

Acts 7:54- 8:3 - Fellowship Group Notes – Study (27/28th Nov)

Many people are mainly interested in Stephen because he was the first Christian martyr. However what Luke points us to is not really this at all. Luke points us to see the teaching and death of Stephen in the context of the growth and spread of the gospel and the early church. Luke points us to see how God in his providence and sovereignty can gloriously use persecution as an aid to help the spread of the gospel and the strengthening of his church. God can turn any situation, even the death of one of his servants into something unbelievably powerful and effective. God can even turn those who looked on and approved of the death of Stephen into the greatest of Christians.

- What's the story of Stephen so far? *Being chosen (6:5), seized (6:8-15), speech (7:1-53)*
- Through the whole story of Stephen where do we see his gaze fixed upon? Even in his death?
- Does the death of Stephen remind you of any other death in the bible? Are there any parallels?
- Parallel with Christ's death
 - The elders and scribes condemn Stephen and use false witnesses (Matt 26:59-60, Luke 22:66)
 - The unity amongst the condemners (Luke 23:18)
 - Cast *out* of the city (John 19:17-20, Hebrews 13:12)
 - "Receive my spirit" (Luke 23:46)
 - "Do not hold this sin against them" (Luke 23:33-34)

7:60, 8:2

- Death is a horrible thing. It's not to be romanticised. As Christians we should grieve death even more than non Christians. What was Jesus reaction to death? (John 11:33-38). But though we do and should mourn deeply we hope with a hope even deeper than the mourning (1 Corinth 15:54-57).

God's glorious sovereignty seen in action through persecution

- Thinking elsewhere in the bible what does God achieve by death? In church history where have we seen God working through persecution? Here in this passage what does God achieve through persecution?
- Look at Acts 1:8. What mission does Jesus give his church?
 - How then does God make persecution serve his aim? 8:1, 4.
 - Now look onto Acts 11:19-21. What do you see happening there? How does this tie in with 1:8? (Acts up till now has all been based in or close to Jerusalem but now it spreads out). So the early Christians flee and are spread all over the place and preach the gospel wherever they go (8:4)
 - What other significant thing is achieved and introduced through Stephens's death? (8:1)
- Look at Judges 16:30. How does this truth about Samson relate to Stephen? *It seems more is achieved through Stephens's death than his life.*
- How do we see this truth of God working through persecution in today's church elsewhere in the world?

Application - Persecuted not just for being a Christian

- Think back over church history and look at the story of Stephen. What were Christians of the past killed for? Was it just because they were Christians or was it more specific than that?
 - William Tyndale – killed because (in his own words) "I defy the pope, and all his laws; and if God spare me I will one day make the boy that drives the plough in England to know more of scripture than the pope himself!" What was he killed for? *For upholding the authority and truth of scripture and trying to translate it into English.*

How does this apply to us then?

- These people of church history were killed for a specific reason, for believing a specific truth, for teaching a specific aspect of Christian life. Stephen is killed for speaking out against the Jewish scribes. (Stephen the judged turned the situation upside down and became the judge of the rulers).
- How then should we do this? How do we stand up for a particular truth? Or the way of the Christian life?
- In Britain today most of us aren't going to be persecuted, or even killed for believing in justification by faith alone. But we might well be sidelined; we might well lose some of our own popularity not just in society, in work, in friendships but even in the wider church when we stand up for a particular truth. In years to come we might not just be sidelined, we might be persecuted in the traditional sense, persecuted even to our deaths.

Pray

- That persecuted Christians would continue to boldly proclaim Christ in their lives (if they are persecuted they must be doing something right!).
- Pray for Friends International and UEA Christian Union with regards to the current problems in their work
- That we would stand up for Christ in our own particular setting