

Death, The Servant

This morning I begin with the brief story of Andrew Rivet, a Frenchman born in 1573, he spent his life as a professor of theology in Holland at the University of Leyden. Andrew, like Stephen, was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 6:5) Andrew, preached his last sermon on Christmas Day 1650 at the age of 77. Later that night, he became very ill. He died 2 weeks later on January 7, 1651. Andrew was a devout man who served God faithfully for over 50 years. When it came his time to die, God in a very real sense, brought Andrew closer to Him than all the years prior. Let me read what Andrew said just before he entered heaven. “The sense of divine favor increases in me every moment. My pains are tolerable, and my joys inestimable. I am no more vexed with earthly cares. I remember when any new book came out, how earnestly I have longed after it—but now all that is but dust. You are my all, O Lord; my good is to approach to you. O what a library I have in God, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge! You are the teacher of spirits—I have learned more divinity in these ten days that you have come to visit me, than I did in fifty years before.” (Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967, p. 207) These words of a saint of God illustrate, as the hour death approached, death became the servant of the saint, the process of dying became his teacher, his sanctifier and kindled the flame of worship.

The Biblical View Of Death

Let me set the stage by being clear about the biblical truth concerning death; death is an enemy. Death is not romantic or glamorous or heroic. Death is the enemy of all mankind. When Christ returns and gives “the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.”²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.²⁶ **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.**” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26) Understand we were not created by God to die. Death is the curse of the fall of mankind into sin and death is the enemy, and the curse of death came into the world as the result of sin,¹² “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so **death spread to all men because all sinned.**” (Romans 5:12) Adam brought death into the world, but before his sin; mankind was immortal. All people have a finite beginning point; birth, but all people remain immortal, because of sin we physically die, but we live on - either in heaven or hell.

Death Is Conquered

While we are avoiding any simplistic, naïve, romantic images of death, let us believe with all our hearts and all our minds and all our might the great truth of our Christian faith as written by Apostle Paul;⁵³ “**For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.**”⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ (Isaiah 25:8)⁵⁵ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ (Hosea 13:14)⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷ **But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:53-58) Through Christ, God the Father made death the servant of the Christian; for through death

the Christian receives victory forevermore. But, not only victory over death but victory over the ravages of sin in life. Again, Paul wrote, ³⁵ “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ (Psalm 44:22) ³⁷ No, **in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

(Romans 8:35-39) We are more than conquerors over death through Christ, God gives us the victory over death, but more than victory, death is defeated by Jesus. Death is bound in the chains of resurrection power so that death cannot destroy us. But more than that, more than that! Death is handed over, bound and defeated, and becomes a servant to the church. We are more than conquerors because death is not just defeated and kept from destroying us; it is enslaved and made the servant of God’s people. You may think this is a strange way of talking about death, but I hope by the time I am finished today you will agree with me that death is the servant of God’s saints.

This is the meaning of what Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthian church, ²¹ “So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ **and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.**” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23) My beloved death is yours the way you are Christ’s and you are Christ’s to serve Him and glorify Him. So, death is your servant. The enemy is defeated, bound, enslaved, and delivered into the service of the saints.

It was not immature glamorizing or embellishing of death when Andrew Rivet said that he had learned more truth about God during ten days in the valley of death than in fifty years of study. Andrew had defeated death and it had become his servant. The terrible enemy had become the tutor of heaven. So too, it is with the enemies of God. Even in their destructive efforts they are made to serve the saints. However, like the Apostle Paul, God uses difficulties and death to keep us focused on Jesus, “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” (2 Corinthians 12:7) It was through conceit and self-importance that Adam and Eve sinned. Just as sin entered the world through man, it also has entered the church and the people of the church are, as a congregation, to work to keep sin from the church. The difficulties the church faces are meant to strengthen it and help it focus on Jesus. The Corinthian church was dealing with internal sin and Paul wrote, ⁴“When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 5:4-5) We, as a family of God are to work to keep sin from affecting Christ’s church. Here on earth Satan may devour one’s flesh but their spirit is saved. Death and Satan are servants of God and by this they are also the servants of God’s saints. But death and Satan are only servants of the saints by the power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that dwells within – we do not possess the power on our own to challenge the evil one or the death.

You are by this point wondering when is he going to get to Acts chapter 7 and the stoning of Stephen. Well, now I am ready and I hope you are also.

Jesus’ and Stephen’s Trial and Death

Let me begin by giving a quick comparison of how Jesus and Stephen died and some background that will aid us as we explore these last few verses of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8.

1. Both Jesus and Stephen were tried before the high priest. (Mt. 26:57-59)
2. Both were accused by false witnesses. (Mt. 26:60)
3. Both were accused of threatening to destroy the temple. (Mt. 26:61)
4. Both were charged with blasphemy. (Mt. 26:65-66)
5. Both commit their spirit to God the Father while dying. (Lk. 23:46)
6. Both ask their enemies to be forgiven. (Lk. 23:34)

Stephen's speech not unnaturally aroused hostile passion on the part of his hearers. His claim to have a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God exacerbated their feelings of jealousy and anger. This naturally led the unsaved hearts to an outbreak of violence, and Stephen was taken out of the city and killed by stoning, the traditional Jewish form of capital punishment. An interesting thing to note is traditionally the Jews would strip the convicted to their loin cloth, shaming them before they stoned them to death. Here the convicted is fully clothed and the executors take off their robes, a subtle indication of Stephens innocence and the Jews shame and guilt. Also, there was a problem with the nature of Stephen's death. He had been tried by the Sanhedrin, but that council had no political power or authority to put anybody to death, this was reserved for the Roman invaders. We know this from Jesus' trial when the Sanhedrin went to Pilate to ask the Romans to execute Jesus. **"Pilate said to them, 'Take *Jesus* yourselves and judge him by your own law.' The Jews said to him, 'It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.'"** (John 18:31) Yet, here Stephen is executed by stoning by the authority of a council without the authority to do so.

Now with this background concerning Stephen and his stoning, I want to examine 3 ways in which death became Stephen's servant.

Death Became Stephen's Servant

Reading from Acts, chapter 7, beginning at verse 54, "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep.^{8:1} And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison."

The story of Stephen is harsh, yet, I want us to be encouraged by the case of Stephen and his death this morning. Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian church and an example of dying and giving glory to Jesus for Christians of every age until Jesus' return. Stephen died a very horrible death, by stoning, but even through this horrible death, it became Stephen's servant, in at least three ways.

Stephen had just preached a message to the Jewish leaders, and his main point was that the essence of their religion had become self-worship, not God-worship. They rejoiced in the work of their own hands not in God as we explored in the last sermon. They wanted power for themselves instead of submitting to the power of God. When Stephen came to the end of his message, the council was enraged and ground their teeth at him and acted violently resulting in Stephen's murdered.

God's response to Stephen at this moment was exactly the opposite of the Jewish Sanhedrin. God filled Stephen with His Holy Spirit as we see in verse 55. I believe this is not a rare event or exceptional one. God has drawn close, throughout the centuries, to believers and martyrs as they approach death, and you can expect God to do this for you, if you walk in faith with Him. As the Psalm of David instructs, **"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."** (Psalm 23:4) God always draws near to the dying saint. This is verified by Peter who wrote, **"But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."** ¹⁴ **"If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."** (1 Peter 4:13-14) There is a special grace given to dying Christians. I have wondered and maybe you wonder - could I endure suffering as a Christ in the hour of persecution or even in the hour of my ordinary death? The answer is, no - you and I could not, not by our own power. However, God through His Word and His Spirit wants us to know we will not be left to ourselves. There will be extraordinary grace for the extraordinary trial of every believer's death. The Spirit of glory and of God will rest upon us. Be assured also when God comes in the hour of our death, He makes the enemy, death into the servant of His saints.

Notice with me how God did this for Stephen.

God Opened A Window To Heaven

First, as the enemies of God work to murder Stephen, the Holy Spirit in Stephen turns the jaws of death into a window of heaven. Instead of seeing the fire of hell, smelling the stench of death and seeing the face of Satan, Stephen sees the glory of God and Jesus glorified and alive standing at the right hand of God the Father. Reading verse 55, “[But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.](#)” Do you see how death is stripped of its power here and made the servant of God’s servant? It raises its ugly head and threatens to take away from us all the pleasures of bright spring mornings and buds on the trees and the sun’s warmth on the skin and the colors of fall and the stars in the night sky, but instead God, as death approaches, opens the window of heaven and reveals His glory and the glory of His Son. The sin of death threatens saying it will take away our most precious relationships, but instead it by God’s power and grace we are drawn closer to Jesus, our most precious relationship and He is standing to receive us.

I do not mean that every believer will get the same vision of glory and of Jesus that Stephen got. However, I do mean that this is the way the Holy Spirit comforts us when we are dying and God stripes death of its power. One way or another God makes death a window to the glory of Himself and to Jesus. For those who love Jesus more than anyone and long for the glory of God more than anything - the sting of death is gone and the power of death is broken. Whether you are a 77-year-old theologian or a 22-year-old newly-wed or a 50-year-old parent, you will call death sweet names as you pass from this world into eternity in heaven.

That is the first way that the Holy Spirit makes death serve Stephen. If Jesus is your Savior and Lord, He will have death serve you when your time comes. The Spirit makes death a window onto the glory of God and the person of Jesus.

Death Opens A Doorway To Jesus

Second, the Spirit enables Stephen to see through death a place of fellowship in the presence of Jesus. Reading verse 59, “[And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”](#)” In other words, not only did the Holy Spirit turn the hour of death into a revelation of the glory of God and of Jesus, but Jesus also showed Stephen that the reason He was standing, and not sitting (as it says in verse 55), was to welcome His servant to his true home. So, death serves the dying saint not only as a window to see glory, but also as a doorway to enter glory; not only a window to see Jesus, but also a doorway to join Him.

The triumph of the saint over death is the calm and confident prayer, “[Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.](#)” It is as though you are in a small cabin in the woods – the forest is beautiful and you are filled with joy. Then the door opens and you see the beauty of the forest and you are moving toward it, inch by inch. But as the door opens wider, you see you are approaching death and there is a huge, ravenous wolf with bared fangs and furious eyes. At first you are terrified but then the Holy Spirit opens your eyes, and behind the wolf you see Jesus shining like the sun. He is standing with His arm extended to you and His face smiling. Then you notice in His other hand there is a chain that leads to an iron collar on the wolf’s neck. You hesitate for a moment but then the Spirit gives you strength, and as you put your foot in the threshold and as the mouth of the wolf opens, Jesus flings him with a mighty jerk clear out of sight and you enter into the presence of the Lord of glory to walk with Him for evermore in the beauty of heaven.

That is the second way the Spirit makes death serve the saint. It is not only a window to see Jesus but it is a doorway to be with Him forever.

Death Causes Reflection On Jesus

Finally, the Spirit makes death serve Stephen by drawing out of him the beauty of Christlikeness in the hour of trial. Reading verse 60, “**And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.**” Stephen asked God to not hold this sin of murder against the people, it was Stephen’s hope they would come to know the truth of Jesus and receive salvation. When Jesus was dying, He had said, “**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**” (Luke 23:34) Death had failed utterly as a curse to destroy the love and holiness of Jesus. In our passage in Acts chapter 7, now, because Stephen was filled with the Spirit of Jesus, death fails again. Stephen desires God and he desires people will be forgiven of their sins through Jesus and become saved.

The devil designs for your death to produce despair and hopelessness and self-pity and resentment and bitterness. However, the design of the Holy Spirit is very, very different. Jesus’ Holy Spirit that He gives to every believer destroys the power of death, and makes death into an occasion for showing the beauty of Christ. As Stephen said, “**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**” This is God’s great triumph through His Son; He gives every believer Christ’s mercy!

Holy Spirit Transformation

Now, I close by simply pointing out that there is a connection between these three ways that the Holy Spirit transforms death from adversary into servant. This

connection shows that the way to die in the power of the Holy Spirit is also the way to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to behold and to love the glory of God and you see and know that Jesus is alive and triumphant at God's right hand, and when the Spirit gives you the will to say, "Jesus, there is no place I would rather be than with you, receive me," then the beauty and the power of Jesus will enter your life - and hopelessness and self-pity and resentment and bitterness will be consumed by the presence of Christ and by the hope of His glory. You will begin to live as if you are already in heaven with Christ while you live and remain in this broken world. Like tea leaves added to clear water you will be able to change the flavor of the world into the eternal savoring of Jesus Christ.

This is the way we die by the power of the Spirit and it is also the way we live by the Spirit. Loving the revelation of God's glory; knowing the triumph of Jesus over all our enemies; trusting ourselves into God's welcoming fellowship; and overflowing with His grace even to His and our enemies. This is why we seek the fullness of God's Spirit. This is why we are crying out, "Lord, show us your glory! Lord, strengthen my faith! Lord, let me live in such a way I show Your glory to the lost world. Lord, let me die in a way that shows all Your glory!"

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!