

Acts 7:51-60

May 7, 2023

What a way to die! Rocks being flung, and with great force! Again and again. Angry hands picking up stones to throw at him. And there's no stopping them. No one coming to help. No hospice care. No compassion at all. Stephen drops to his knees. The pain is unbearable. Finally, he closes his eyes in death. A peaceful departure? Hardly. He suffered a cruel and violent death. What a way to die!

But why? Why die this way? Was he a serial rapist? A mass murderer perhaps? No. Stephen was stoned to death by an angry mob because he proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Lord and Savior this mob had put to death on a cross. And Stephen called them out. "You murdered the Righteous One," he told them. His words made them angry. His words caused them to pick up stones. Because of Stephen's words he was killed.

Watch what you say. You are likely to offend someone. Especially in our own day. Speak out for the lives of unborn babies and you will face an angry mob. Speak up for marriage as God designed it, one man and one woman for life, and be prepared for the rocks to fly. Affirm what God says in Scripture, that He made them male and female, and be prepared to duck when the stones are hurled.

We live in the same world in which Stephen lived. Do you doubt it? Then repeat Jesus' own words to your non-Christian friends, that He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, that no one comes to the Father in heaven except through Jesus. You may not be stoned to death by your friends. But you will be labeled. You will be seen as a religious fanatic. You will be called intolerant and unloving.

Who needs that? We just want to get along with everyone. We don't want to offend anyone. And we don't want to lose our friends. Then we'd better keep our mouths shut.

Stephen couldn't do that, could he? He could not keep his mouth shut. And you know why? He was filled with the Holy Spirit, it says. Jesus lived in his heart. What he believed in here, he had to speak. It's just as Jesus says in Luke 6: "*Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.*" Whatever is in here (heart) comes out here (mouth).

What's abundant in your heart? Cardinal's baseball? The weather? That's all some people talk about. The hearts of other people must be filled with troubles because out of their mouths, all that others hear are the troubles they are going through. And still other people must have a lot of anger in their hearts because they use their mouths in angry ways. Does your mouth speak of Jesus? It will if Jesus is abundant in your heart.

What about that angry mob. What was abundant in their hearts? Anger. Hate. Certainly not Jesus. What a way to live! To live without Jesus! And you know why they lived like this? You know why Jesus did not live in their hearts? They closed their ears. Again and again their ears were closed to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And when Stephen told them he was seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God, heaven being opened, they covered their ears with their hands refusing to hear of Jesus.

You see, Jesus comes into the heart through the ears. "*Faith,*" says the apostle, "*comes by hearing the Word of Christ.*" What you're doing today. You're here. The Word of Christ is being delivered into your ears. That's how He becomes abundant in your heart, through the faithful hearing of Jesus.

Can you imagine someone sitting here in the pew with their hands over their ears? Who would do that? We're not like that angry mob. Now-a-days people cover their ears by just simply staying away from church on Sunday morning. That's the modern way of closing the ear.

I did that in high school for a while. It was a Lutheran boarding school. I stayed away from church as a freshman for a time. I was covering my ears to Jesus. Until I was rescued by an angry mob of seniors who banged on my door and in a way dragged me to church. No, they actually weren't angry, but they were stern and quite serious. And they were showing love to me, and I'm grateful.

The angry mob that stoned Stephen to death, the worst thing they did in God's eyes was not to stone him to death; it was to cover their ears. They were keeping Jesus out of their hearts; keeping the Holy Spirit from bringing them to repentance and faith in the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

If you, or someone you love, have been covering your ears to Jesus, here is what you need to know – God's heart is abundant with love and with mercy for you and your loved one. No wonder Jesus spoke the way He did. His heart is filled, not with anger, but with compassion. Compassion for sinners like us. When Stephen prayed for the mob that was stoning him to death, he was echoing Jesus' own words from the cross: "*Father, forgive them.*"

That's what God does. He forgives. His heart is filled with it. Even for us who have covered our ears to Him. But your head, your head is always covered with the water of your baptism. And so, you are God's dear child in Jesus whether your hands are covering your ears or not.

But why would you or I cover our ears to Jesus? Because what He has to say to you and to me comes from the abundance of His heart. He has gracious words for you every single day. He has, for you, the word of forgiveness; forgiveness for you, forgiveness for your sins. And yes, you are forgiven. Not just once in your past. Every day His word of pardon is for you.

What a way to live! With Jesus in your heart. With His gracious words in your ears. With His forgiveness washing away all your sins. That's how Stephen lived. And because this is how he lived, he could die in peace. Yes, in peace. Do you think he cared that it was a painful death? That an angry mob full of hate was stoning him? No. He was going to heaven. And so, he was given a peaceful departure in Jesus.

Does it matter if you go to heaven by way of cancer or heart disease, a car wreck or by stoning? No it doesn't. All that matters is that we go there with Jesus. What a way to die! Trusting in Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Crying out, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!*" And believing that He most certainly will.

With Jesus abundant in your heart – that's the way to live, and that's the way to die. Amen.