

# *Stephen vs Paul, Church vs Violence*

Third in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

by

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Acts 6:1-15; 7:51-60

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup>And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup>while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” <sup>5</sup>What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup>They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup>The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup>Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. <sup>10</sup>But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. <sup>11</sup>Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup>They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. <sup>13</sup>They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; <sup>14</sup>for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.” <sup>15</sup>And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

<sup>51</sup>”You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. <sup>52</sup>Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. <sup>53</sup>You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

<sup>54</sup>When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. <sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died.

Early in this series on the Acts of the Apostles I warned you that the glory days of the church's beginning would give way to all manner of conflict. That idealized snapshot of all the believers gathered in awe and wonder, devoting themselves to prayer, and sharing their goods in common would fade, and fade fast. Today we enter the fray of the cost of discipleship, and we see how the Good News of Jesus Christ can quickly meet up with the unwelcomed violence of the world.

Sadly, this story about the Stoning of Stephen is heard today against a back drop of far too much violence in our city, our nation and our world. A friend of mine, who works in an inner city school, just this week suffered the death of a 16-year-old student to gun violence. The child was shot in the chest crossing the street in Kensington. For the last several months, our national attention has rightly been focused on violence against black and brown people. The Louisville police shooting of Breonna Taylor, while she slept in bed, has galvanized outrage and need for reform. Tragically, peaceful protests have also been interrupted by violent response.

Telescoping out from these individual incidents, if you step back and take in the big picture, since January, in these nine months of 2020, thirty-one thousand people have died to gun violence in the United States.<sup>1</sup> And, as we approach the election in November the rhetoric of some important platforms in politics, journalism, and on social media are suggesting that violence might be a justifiable response to an election that does not turn out as they hope. Whether you are the President of the United States, or a political opponent, or an ordinary citizen, this incendiary rhetoric is politically irresponsible and morally reprehensible.

Friends, words matter. And the use of aggressive, threatening words is known to lead to violent actions. As people of God, the church has a strong and powerful word to say against this kind of rhetoric: the word of God, the God who wills life, not death. God's word that ordains

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<sup>1</sup> Gunviolencearchives.org, Sept. 22, 2020.

people to distribute food to the poor, to wait tables in the name of Christ, the word that calls us to work for peace with justice.

Now admittedly, in the case of Stephen, his words are part of what got him into trouble in the end. It may be that calling his hearers “stiff-necked” – accusing them of being obstinate and stubborn, may have not been the best way to end a sermon. Up until then, what do know about Stephen? He was a man “full of faith,” Luke says, and “inspired by the Holy Spirit.” He was selected in the first class of Deacons by the early church, and ordained to the work of waiting tables, taking care of the widows, and the daily distribution of bread. I looked Stephen up in my book of *Saints: Who they are and how they help you*. I learned that Stephen is considered the Patron Saint of Deacons, and also he is to be invoked by those with headaches. “His invocation by headache sufferers,” the book says, “is by association with the sharp pain of his stoning.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, before the stoning, headache is what the congregation may have suffered listening to Stephen. His preaching was prophetic but it sure wasn't very pastoral. Leaders of the temple shouted charges of blasphemy against him; they hauled him before the high priests and council. He proceeded to preach that very long sermon, working his way through the whole history of God's saving activity from Abraham to Jesus. Everybody knows how short the fuse of a congregation is when the sermon runs past the hour, and then there's the matter of his calling his listeners' names! “You stiff necked people,” he said, “forever opposing the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets, just like your ancestors used to do.” He basically bad mouthed their religious forebears all the while criticizing them. When the sermon ended on the high note, “You have become Jesus' betrayers and murderers,” they descended

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Hallam, *Saints: Who they are and how they help you*, p. 111.

upon him, as one preacher has put it, “like killer bees in some low budget horror movie.”<sup>3</sup>

They dragged him outside the city’s walls where they stoned him to death. And look who is there watching the whole thing unfold: Saul. Saul who will be, but is not yet converted, and who will repent of his violence, who will come to believe in Jesus, and who will take on the Christian name, Paul. But back at the stoning of Stephen, Saul first stood by the violence, shaking his head in approval, and that very day, a severe persecution of the church began. Can you imagine the courage it would take to be the next one to stand up and preach in the name of Jesus Christ?

Remarkably, instead of hunkering down, and closing their doors to the world, those early Christians continued their prayer and devotion, they continued to share their things in common, to feed and serve the poor. They went out – into their communities and into the world and bravely proclaimed the love and justice of Jesus Christ.

Columnist and commentator, David Brooks, has written about this moment in history calling us to a higher moral standing. He recalls how Viktor Frankl, writing about the madness of the Holocaust, reminded people that we do not get used to difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses. The meaning of life itself, Frankl argued, comes from three things: the work we offer in times of crisis, the love we give, and our ability to display courage in the face of suffering. Brooks observes that we have become a morally inarticulate culture and this is a moment when these fundamental moral questions apply.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Killer bee quote from Jon Walton, “Luke, the Spirit, and the Church,” preached at First Presbyterian, NYC, 4/28/02.

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, “The Moral Meaning of the Plague,” *New York Times*, 3/26/20.

In this pandemic, and in our bitterly divided nation, we have to hold fast to basic sources of the sacred meaning of life: we work for the good of others in times of crisis, we love, and we display courage in the face of suffering. So what is the ultimate source of our work, our love and our courage? The gospel of Jesus Christ.

Anne Lamott has written with profound insight: “When God is going to do something wonderful, God always starts with a hardship. When God is going to do something amazing, God starts with an impossibility.”<sup>5</sup>

It was a hardship for the early church to have one of their first great preachers die by stoning. And I suppose you could say that what happened next was an impossibility. Because Saul, with that mean head nodding in assent and approval, as each stone was hurled, and who left the scene to further severe persecution against the church, would become Paul, one of the greatest evangelists and preachers of the church. He would repent of his former life of violence and go on to spread the message of the love and mercy, of the grace and peace of Jesus Christ. He would preach boldly – as Stephen did – to the ends of his known world.

In this fraught and all too violent moment – in our city, and our nation, and our world, during this pandemic while the numbers of the dead tick upward of two hundred thousand and counting, it helps to remember: God starts wonderful things in hardship. God works amazing things from impossibility. And God calls us to: good work, love, and courage to further the peace and justice of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*.