

The Church on the Move: Love in Death

Acts 7:44-60 || Pastor Paul Hahn || 7 August 2022

*To CARE for one another in truth and in love,
To GROW together as followers of Jesus,
To SERVE those God has placed in our path.
– CG Mission Statement*

Icebreaker: Do you have any summer traditions that you try to do every year?

Worship: Psalm 89:12-18 (*Remain a few moments in worship with this passage. What is God's invitation?*)

Sermon Summary for Acts 7:44-60 (*Read aloud before reading the sermon summary.*)

We are forever in need of our Father's love – both to experience it and to know it more deeply. This is especially true in moments of hardship and pain as we see in the events surrounding Stephen's death. It can feel off to know that God's love can come through such terrible circumstances, but we see it here: love from God throughout a story of martyrdom, even in the moment of Stephen's death.

God's love of clarity // Consider Stephen's love for the Jewish religious leaders as he stands before the high priest and council of elders. He is one of the first deacons mentioned back in Acts 6, full of faith and the Holy Spirit ([6:5](#)). He has been falsely accused of speaking against the temple and the law of God – even of blaspheming the name of God. But as he stands before the council, his face appears to be like that of an angel ([6:15](#)). He launches into his defense, highlighting the grace of God to Israel across the centuries, all of if meant to point toward Jesus. Stephen is giving them God's love of clarity – something that is often unwelcome to us, especially when it comes in unflattering forms, like Stephen's honest rebuke of Israel and its leaders ([7:51-53](#)).

The stories of the Bible always seek to reveal (and offer clarity) about the truth of who we are. Like the religious authorities in this story, we too can be stubborn and stiff-necked with hard, unbroken hearts. God stands ready to forgive us, if we will be broken before Him and turn to Jesus for mercy. We either embrace the loving confrontation of God through His word and spirit that leads us toward repentance, or we will gnash our teeth at it. So, let's be broken now; let's have soft hearts now; let us repent about our own foolish, stubborn rejections of God's loving movements toward us. And let us turn back toward God, pleading for the mercies of Christ.

The Love of God in trials // This is certainly strange packaging for God's love. Stephen's face shines as he faces this. Then the heavens appear to open as he is being stoned to death, and he sees Christ's face shining upon him. It's ironic that Stephen was accused of dishonoring the Temple... but he was doing what the Temple was meant to do: serving as a bridge between Heaven and earth, both presenting the unique love of Christ and calling people to come back to it. And he is experiencing all this in the midst of intense suffering. God's love will uniquely come to us in these kinds of spaces. And we will reflect it beautifully to those around us, even if they cannot see it in the moment. This martyrdom showed that the Gospel was worth dying for – not just for Jesus himself, but for His people.

The love of God's forgiveness, even for one's enemies // God's love passes through Stephen as he is dying. Just as Christ said on the cross, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,*" here we hear Stephen say "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It is God's deep love to forgive, even for those far from Him – even for us in our stubbornness. So again: let us repent and return to our Father with softened, open hearts.

Discussion Questions (*You will not be able to discuss all the questions. Pick the ones you like. Some are personal perspective and application questions for life-transforming discussions.*)

God's love of clarity

- Stephen gives an overview of the presence of God throughout Israel's salvation history ([Acts 7:42–50](#)). He moves from God's presence in the tabernacle, to the temple, to a quote from [Isaiah 66:1–2](#).
 - What is Stephen's point about God's presence?
 - Remembering the accusations against him, Stephen, in [Acts 6:13–14](#), what indictment against the Jewish leaders is Stephen implying?
- Can you see the stiff-necked, stubbornness in yourself that we see in the council of elders?
 - How can you and your CG support each other through these difficulties?

The love of God in trials

- Stephen concludes with a direct, sharp attack on the religious leaders ([Acts 7:51–53](#)).
 - What does he accuse them of?
 - How does Stephen's speech up to this point condemn the leaders?
- Have you deeply felt God's presence in the midst of hardship or trials?
 - How did God meet you there? How did it change your relationship with Him?
 - Have you seen how God used this experience to show His glory and love to those around you?

The love of God's forgiveness, even for one's enemies

- Acts 7 ends with the stoning of Stephen and the introduction of Saul ([Acts 7:54–60](#)). At the beginning of this episode ([Acts 6:10](#)), Stephen's accusers could not withstand the wisdom of the Spirit, so they falsely accused him. Through it all, how would you characterize Stephen's response to this injustice?
- Stephen prayed for two things as he died. The first ([Acts 7:59](#)) recalls Jesus' dying words from the cross ([Luke 23:46](#)), and the second ([Acts 7:60](#)) recalls Jesus' earlier prayer for the forgiveness of those responsible for his death ([Luke 23:34](#)). How could Stephen ask God to "*not hold this sin against them*"?
- Can you think of an experience of forgiveness in your life that God was clearly at the heart of?
 - How can this story of forgiveness and mercy in the midst of terrible events be a call toward prayer for softened hearts that are more willing to forgive and reconcile with others?

Prayer

This week's Prayer Guide for personal or group use is [HERE](#).

Engage & Experience: Prayer

CG Discussion Guides will be provided through November 20th, the last day of our sermon series on **Acts: The Church on the Move**. As we continue our 2022 Focus on Prayer, we suggest you and your CG read a book on prayer together for the end of the year. Here are our recommendations:

- **Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God**
Timothy Keller
- **Prayer: Does it Make Any Difference?**
Philip Yancy
- **If God Already Knows, Why Pray?**
Douglas Kelly