbors and co-workers. Are there words you would like to say to someone but you haven't had the courage? Don't wait! This is question number one. If this was the last day of your life, would you be prepared socially? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Are you prepared to die personally?

On Tuesday morning I was having breakfast with a friend. I told him I was going to Kiev for ten days on August the fifth. Kathryn and I will fly into Kiev and take a train to the western part of that country. We have been told by our contact that we are going to meet some incredible people! I am so excited. I love to travel and I need an adventure in my life. It is a big world and I want to see as much of it as possible.

He asked, "Why?" I told him, to look for future mission trip sites. The landscape of the Russian trips is changing, so we are taking the next few mission trips to the Ukraine. He spent the next few minutes telling me in a nice way that I was a fool. He tried to discourage me from going. I have never understood why people do that? Why do so many people discourage others from doing something? I was not inviting him to come. I was telling him I was going. It is my passion and it is part of my calling. Have you ever discouraged someone from doing something they wanted to do? Let me ask you this question:

What do you still want to do with your life? I am not just talking about traveling to odd places. I am talking about your passion. Stephen was passionate about Jesus! What are you passionate about? Is there some place in this world you still want to go? Is there some book you would still like to read? Is there some language you would still like to study? When Thomas Jefferson died, he was studying German. Is there someone you would still like to meet? Don't wait! This is question number two. If this was the last day of your life, would you be prepared personally? Have you done everything you want to do? What do you still want to experience? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Are you prepared to die spiritually?

On Wednesday, Joyce Aey and I traveled to Jamestown, New York. We visited fourteen members of this church who participated in this year's youth mission trip. It was the best day of my week. They are fun to be with and I am so proud to be their pastor. We surprised them with our visit and we were welcomed sincerely. We spent the afternoon together by visiting the shore of Lake Erie. We ate at a restaurant overlooking the lake. It is safe to say the energy level and the morale of the group was high. The one who had the most energy and the highest morale was Ricky. You know Ricky. He is the one who always has a question. Geography didn't change him. As I was standing on the shore of that great lake he came up to me and asked in that soft voice, "Russ, have you ever read the sacred text of the Dalai Lama?" I said, "No, Ricky. I am not interested in the Dalai Lama. I am only interested in Jesus. The only one who really matters is Jesus." I don't want to sound critical. Ricky is one of my favorite people in this world, but we don't send these young people on mission trips to learn about the Dalai Lama. We send these young people on these trips to experience Jesus. He is their only hope of salvation. Heaven won't be the same without each one of them. Heaven wouldn't be the same without you. The one thing no one can question is Stephen's salvation. He has a vision of heaven. This is question number three, the final question. If this was the last day of your life, would you be prepared spiritually? Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, say, "**Amen!**"

You do not have to be a Civil War expert to know the name Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. He was respected by both friend and foe for his courage during battle. He was once asked about the source of that courage. This was his response:

My religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God (knows the) time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter where it may overtake me. That is the way all men should live, and then all would be equally brave.

It is interesting to note that Jackson died eight days after that quote. He was accidentally shot by one of his own soldiers. That shot caused him to lose his arm, which led to pneumonia. I have to ask you:

Are you prepared to die? Stephen woke up that morning and didn't have a clue he would be gone that night. Maybe that will be our story? Only God knows. That is why you must always be prepared. Are you prepared to die **socially**? Are all the relationships in your life perfect? What would you still like to say? Are you ready to die **personally**? What do you still want to do? Are you ready to die **spiritually**? Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? I hope so. Heaven wouldn't be the same without you! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"