

Rev Malcolm Macleod: Acts 6

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Date: 15 October 2017

Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Let's turn again to Acts chapter 6. And as I said, we're going to look at this whole passage, and it's a long section.

Please don't be too alarmed by that. It will cover it in four points. So, but just to focus our thinking, let's look at verse 15 of chapter 6, where we're reading about Stephen as he speaks to the people. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. How can it be so? I wonder, do you see that as you look in this direction?

I fear not. I fear you don't. And that has caused me, over the course of this year, more than any other year, to think long and hard about good Christian character.

I think that there are many of us in recent, over the course of this year, it has been a challenging year to say the least for many of us. And it has caused me, and I suspect others, as I said, to reflect on how we should live our lives.

[1 : 22] I think if we are going to be perfectly honest with one another, and I speak just now, particularly to those of us who call ourselves Christians, I think that we have failed. I think we fail individually.

Many times daily, I said that in the address to the younger ones, but we fail collectively as well as a church. And many of the messages that I've shared over the course of the year in different places have focused on the whole subject of how should we live.

It's an important subject because time and again we're reminded of that question, we're given clear direction on how we should live as followers of Jesus.

How should we live? And this morning, as we turn to this passage, there are two really crucial subjects being unpacked here, and one of them yet again is that subject of Christian character.

There's a wonderful example here of godly Christian character, and how should we live our lives.

But there's also something else here, something that I believe, and as many of you know, I believe, is important to the Lord.

[2 : 45] And that's the persecution of his people. Two key subjects for me this year, good Christian character and the suffering church. Now, as I've read the passage, it's very clear to us that it's not terribly palatable.

It's not nice. It ends badly in many regards. It ends with the murder. We won't gloss it over, it's not a killing, it's nothing accidental, it is a murder of one of God's faithful servants.

Now, before you are tempted to switch off, and we're masters at that, aren't we? We're masters at looking attentive with shut ears.

Let's not do that this morning, because there's something here for all of us. Those who truly walk with the Lord are men and women and boys and girls of a bigger picture.

We walk and follow, and walk in a bigger picture, where we have to admit that we don't know what's going on. I have to stand here and say to you, if you ask me why on earth is God allowing so many houses in California to be destroyed?

[4 : 04] Why is he allowing these things to happen? Why is he allowing all that's going on across the world, particularly in the Middle East? Why is he allowing that to happen? I don't know. I don't know.

But this I do know. God is sovereign. And being someone of the bigger picture, I understand that in all things God works together for good.

Now, how does God work for good in this dreadful situation? Well, in a number of ways. He, look at chapter eight and verses four and the following verses, we read there that as a direct consequence of the murder of Stephen, his people are scattered across the land, but they don't just go and hide.

They continue preaching the message of the gospel. They just preach about Jesus. And because they're speaking about Jesus and honouring Jesus, we read that joy follows joy comes through hearing about Jesus.

Joy comes in your heart through following Jesus. Chapter 11, same again. We're given a reference at verses 19 and onward.

[5 : 17] There's a scattering again. It's a reference to what happened when Stephen was killed. And God's people are scattered across the land and father even father a field, but they carry on preaching Jesus.

And the church grows a great number believed and turned to the Lord. This message of the martyrdom of Stephen serves two purposes for us.

It reminds us, as I said, of a wonderful character in Stephen, a man that we could do well to follow and imitate in our lives as followers of Jesus.

We can learn a lot from him. It also reminds us that God has a greater plan. And part of that plan involved you and me hearing the gospel.

And in order for us to hear the gospel, Stephen had to die in the way he did. So this passage reminds me that God loves me.

[6 : 22] It doesn't remind me, as we might be inclined to, to conclude just by reading the passage, oh, these men are so wicked. They are. But more than that, it reminds me of these two things.

Some of God's people are so faithful, right to the very last breath. I want to be like that. And more importantly, God loves me because in the midst of this turmoil, he had a plan that I would hear the gospel through the scattering of his people.

So hold these things in your mind and let's now turn to the passage. And I have said, as I said, four points, and we're going to take the big section in those points. The first one is verses one to seven of chapter six.

And here is the heading. Stephen was prepared to serve. All of the headings relate to Stephen, which in turn relate to us. We can learn from them. Stephen was prepared to serve.

Now I have a question. Are you prepared to serve? Are you prepared to serve? Are you prepared to do whatever it is that the Lord asks of you?

[7 : 33] Now for all of us, that's going to be different. Perhaps for some of you, the question is very, very simple. Are you prepared after years and years and maybe years and years and years of coming into church and hearing the gospel preached?

Are you prepared about the need of Jesus? That's the question I believe you would ask of you if you're not walking with the Lord. If you haven't turned away from your sin and trusted in Christ.

Are you prepared to do that? For others, maybe the question is a little more involved. Are you prepared to go?

Are you prepared to go? Wherever that might be. Well, Stephen was. Stephen's life was completely transformed and we don't know when he met with Jesus.

We don't know where we don't know what happened, but the evidence is very clear. His life has been completely turned around and he's a very different character. And we read in this section that as the church expands, so do the needs.

[8 : 42] And wherever the church expands and the needs expand, you're going to find people who are grumbling and complaining. And that's exactly what happens. Our, our widows are not being fed.

So the needs are enormous. The apostles can't do everything. We need to devote ourselves to prayer and ministry of the word. The decision is made to appoint a men, a number of men to serve the tables.

Now, all that means is to serve in a practical way. So if we're going to label this office, let's call them deacons because they're tending to the fabric and the needs of the church.

But we need to understand something. The role wasn't then and isn't today for anyone and everyone.

It's for a very definite type of person. The passage is very clear. Verse three, they are to be men of good repute, spirit filled and wise we're told.

[9 : 41] And it appears that Stephen was the immediate choice as they were thinking, well, who shall we, who, who fits that? Well, who shall we choose? Oh, Stephen. Why?

Well, because Stephen's a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. And he and the six others we read, we read in that section, were commissioned to this role within the church through prayer and the laying on of hands.

It's an office. It's a ministry. That's what God was asking of them. And they said, yes. So what was the outcome of this? Well, it's threefold that are and it's important to notice these things.

When you think of the underlying problems that were present in the church before these men were appointed, order was restored. When the deacons were appointed, order was restored.

The apostles were able to fulfill their ministry. We will devote ourselves to prayer and preaching.

And so the third thing is that the church grew as a result.

[10:43] It's astonishing what happens when we are obedient to what God is asking of us when we are prepared to serve.

So we can all make a difference in the church, either at home or wherever it might be across the globe. Stephen was prepared to serve. Are you? Are you prepared to serve?

The second point, Stephen pursued the lost, verses 8 to 15 of chapter 6. Now, it's a mistake to think that passion for preaching or the lost for reaching the lost only belongs to those who stand on the platform here.

Or it only belongs to those who are street pastors or those who go out in chaplaincy ministry or those who go out as missionaries.

It's not the call and the passion of the Great Commission should belong to every single person who is redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

[11:52] If you don't follow of Jesus today, the Great Commission to go out with the Gospel is as much yours as it is mine.

Stephen did far more than serve tables. He was engaged in a powerful outreach. Do you see that in verse 9? He was involved in going out to share about Jesus.

How can I keep quiet when there's a fire burning within me? He tells about Jesus and there is a demonstration of signs and wonders. It's amazing. It's a remarkable ministry. But that's not something to dwell on because Luke doesn't dwell on it.

That's just an aside. His ministry was spectacular, but it was equally involving something else. And perhaps this is more important because more time is given to it.

Stephen's ministry involved powerful apologetics. Stephen was able to defend his faith. Stephen was able to answer the questions. If someone comes up to us outside and says, why do you follow Jesus?

[13:01] Can you answer that question? It's not as easy as it sounds. Well, because he changed my heart. How did he change your heart? Well, I once was and now I am. We need to think about that and we need to be prepared and keep constantly working on this process of how are we going to speak about our faith and defend our faith.

Stephen was very good at that. And if we are going to stand for Jesus in a hostile world like Stephen, then we can assume we're going to face opposition.

And that's exactly what he faces in verses 9 to 14. The more learned, gather together to oppose him. Or while you say this, but listen, that's not the way it is.

Well, the people dispute with him. But what's the response? Look at verse 10. It's a wonderful verse. They could not withstand the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke. Isn't that remarkable? Now, what was the key to Stephen's victory? How was he so successful? Well, I think that the key to his victory is this. He wasn't expressing his own opinion.

[14:17] He wasn't saying, well, I think he was preaching Christ crucified. He wasn't looking for friends. He wasn't looking for favour. He was preaching the truth.

Paul would go on to say, well, this truth is a stumbling block to Jews and it's folly to Gentiles.

But for those who are called, who are both Jews and Gentiles, it's Christ, the power and wisdom of God. So Stephen encountered opposition, but he encountered something else as well.

And this is something we can have as we go out in the name of Jesus. He encountered God's presence. Now, that might not be immediately obvious to you, but nevertheless, it's true.

We're not reading about four men in a fiery furnace or three being joined by a fourth. We're not reading about the jaws of the lion being clamped shut. And just as powerful a way as God was present with the men in Daniel's day, he's present with Stephen.

[15 : 31] He's facing injustice. He's facing lies. But God pours out his presence on him. He can do that for you as well and for me. And everyone around Stephen looked at him and thought that they see.

His face is like the face of an angel. How is that? Because the presence of God is upon him. So Stephen pursued the lost into the darkness because that's what was about him, assured of the presence of God.

And so can we. So can we. We can go in that same confidence that God is with us wherever we go and whatever we do for him. The third point. This is from chapter seven, the first 53 verses that we haven't read. I grant it.

And I'm hoping that maybe you'll go back this afternoon and just have a read of it just to fill in the blanks if you have any. But the third heading is that Stephen preached the truth. The truth.

Now we could give this title, this section, another title. We could say, the truth hurts. And so it does. The truth hurts when we receive it. Nobody likes to be told their shortcomings.

[16 : 59] I can guarantee you if I was to walk up to you and say, well, there's this wrong in your life and there's that wrong in your life. And you know, I don't like the way you do that. You would be far from happy. You would be angry. You would be self conscious, uncomfortable, restless.

Yet here's the thing. The truth, when it is spoken in love, only has one objective and that's restoration.

Moving from where we are to where we should be is the objective of genuine truth spoken in love. And that's the only kind of truth we should speak as Christians, those of us who are. And that's the truth that Stephen is communicating here. Yes, he's exposing some failing, serious failings, but he's doing it with the objective of people moving from where they are to where they should be.

He's been falsely accused of blasphemy against Moses and God. He's been falsely accused of speaking against the holy place on the law. All of these things. What does that speak of? Well, surely for me, that tells me how legalistic the people are.

[18 : 23] They're more interested in Moses than they are in God. He comes first, the law over grace. He's accused of blaspheming all of these things. But how does he respond?

Well, as I said, Stephen preached the truth and he gives the high priest and those who are listening, brothers and fathers, he gives them a history lesson and in that history lesson, he covers four key points.

And I'm going to cover them very quickly. There is no time to say too much about them other than to give you some quick headings. In chapter seven, verses one to six, he reminds them of the privilege that is bestowed on them.

You are privileged people, he says. You remember where you came from? Do you remember that Abraham, our father, sat in darkness? He was living in idolatry.

He was a million miles away from the God of heaven, the true God. But God saw him and God called him and through that call, you are where you are today.

[19 : 31] He speaks of the privilege bestowed on the people. Secondly, verses seven to 38, he speaks of the promise that has been given to the people.

Now here we go into the whole story of Moses and what happened in Egypt. The promise of the land of Canaan. Once this land is cleared of those who hate God, those who live badly before him, those who do wicked things, this land will be yours because you are my chosen treasured possession.

You are people of promise. But then the third thing he reminds them as he speaks in love is in verses 39 to 43. He speaks of the punishment upon the people. You see, yes they were privileged and yes they were given a promise, but how did they respond?

As Moses is up on the mountain meeting with God in their line of vision, there is a smouldering mountain where God is present and their leader is in his face.

And they look and in their minds they go back to Egypt and they ask for a golden calf and they bow down and they worship a false God and then they rise up and play.

[20 : 57] How can you live like that in the very presence of God? Well maybe some of us are. Maybe some of us are. Maybe some of us are.

For that there was punishment. God punished them. And then he reminds me of something else, the fourth thing in verses 51 to 53.

And this is a devastating and it's a solemn indictment against the high priest and the people. Stephen speaks of the persecution that they are inflicting and have done in the past. And here he's talking about the prophets. God sent you the prophets and God warned you and God spoke of hope through the prophets. God told you that the Messiah would come, but how did you respond? You pursued them to death and that darkness and wickedness and defiance culminated in verse 52 in the death of the righteous one, the Messiah, Jesus. Well, did you enjoy hearing that history lesson? Maybe you thought I was preaching brimstone on fire, but that's the truth.

[22 : 14] And that's the truth that Stephen preached to the people of God. Well, not only does hearing the truth hurt emotionally, speaking the truth hurts physically. And we'll see that in a moment.

But before I move on to the last point, I just want to just point out something that maybe you've seen yourself. Do you see the similarity between Stephen's suffering and the suffering of Jesus? Remember what I said at the very beginning. The objective is, let us be more like the Lord. Let us think deeply about our own walk and our character as followers of Jesus if we are. But Stephen is so like Jesus. Like Jesus, Stephen came to serve the people.

And as he served the people just like Jesus, he ministered powerfully. And for that reason, just like Jesus, Stephen came into conflict with the religious leaders.

And just like Jesus, Stephen endured lies and false accusations. And this we'll see in a moment means that he suffers at the hands of the people he sought to serve, just like Jesus.

[23 : 34] Living faithfully before Jesus is costly. Recently, I sat with someone and they were sharing with me a level of suffering that I don't think, and I say this with the greatest respect to all of you.

I don't think there's anyone in here that has endured the suffering that this person is enduring as we meet together. This person spoke to me about how they feel that at this particular time all they are experiencing is the hatred of the people.

That's the way it feels to them. They're telling me how they are living under the lies of the people. They thought they were friends. They're telling me how they are so aware of the rejection of the people who are once their supporters.

And as I'm listening to this, I'm thinking, well, what do we say to that? And all that's in my mind is this. How they're not very comforting, the words I have, some pastor.

How blessed you are. You are walking in the very footprints of Jesus.

[25 : 01] The very footsteps that you're taking, Jesus has taken before you. And for that reason, you can be fully assured that he not only understands what you're going through, but he is walking with you in it.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven.

For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. There's a cost in walking with Jesus.

And if you are enduring that yourself today, remember the Lord is with you.

He has gone there before you. Stephen preached the truth and he was about to pay the ultimate price for doing so. That leads us to our final point in verses 54 to 60. And it's simply this. Stephen persevered to the end.

You know, we can cross a line. It's difficult to go back once you've crossed the line and that's certainly what he has done. He has exposed the failings and the shortcomings of the people and he has stirred them up to fury.

[26 : 18] It doesn't verse, don't these verses 54 to 60 just paint for us a really sickening picture of how our conduct can be. Not me, Lord. Not me. Is that what you're saying? I wouldn't do that, Lord.

Well, I'm glad you think so, but I'm not so sure. I'm not so sure. When you get caught up in mob mentality and you're looking for someone to blame, this mob turns on Stephen and they have one intention to kill him.

But look at his reaction as we look through these verses quickly. Stephen again flooded by God's grace. What does he do? How does he respond? He is focused on that which is above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

He looks up and he sees an open heaven and he sees his saviour and he perseveres to the end and just like the Jesus that he loves and serves, what does he say?

He appeals for forgiveness for the very people who are sending him into the Lord's presence with such violence.

[27 : 30] Don't hold this sin against them. Isn't that remarkable? Now, does God answer prayer? Does he answer prayer? Do you believe that God answers prayer today? Do you believe that out of the depths as you cry to him, he actually hears your words?

Well, the passage tells us that the answer is yes, he does. He hears and he answers and rather than condemn a man to a well-deserved place in hell, he deserved it.

Rather than condemn a man to a well-deserved place in hell, he meets with Saul of Tarsus on a dusty road in the Middle East and shows him his glory, transforms his heart so that he is prepared to serve, gives him a passion for the lost and gives him the power and the ability to preach the truth and gives him the grace to persevere to the end.

Everything that Stephen was, Saul became. Does God answer prayers? You bet he does. So don't give up praying for your own Saul.

If you have a Saul of Tarsus, I doubt you have someone so bad, but you might. Don't stop praying for Saul. He may become a Stephen by God's grace. Isn't that wonderful? So in closing then, this morning, do we not stand before a God who is prepared to purge away?

[29 : 22] Just gone. Purge away every single word that you have spoken in hatred towards him.

He's prepared to purge it away. And do you not stand or sit before a God who is able to deal with every single act that you have done in rebellion against him? Is he not able to do that?

Of course he's able to do that. We are standing before a God this morning who not only heard Stephen's cry, don't hold a sin against them.

Forgive them, Lord. He heard and he answered. And because of that, you are here this morning. Don't lose the connection.

You are here this morning. Whether you walk with Jesus or you don't, you are here this morning because of Stephen's prayer that day and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

[30 : 30] That's why you're here because the word came to the Gentiles. The truth came to those who are not you, unless you're a Jew, or you're of Jewish extract today.

We're all Gentiles and the word has come to us in truth because God is so gracious. So how will you respond? How do you respond to this this morning?

How do you respond? Will you be like Stephen? Will you allow God to work in power and transform your heart and your life? Will you allow him to do that? Will you allow him to give you this willingness to serve, this passion for the lost, this ability to preach the truth?

And I'm not talking about preaching standing up here. I'm talking about speaking to your neighbour and telling him about the Lord. Will you allow him to do that? And will you ask him for that grace to endure to the end? What is your answer?

Perhaps you will be like the fool who turned and walked away. Will you turn and walk away? Well, my choice, I choose Jesus. You see, this isn't a message for people who are not saved.

[31 : 46] This is a message for me as well and for every Christian in here. I choose Jesus again this morning. And I chose him yesterday and the day before. And by his grace, I'll choose him tomorrow until I see him face to face.

By his grace, I choose Jesus. And like so many of those we're serving across the nations, I choose to allow God to transform my heart.

I appeal to him to transform my heart, to make me more like his son. Why do I do that? Because I believe that that's his will for my life.

And I think that's his will for your life too. That you would let him transform your heart and become more like Stephen.

But more importantly, to be more like Jesus. So what do you choose? Let's bow our heads together. Our Father in Heaven, I take this word now and cause it to bear fruit, we pray.

[33 : 04] Spoken again just mere words of men. But Lord, your spirit can take it and apply it into our hearts and into our lives. And we appeal to you Lord, that you would do that. That we would become more like your son. And Lord, where there is a heart far from you.

Lord, that you would draw this man or this woman or this young person to follow your son, to walk with Jesus.

And in doing so, you will receive all of the glory and the praise, all that belongs to you. So hear us as we continue on in Jesus' name. Amen.