

1) INTRO

- Today – November 13, 2016 – is recognized as the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church
- It’s a day when we’re encouraged to reflect on and remember and pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who’re suffering – sometimes even dying – b/c they’re loving Jesus and living for Jesus
 - It’s a day to remember and pray for our 200 million brothers and sisters across the globe who’re suffering for their faith in JC
 - It’s a special day to join in prayer – along w/ our brothers and sister in 130 countries – to pray for fellow believers who’re being tortured and killed for Jesus
- And, the theme verse this year’s 2 Cor 1:5 – “For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ”
 - While our brothers and sisters may be suffering for Christ – even at this very minute, we’re reminded by this verse that Christ gives comfort as well
 - And, it’s a comfort that runs deeper than having a home that’s warm and dry
 - It’s a comfort that runs deeper than having food on the table...or money in the bank...or a good retirement...
 - Instead, it’s a comfort that comes only through the presence of God himself
 - It’s a comfort the HS gives us b/c of his constant and continual presence in our lives
 - 1 Peter 4:14 – “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, b/c the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you”
 - It’s a comfort that rests on the truth of Romans 8 that nothing’s able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord
 - It’s a comfort that looks to the perfect work of JC dying on the cross for our sins and now filling us with his presence by the HS
 - Who’s never ever going to leave us or abandon us when we’re his
 - And, this comfort gives us – as believers – the ability to endure persecution...but not only to endure it, but to shine greatly for Christ in the midst of persecution
 - And, Stephen’s one who did just that
 - He was persecuted and killed for living for Jesus, but that even in the midst of that...his gospel witness for Jesus shines brightly even to this day
- It’s in God’s providence that we’re here in this passage today...where we read of Stephen dying for Christ & shining for Christ in death
 - Months ago when we sat down to put together the Acts sermon schedule, we weren’t aware at the time that this day would be the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church
 - But, here we are...not by coincidence, but by God-incidence

Acts 6:8-8:3**2) 6:8-15**

- As our passage continues on from last week, we see that Stephen’s the central figure God uses here to point to Jesus and glorify himself
- And, we met Stephen quickly last week...he’s one of the seven that was chosen to help care for and serve the widows who were being neglected in the early church
 - And, we saw in v5 last week that he was “a man full of faith and of the HS”

- And, we see this confirmed and lived out in our text this week
- B/c Stephen's a man full of faith and the HS, he's noticed by others as one who's living for Christ
 - And, it makes some people very unhappy
 - Even to the point where they couldn't stand him
 - The HS was at work in Stephen...he was living a radically changed and transformed life b/c of JC his Savior
 - And, some people didn't like that and so he was brought before the council
- And, we're told in our passage who the people were who were angry with him
 - They were Jews of the dispersion
 - So, they were Jews from various places and locations
 - And, they seem to be more jealous of their Jewish religion than others were
 - We see this in the charges they bring against Stephen
 - They accuse him of speaking against both Moses and God
 - And, the false witnesses they recruit accuse him further that he's constantly talking against the temple and the law
 - So we see the enthusiasm these Jews have for upholding the basic tenets of the Jewish faith – namely the temple and the law
 - And, the false testimony against Stephen's that he's been saying that 1) Jesus will destroy the temple and that 2) his teaching changes the customs that Moses handed down
- So, these charges by the Jews are brought before Stephen and, as he's there before the council, they all see "that his face was like the face of an angel" (v15)
 - Just as Moses' face at Mount Sinai (Ex 34) and Jesus' face at the transfiguration (Luke 9), Stephen shows a supernatural calm and peace
 - As one filled with the HS, Stephen takes these accusations as a man full of God's grace and power
 - In the midst of these false attacks, Stephen continues to live out Jesus' words from Acts 1:8 – "But you will receive power when the HS has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"
- When we're God's people, who trust in the saving work of JC in dying for our sin, we're filled with the same Spirit Stephen was filled with
 - And the Spirit helps us – just as he did for Stephen – he helps us to shine brightly for Jesus
 - And, when we're shining brightly for Jesus, people will know we're followers of Christ
 - They'll know b/c our actions are different
 - We don't live life as the world does
 - We don't take part of the sinful entrapments the world offers
 - We're people who're seeking after holy living
 - We don't enjoy the same movies or music or books or jokes or ideologies the world does
 - Our attitudes are different
 - We don't get angry or anxious about gov't elections
 - We'll have peace in our sovereign God whose kingdom we'll dwell in forever and ever
 - We'll have attitudes of joy and prayer and gratitude
 - We'll be filled with love for God and others and be patient with each other
 - We'll exude kindness and gentleness
 - People will know we're Christian b/c our speech is different

- We'll speak words that build up and edify
- We'll point each other and the lost world to JC
- We'll care so much for the souls of others that we'll share the urgency of the need to trust in Jesus and we'll do anything we can to help a brother or sister flee sinful living
- When we're living by the power of the HS, we'll be different
 - People will see Jesus
- Do people see Jesus in us – individually and as a church – b/c we're living by the power of the HS?
- Do people see the witness of Christ in the work of the HS in us?
 - They saw it in Stephen's life
 - And that's why they're coming after him
- Stephen lived out Acts 1:8
 - He received power from the HS to be Christ's witness...and people saw Jesus in him
 - And, he received power from the HS in the midst of persecution to point people to Jesus
 - And, we see this in chapter 7

3) 7:1-53

- Once these false accusations were brought against Stephen, the high priest allows him to offer his defense
 - But, what's interesting's that his "defense" is an exposition of the God's working in the OT and how the OT all points to salvation in Jesus, "the Righteous One" of v52
- Stephen's speech in chapter 7's more of a defense of pure Christianity and God's way of worship
 - Which the Jews didn't have right...including the Jews Stephen's speaking to here
 - So, Stephen takes the time to unpack the truth of the Christian faith and its history as recorded in the Jewish Scriptures
 - And, he unpacks this by beginning with Abraham, then moving to Joseph, then to Moses, and to David and Solomon, and then to the prophets
 - If you ever want a brief overview of the OT, this is the place to go
- Stephen's speech is where God unpacks three themes that fly in the face of the Jews here
 - The 3 major themes that're unpacked are these:
 - 1) God's activity's not bound to the geographical land of Israel
 - 2) True worship's not confined to the Temple
 - 3) The Jews have always rejected God's representatives
- So, in giving his defense to the Jews here, Stephen goes after each one of these major themes
- And, he begins with the point that God's not bound to the geographical land of Israel
 - This makes sense knowing that Stephen's accusers were Jews of the dispersion...they were from various places
 - So, it makes sense that they'd see a great significance in regards to the geographical land of Israel
 - But, Stephen shows that God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia (vv2-3) and Harlan (v4)
 - He shows that God blessed Joseph in Egypt (vv9-16)
 - God spoke to Moses in the desert at the burning bush (vv30-34)
 - God performed great wonders and signs in Egypt, the Red Sea, and in the desert and in giving his people the law at Mount Sinai (vv36-38)
- Stephen also shows his accusers that true worship's not confined to the Temple
 - We see that the burning bush was holy ground where Moses had to remove his sandals (v33)
 - We see that Moses encountered and worshiped God at Mount Sinai

- vv48-50 shows that God doesn't dwell in houses made by hands...this is a quoting of Isaiah 66:1-2
- Stephen's showing that God's not dependent on a temple
- The last thing Stephen points out to his Jewish accusers is that they've rejected God's representatives throughout their history
 - We see that Joseph was rejected by the patriarchs (v9)
 - Moses was rejected when we tried to stop a fight between two Jews (vv26-29)
 - And, v35 shows that this Moses was sent as Israel's deliverer
 - The Jews rejected the leadership of Moses and instead bowed down to a golden calf (vv39-43)
 - Then ultimately, Stephen concludes in vv51-53 by called his accusers stiff-necked people who're uncircumcised in heart and ears and who've always resisted God, the HS
 - And, he accuses them of resisting God just as their fathers throughout history have
 - And, the ultimate rejection Stephen points out is the Jews rejection of the the Righteous One in v52
 - He points out to them that they betrayed him and murdered him...the ultimate rejection of "the prophet like me" that Moses spoke of in v37
 - And, ultimately he points out that they're the ones who've rejected the law b/c they rejected Christ, who the law pointed forward to (v38)
 - The law doesn't give life, Jesus gives life
 - The law points out our need for a Savior
 - And, Jesus is our perfect Savior who's the only one who ever perfectly kept the law
 - And, when we trust in him as Lord and Savior, his perfection's what God sees rather than our gross sin against God and his perfect law
 - Thank you, Jesus, our Righteous One!
 - So, Stephen turns from being the accused to being the accuser
 - He's direct and straight-forward and clear in the fact that they've rejected God himself in JC
 - The joke's been made here: what happened to Stephen and his angelic face?
 - There's nothing soft and sweet about him anymore
 - But, Stephen's much like Christ here
 - Jesus was the epitome of the love of God...yet he also expressed the wrath of God against hypocrisy...especially against the Pharisees
 - And, this is the same type of crowd that Stephen's dealing with here
 - And, as we look at Stephen's accusers, we see a great danger
 - We see the danger of knowing the Word, but not understanding it or believing it
 - We see how this is true in the history of Israel from chap. 7 here
 - We also see how this is true of Stephen's accusers too
 - The Jews who Stephen was speaking to knew all about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, the temple
 - But, they didn't see the storyline/the common thread that all pointed to Jesus and the coming indwelling of the HS to every believer
 - May we constantly pray that God'll give us ears to hear
 - That he'll give us hearts that understand and believe
 - That he'll help us eyes to see Jesus in the pages of his Word that he's given us
 - All our knowledge of the Word means absolutely nothing if we're not believing it and living it out by the power of the HS
 - When we ask God to help us in this, he'll honor that request
 - That's praying in line with his desires for his people

- May we actively come to the Word in this way...pleading with the Spirit that we desperately need his help
 - We need his help to understand and believe what we in the pages of Scripture
- May we actively come to corporate worship in this way...preparing our hearts and pleading with the Spirit to help us understand and believe the preached Word and the songs that point us to Jesus and the prayers that come humbly before our sovereign God
- May God give us greater understanding and belief and application of his Word...amen?

4) 7:54-8:3

- After Stephen finishes his speech and points to his accusers that they've rejected God's law and Jesus, they become enraged
 - Their desire to kill him's never been greater than at that moment
 - Stephen called them out on their sin and their anger leads to the murderous act of executing Stephen by the Jewish practice of stoning
 - We see here the reality that the Gospel angers some people
 - In particular here, we see that the truth of God and his Word forces us to recognize and confess that we're sinful people
 - And some people don't want to be aware of their sinfulness
 - But, when we're aware of how sinful we are, it makes Jesus and his saving work on the cross even more glorious and dear to us
- But, in that moment right before his death, Stephen looks up to heaven...and sees Jesus...our Savior and Lord and Redeemer and King and Righteous One standing at the right hand of God
 - Stephen sees Jesus, standing in his forever kingdom already reigning and ruling with all authority
 - And, as they were stoning Stephen, he cried out to God asking that he not hold this sin of theirs against them
 - Even as he's about to die, Stephen prays for the souls of those who're executing him
 - And, who's there? Saul
 - Saul...who'll later be Paul, was there approving of this execution
 - And, not only approving of his execution, but afterward seeking to destroy the church (8:3)
 - Isn't it remarkable to know that Stephen's dying prayer was answered in an amazing way when God converts Saul/Paul, as we'll see later on in Acts
 - The very person who was putting our brothers and sisters in prison came to be dramatically converted by our sovereign God

5) CONCLUSION

- Stephen had the opportunity to shine brightly in his Gospel witness...even in the midst of his persecution and execution
 - And he did so
- We have many brothers and sisters around the world who're being persecuted and killed – just like Stephen – b/c they're living for Jesus and b/c they love Jesus
 - And, they're brightly shining for Jesus also...so that they're bearing witness to the Gospel of JC
 - From North Korea to Iraq to Somalia to Pakistan to Saudi Arabia to India to Egypt to Vietnam to Mexico...we have brothers and sisters who're facing death and persecution every day
 - And, just like Stephen, they're making the most of the opportunities they're given to shine brightly for Jesus

- Let's lift up our brothers and sisters around the world so that they're continuously filled with HS power to know the comfort that only God provides
 - May God give them eyes and the ability to look heavenward and see our Master and Savior, Jesus, in the midst of the persecutions they're walking through
 - And, may God change and transform the lives of those who're persecuting our brothers and sisters as they see them suffer well for Jesus
- May God do the same for each one of us as well
 - None of us knows what God has in store for us in the future
 - God may call some of us sitting in this room to suffer greatly for the Gospel...maybe even to die
 - Are we willing to die for Christ?
 - There's a reason why we ask each person that when we baptize them
 - While we're in North America and the persecution might not be the same as that in other parts of the world, persecution still happens
 - Whether were pastors in the pulpit or believers sitting in a Bible study or high schoolers in school, we know that brothers and sisters die for Jesus in our own continent
 - And, even if the opportunity to die for Christ doesn't come to us, we feel the pinch of being people who're seeking to live lives for Jesus in the midst of our sinful world

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