

The Gospel-centered life

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In Acts chapter 6 and 7, we read about a man by the name of Stephen. He was appointed to be one of the first deacons in the early church. He helped care for poor widows in the congregation. We are told he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He performed many miracles among the people.

Further along in chapter 6, we find these verses:

⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Many of the Jews came against Stephen, so he preached to them as the Spirit led him. And the scriptures continue with these verses:

⁵⁴Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸Then 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. ⁵⁹And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰And 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.

Does Stephen's last phrase sound familiar? *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* It sounds like Jesus . . . on the cross . . . in Luke 23:34, *"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."* Stephen was echoing the words of Jesus. He was living out the gospel. As rocks began to rain down on him from every direction; as they hit his mortal body with deadly accuracy; as he began to grow weaker and started to falter; as his vision blurred and blood ran freely . . . he had compassion for the souls of the enraged stone-throwers. His enemies. And he forgave. It was a beautiful picture of the gospel . . . lived out in real life.

We, too, had been the "enemies of God" (Romans 5:10): *"But God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"*(Romans 5:8). Now Stephen was living out this gospel of Jesus Christ, before those who could have been seen as enemies.

For Stephen, salvation was not a "one moment in time" event, it was an encounter with Jesus Christ that changed him forever. . .

All of the Christian life is focused on and propelled by the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of the Old Testament prepares the way for it, and the New Testament looks back to it. The gospel is the center of all scripture and the essential center of the Christian life . . . from beginning to end.

The gospel is the truth of a holy, sovereign, just, loving and almighty God, whose creations turned against him and lived lives of sinful rebellion, against the pure, King of the Universe. He rightfully could have brought immediate condemnation and destruction to all. Justice demanded that the crime be punished. The debt had to be paid. And so it was. Yahweh, the Creator God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon; the God of Isaiah, Elijah, Daniel, and Esther, sent his Son to be the sacrifice that paid for the sins of the world. This Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, lived a sinless life. He then willingly laid down his life on a Roman cross. In this act he took upon Himself the sin of the world and endured the wrath of God that we deserved. Three days later He was raised from the dead, victorious over sin and death, never to die again. *"Therefore God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"*(Philippians 2:9-11).

This is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is available for all who believe. We celebrate salvation found in Christ, but many of us do not realize that the power of the gospel is not just our only hope for salvation, it is our only hope to live a holy life. The same truths of the gospel that usher us into salvation are the same that carry us through every day of our Christian lives.

In the story of Stephen we see evil forces come against him, even to the point of death. But by the grace of God, even when life "squeezed" Stephen, the gospel is what flowed from his life. Even in the most difficult of situations, forgiveness and grace shown forth.

That is what the gospel is supposed to do in the life of a Christian. The gospel is our point of reference. It is our "north star". It is the point from which we gauge all else. The gospel is our light that illuminates the truth of all that surrounds us. It is the lens through which we see the reality of life.

When life squeezes you, what usually comes out? When we are sinned against, mistreated or have to endure hardship, what comes out of our lives? Is it grace, forgiveness, peace and joy, or is it anger, worry, conflict and unbelief? When life squeezes us, does some form of gospel thinking or gospel living come out of our lives?

In the case of Stephen, the gospel had taken away his fear of man and his fear of death, and had replaced it with faith in Christ, thoughts of eternal life, a fear of God, and a compassion for even his enemies. His life had become centered on the gospel.

At salvation the gospel introduces certain truths into our lives. These truths are not merely for salvation. They are given to enable the believer to live a life of godliness and to be made like Christ.

In the same way that *faith* brought you into salvation, faith will carry you through your Christian life as you trust in God's provision, promises and faithfulness.

In the same way that God drew us to Himself in salvation, so will He continue to draw us to Himself as He grants conviction of sin, desire for God's Word, compassion for other believers, and a heart that loves God and loves others.

In the same way that one's salvation depends solely on the work of Christ, so too, does one's sanctification depend on the work of Christ in our lives. In our weakness He is strong. Reliance on God's grace, not our own works, will continue to empower our Christian life.

In the same way that confession and forgiveness ushered you into salvation, so too, does confession and forgiveness guard your newness of life and your intimacy with Christ each day of your Christian life.

In the same way that unconditional love laid the foundation for your salvation, so too, does unconditional love hold you securely throughout the ups and downs of your Christian life (Romans 8:31-39).

In the same way that dying-to-self brought you into salvation, so too, does dying-to-self lead you into submission to Christ and a continued love of neighbor.

In the same way that *your new identity ushered you into the family of Christ*, so will your new identity be your security and righteousness in your Christian life. It frees you from the need to fear man and allows you to walk in holiness in agreement with your new nature.

The same sovereign God of the gospel who coordinated the centuries, the events, the prophecies and the details that led to Christ's coming . . . The same sovereign God who coordinated the events that drew you to faith in Jesus Christ (John 6:44), is the same sovereign God who can be trusted as we face the challenges and decisions every day of our Christian lives.

As our salvation rested firmly on the finished works of Christ, so the daily life of holiness and sanctification, too, relies on the finished works of Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). At salvation our sin nature was removed. Our rebellious spirit was replaced. Our needs were now met. Our new hearts for

obedience were received. Our sins were forgiven. We are now counted as righteous saints in the eyes of God. It is not only that we were saved from sin at the cross, we have now been equipped and empowered for holiness. Christ's death and resurrection did not only save us from the penalty of sin, it has now freed us from the power of sin. We have been justified and made righteous through Christ, but that is not all. God has guaranteed that all who are truly in the faith will be made like Christ. Sanctification is the proof of salvation. Submit your will and your sin to Christ, trusting Him for the victory.

Our inability to save ourselves continues to be true as we face the temptations and struggles of life. May our weakness continually bring us to our knees and may God's promised strength continue to be the power by which we live. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As God drew us to Himself for salvation (John 6:44), so He continues drawing a believer to Himself in the Christian life. As we delight in Him, He directs and ignites the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4). As the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:8), we are moved to confess our sin and drawn to continued intimacy with Christ.

Our daily rehearsal of the gospel allows us to walk in the righteousness that has been granted us. Grace continues to move us towards repentance. The unconditional love of God continues to compel us towards good works. We have been saved, but do not be mistaken, the gospel is more than a moment-in-time event. It is a life-long, life-giving, good news relationship with God.

As we, daily, plug in to God's Word, pray, and confess our sin, we will find ourselves more and more filled with the truths of the gospel and prepared to let it pour out of our lives, even when our world squeezes us.

In closing, let me encourage you to live out the gospel . . . never knowing what will result from your faithfulness. We started out our talking about Stephen, the man who forgave those who were stoning him to death. There is one more interesting detail in that story. In verses 57-58, as Stephen was about to be stoned, it says this: *"Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."*

This young man, named Saul, would eventually become the apostle Paul, who would pen more of the New Testament than any other writer. He would write out the mystery of the gospel, so that we could understand what God has done for us.

We do not know all of the steps that God used to draw Saul to Himself, but this one event was noteworthy enough that it was recorded for us in the scriptures. The ripple effect from Stephen's death that day changed eternity on a greater scale than he would ever have imagined. May God do the same through us as we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ.