

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:54-60)

What is Jesus Doing in Heaven?

Twice this past week, people have asked me why. One was a small child. We were talking about the fact that Jesus is in heaven and we can't see him or make him come down here until he's ready. The child wanted to know why. The other was an adult who wanted to know why it's so hard to live as a Christian. At first glance, those might seem like different questions, but in fact, they're the same. If we could see Jesus here, openly ruling and caring for us, then life wouldn't be hard. But right now, we don't see him, except in his Word. Sometimes the hardships and difficulties and disappointments of life in a sinful world make us wonder what he's doing. Did he go to heaven so that he wouldn't have to deal with our lives here? We do that sometimes, right? We hide and hope that a difficult or an emotional situation blows over. But that's not what Jesus is doing. He didn't go to heaven to get away from things that he just didn't want to deal with. He didn't ascend into heaven to go on vacation from the cares and stress of modern life. We can't see what he's doing, but he is working there. So this morning, we will use the violent death of a Christian named Stephen to answer the question: **what is Jesus doing in heaven?**

I.

Stephen's death answers that question. But the answer defies all human logic. **What is Jesus doing in heaven? Ruling all things for our good.** Stephen was one of the ministers of the church in Jerusalem. Our text this morning records how the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council orchestrated his legal murder. Stephen became the first known *martyr*. A martyr is someone who dies for the faith. Several martyrs are mentioned in the New Testament, but only Stephen's death is described for us. And one detail always jumps out at me when I read this account: before he died, Stephen saw heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Now, there is no indication in the scriptures that this was the usual experience for martyrs. Rather, God took the unprecedented – and as far as we know, unrepeated – step of letting him glimpse heaven as he died.

Why? To sustain Stephen's faith. Death is the last and greatest test of our faith. It's the devil's last chance to destroy our faith and we can assume that he pulls out all the stops as that moment comes. That's why I always stand next to the bed of a Christian as he or she is dying, if I know that's happening. I pray for them and read Scripture to them and assure them over and over again that they are going home to be with Jesus. God did that for Stephen. But the mere fact that God zeroes in on Stephen's death and not on the death of any other New Testament martyr tells that there is more to it. There was another reason for this vision: the testimony of Stephen.

In English, the word "martyr" does mean someone who dies for the faith. But "martyr" is really a Greek word. In Greek, "martyr" means "witness." In fact, when Jesus told the apostles, "You will be my witnesses," the Greek word he used was "martyrs." Jesus sent the apostles out to proclaim the gospel by their lives and by their deaths. Stephen was not one of those eleven apostles. But he was a witness of Christ. Not only did God let him see heaven as he died, the Holy Spirit moved Stephen to declare what he saw. God gave the people who were murdering Stephen one last chance to hear the gospel. Now we don't know if anyone in that crowd believed because of Stephen's words. But for two thousand years, what Stephen saw has strengthened the New Testament Church.

That truth reminds us that God is control and he does all things for our good. He sent Stephen to die that day because he determined that his death was the best thing that could happen. The best for who? For Stephen, first of all. Don't be surprised. Stephen entered heaven that day. He laid his burdens down. He heard Jesus declare, "Well done, good and faithful servant" and then he took his place in the choir of heaven where he will

sing and rejoice until the Lord returns and raises his body. Stephen may have had a family and friends in the congregation loved and missed him. But for Stephen himself, it was joy and victory to go and be with the Lord.

And it was best for the church. Stephen died proclaiming the gospel and God promises that his word always does what he sends it to do. No one in that crowd would ever be able to claim they hadn't heard the gospel. Who knows? Maybe God did bring some of them to faith. In the next chapter, God tells us that Stephen's death set off a great a persecution against the church in Jerusalem. That congregation had more than five thousand members, but you know happened? They scattered. Christian fathers packed up their families and moved. Some of them left Israel altogether. And without a doubt, it was a hardship. Many of them almost certainly lost money and suffered physical loss. But God tells us that everywhere they went, they preached the good news about Jesus. Some of them even when to non-Jewish cities and started telling Gentiles about Jesus. Through this persecution, God reached out to people and made them believers. And to do that, God used the persecution to purify the faith of those Christians who suffered and then witnessed. All that they suffered and lost reminded them that their true home is in heaven. It reminded them that Stephen had won and one day they would win, too.

God controls all things for the good of his church. That's just as true today as it was when Stephen died. God knows what we need and he sends it. Sometimes, we need hardship. Sometimes, *other* people need *our* hardship. Does that sound fair to you? Well, the truth is, the only fair thing that God could do to you and me is send us to hell for our sins. But he didn't do that. He sent Jesus to save us from the punishment that we've earned. And sometimes he calls us to suffer for the preaching of that gospel, just like Stephen did. How do we suffer so that the gospel can be preached? You might be tempted to say this really only applies to church workers. But don't think for a moment that you never suffer so that the gospel is preached. How do you react when you're hurt or disappointed? Your children are watching. When you suffer with Christian trust in God who loves you, you are working for the good of those children. A number of years ago, I was with a family as their elderly mother was dying. She had loved singing hymns, so there in the hospital they started to sing to her. The last hymn they sang was the last hymn we will sing today, "I am Jesus' Little Lamb." The last verse says, "And when my last hour is ended, by his angel hosts attended, he shall fold me to his breast, there within his arms to rest." While they sang that verse, she died and went to heaven. Her children and grandchildren will never forget that. God used her death to build up their faith.

Sometimes God uses what we suffer to teach us to let go of this life and focus on the life to come. Sometimes he makes us examples to the Christians around us of how to deal in faith with the losses of this life. Sometimes he uses us to force unbelievers to see the difference that faith makes and to listen to the good news. Do we believe that? When God sends hardships and difficulties, do we trust that he is working for our good and for the good of the people around us? Or do we have to admit that we feel like God just isn't being fair? Do we get angry with God and even try to punish him by staying away from church?

All those reactions are natural and understandable. But they're also sin. It is pure sinful pride to get angry at God and to refuse to believe his promise that all our hardships are really expression of his love. It's pure sinful pride to insist that it's just not fair for me to suffer when other people don't. And you know what? God should just say "enough!" and send us whiners to hell. But he doesn't do that. He still loves us. He points out the sin in our pride, but then he points to Jesus who suffered so much more than we ever will. Jesus suffered hell itself on the cross and then he died because because that's what our pride and sin deserve. He paid for all that sin and then he rose. He rose and set us free from what our sin deserves. He rose and promised to care for us and do all things, even send pain, to bring us home to eternal joy in heaven. When we get there, we will at last understand all that God has done and rejoice because we'll see that it was always the best for us and for our fellow Christians.

II.

But for right now, we live in an age of faith. We can't see heaven. We can't see what God is doing in our lives. We struggle and we hurt. That isn't going to change until Jesus returns or we die. But that doesn't mean that Jesus has abandoned us. He's in heaven where he is working for our good. He reaches into our hearts through the gospel and he sustains our faith. **What is Jesus doing in heaven? Ruling our hearts in all things.**

Stephen's heart belonged to Christ. Once he was dragged before the Jewish ruling council, he knew how things could end. These were the guys who had murdered Jesus. What would've been the prudent thing

for Stephen to do? Shut up and say he was sorry. If Stephen had been a good politician, he would've told them that he got a little carried away sometimes and he was sorry and tried to find some common ground. Who knows? He might even have gone home that night. But at what cost? Denying his Lord. That's the only thing that could have saved his life that day. Stephen's heart belonged to Christ so he could not and would not deny Jesus, no matter what it cost him personally. He kept witnessing to Christ even when the stones were flying.

As he was dying, Stephen said, "**Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.**" He knew that his soul was about to go to heaven where he would be with Jesus until Judgment Day. He died confident of God's promises. But then, Stephen spoke one more time. He said, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" Stephen forgave them men who were murdering him, and even prayed for them. Obviously, both of those statements were modeled on Jesus' own words when he was dying. They both show Stephen's faith.

Where did that faith come from? God gave it to him through the gospel. We don't know when Stephen first heard the gospel or when he was baptized. We don't know if his whole family were Christians or if he was the only one. We don't know how long he was a believer before he became a part of the congregation's leadership. But it doesn't matter. When the time was right, God came to him in the word and gave him faith. Over the years between that conversion and his violent death, God fed Stephen's faith. That means he heard the word and took communion regularly. It also means that God guided and controlled his life, using things like hardship to draw him closer. God prepared him knowing that when the day came, Stephen would give a good confession and even act in love toward his own killers.

Then Luke tells us that Stephen fell asleep. His body died. But it was only sleep because Stephen closed his eyes here and he opened them in heaven. The same thing will happen to us, unless Jesus comes back first. We'll close our eyes in a hospital or at home, in old age or in youth, after a long illness or a sudden car crash. Our time will end and we will go home. Until that day comes, God will do for us what he did for Stephen. He will prepare our hearts to see him. He will work through the gospel that we hear in church and through communion and through the promise of our baptism and through the confession and forgiveness of our sins and he will keep our faith alive. When we feel weak, or lost or afraid, he will offer us the ministry of our pastors to strengthen us. When we struggle with disappointment and defeat and hurt, he will be with us in his Word. And in the end, he will bring us home.

Our hearts have belonged to Jesus from the moment he first made us believers. And from cradle to grave, he cares for us. Jesus is in heaven working all things for our good. Everything that happens here is designed to bring us believers home. And Jesus is in heaven working in our hearts so that in everything that happens to us, good and bad, we belong to him. Trust in your Savior and take comfort in his love. Amen.