

Navigating Unrest by Looking to Christ

by Todd Atkinson

This sermon discusses the significance of the season of Pentecost and the church year in making disciples. It focuses on the story of Stephen, the first martyr in the Christian church, who faced intense hostility but remained full of the Holy Spirit, gazing into heaven and seeing the glory of God. The sermon emphasizes the importance of being filled with the Holy Spirit, living in the power of the Spirit, and following Stephen's example of faith and focus on the ascended Lord.

Scripture: Acts 6:10, Acts 7:55, Romans 8:31, Isaiah 6:1, Acts 7:59, Ephesians 5:18, Acts 2:4, Romans 8:26, Colossians 3:1

Description

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Transcript

Seems significant to me we find ourselves in the season of Pentecost. The church year, this is called the third Sunday of Pentecost. And if one of the great purposes of the church is to make disciples, then one of the great tools at our disposal for disciple making is called the church year or the liturgical calendar.

And that really shouldn't surprise us. I know Father Nico has been teaching you about that. Because in the Old Testament, God instituted an annual cycle of feasts that retold the story again and again and again about his dealings with his people and about his covenant with them.

And in a very similar way, the New Testament tells the great story of God's redemption through his son Jesus Christ. And when the church retells that story every year, then we enter more fully into that story and we become more and more like the central person of that story, the Lord Jesus. And so at Advent, we recall the birth of our Lord that made possible our spiritual birth.

At Epiphany, we are reminded of the mission of the Lord to the nations of the world, which has become our mission. In Lent through Good Friday, we reflect on the Lord laying down his life for us, and once again we offer our lives to him. In the Easter season, we enter into the Lord's mighty resurrection.

40 days after the resurrection, we recall the ascension of our Lord to the right hand of the Father. And when we do that, our hearts and minds, they're lifted to him in heavenly places. At Pentecost, 10 days after the ascension, the gift of the Holy Spirit came from heaven.

And here we remember that our Lord lived his earthly life full of the Holy Spirit. Scripture says that he lived in the power of the Spirit and that he was led by the Spirit. And so at Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit was sent to the church so that we might become like Jesus in that way, that we too would be full of the Spirit, that we too would be led by the Holy Spirit, and that we would know the power of the Spirit.

And so the question I want to put before us today is, what difference has the gift of the Holy Spirit made in your daily lives as Christians? Where would you say the Holy Spirit has been evident? Some of you may have experienced a powerful presence of the Lord while you're worshiping at church, and you would have said that that was the Holy Spirit. And you'd be right. Maybe others experienced a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps you received a word of encouragement from someone. Perhaps you gave a word of encouragement for someone, and you said that that was evidence there was the Holy Spirit at work. And you'd be right.

That was the Holy Spirit. Perhaps there was an occasion when you felt a clear sense of direction from the Lord, and you attributed to that to the Holy Spirit. You look back and say, that was the Holy Spirit.

I was led by the Spirit in that moment, and you were right. You were. It was him.

But I want us to consider a story in the Bible which might show us an even larger vision of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. And so this morning we're going to look at Stephen. I don't know if it's possible to get a couple verses up.

Sorry, speakers. Oh, look, it's already done. Supernatural.

Thank you. I hadn't even finished asking. And so we're going to look at the life of Stephen.

He's the first martyr in the Christian church, and we first hear of Stephen in Acts chapter 6. He is known by his whole community as a man full of the Holy Spirit. That was his testimony. He is then made one of the first deacons in the church, and from the moment that the apostles laid their hands on him and appointed him unto that task, the power of the Lord was flashing through this man like the lightnings of heaven.

Acts chapter 6 says, and Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great signs and wonders amongst the people. And so this deacon who started with waiting on tables shortly became an anointed preacher of the gospel. And when he proclaimed Jesus to his own people, some of them no doubt received that message with joy, but others were furious at him.

He preached, he went through the Old Testament history, and he showed his own people that they had a destructive self-repeating pattern, a cycle that had repeated again and again throughout history, and it had caused harm. That when God sent them messengers, that those messengers weren't well received. So in Acts chapter 7 verse 9, he shows them about Joseph.

He says the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, and they sold him into Egypt. A few verses later, it says they rejected Moses. A few verses later, it says they persecuted the prophets.

And then in the end, he shows them that they had rejected Jesus, the very Son of God, so much more than a prophet of God. Have you ever tried to help someone see that they have a destructive self-repeating pattern that's harming people? Well, how'd that go for you? My experience has been that if people are at a place where they are ready to see that, there can be gratitude, humble appreciation. But if people are in a spot where they don't yet want that pointed out, there can be anger, hostility.

Acts 7 says that when they heard Stephen preach this message about their story, it says they were enraged. It's a funny word in the original Greek. It means to be sawn through, meaning they are affected very deeply.

It means to be angry to the point of rage. Scripture also says that they ground their teeth at Stephen, and this means that they looked at him like a pack of wolves would look at a prey. Like, they are ready to devour him.

They are that angry. I'm sure we've all experienced angry people at one point or another. It is not my favorite place to be.

Because really angry people can be unpredictable. You don't know what they're going to do or how far they're going to go. Really angry people can be irrational.

They genuinely believe that their way of seeing things is the only way of seeing things. Really angry people are adversarial. The person they're angry with becomes an enemy, and the goal is destroying them, whether that's to destroy their happiness, destroy their reputation, destroy their self-esteem, destroy their family, destroy their future, destroy their livelihood.

They lose a sense of boundary. And our world right now is seething with all kinds of anger. Some of it is justified.

There are heinous injustices that have been committed, and there is an anger. When I'm working with some of those people, I tell them, uh, it's okay, you're angry. You probably need to be angry.

One of my First Nations friends in Lethbridge, I reached out to him, and that's what he said, Todd, I'm so angry, and I wish I wasn't. And I said, oh yeah, you should be. But there is other forms of anger that are not nearly as justifiable.

There is just human nastiness occurring all around us. One article I came across said, described this, it said, our contemporary moment is a culture of meanness. A psychological journal that I saw a couple weeks ago spoke about a culture of bullying.

I was reading about one very popular TV personality in our day, and they were commenting about this present culture. And they said it's a culture now where you, they're just mean people, I'm quoting, where no one can make mistakes, where you can't learn and grow, which is as human beings what we're about to do. And so they decided it's time to get out of the, they were getting out of the public eye.

The language they use is, I feel destroyed by all the meanness. What's interesting to me is that Stephen is facing so much more anger than that TV personality. Chapter 6 goes on and on.

It says they were disputing with him. They secretly instigated people against him. They stirred up the crowd.

In the end, they physically seized him. They set up false witnesses against him. There's every form of injustice happening here.

And yet he didn't feel crushed by it. He didn't feel destroyed by it. The Bible says rather that his face was like the face of an angel.

Serene, unbothered. I've spent the last several months in that verse thinking, how could you look like that in the face of that kind of hostility and injustice? Stephen! How could your face look like the face of an angel? And in order for your face to look like the face of an angel, what happened down here inside of him? What was happening on the inside that could generate that kind of genuine appearance on the outside? And then I want to even ask him more questions like, what did you do in a daily basis that cultivated that kind of inner disposition? Why do I want to ask him these questions? Because I am not like that. I can be really bothered by a lot lesser things.

I can have my peace hijacked by a lot lesser forces. But if you'd ask Stephen, why was your face? Even his adversary said that his face is like the face. It's like he's above it all.

There's something otherworldly going on here. And if you'd ask Stephen, why was that the case? Well his answer is found in chapter 7 verse 55. But he, full of the Holy Spirit.

You see Luke who writes Acts is trying to show us that what happened on the day of Pentecost is continuing on, and he's giving us an example of a person in a tough spot of life. He's not even in a church service. He's not even in a worship time.

He's in a really tough situation, and suddenly that's where the name of the Holy Spirit features. He was full of the Holy Spirit. So he's facing the very worst in human nature, but he isn't facing it alone.

The Holy Spirit is with him, not simply just in theory. He's not just doctrinally with him. The Holy Spirit is really with him in a way that is making a difference in this day.

And that is precisely why the Holy Spirit was sent. When Jesus the Son of God walked with his disciples day by day, they never felt alone. They never felt without God.

And now the Spirit of God is with these disciples like the Son of God had been with them. And once again they do not feel alone. God's not just with Stephen a little bit.

He's with Stephen a lot. He's said to be full of the Holy Spirit. The word full means to be completely occupied by something.

If that was me, I wouldn't be occupied. You know what I'd be? I'd be preoccupied by something else. He is so occupied by God.

The word means to be in a state of abounding. And so in the middle of this just terrible situation, here's a guy full of God. Completely occupied by God in a state of abounding because of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Do you know that he wasn't even on there on the day of Pentecost? He wasn't even converted at that time. But the church faithfully taught that the gift of the Spirit given on the day of Pentecost was a critical gift, an important gift. And so all the new believers that came in, they disciplined them into the importance of walking in the Spirit, of receiving the gift of the Spirit.

And this new convert took to that and received that gift for himself. Notice how the Holy Spirit was affecting him this day. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven.

This is one sentence, two clauses, but there's a relationship between the two clauses. Full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. There's what we call a causal relationship.

There is a cause and effect going on here. Means because he was full of the Holy Spirit, what's the result of that? He gazed into heaven. That's what the Holy Spirit does for us.

That's what the Holy Spirit was doing for him on this day. His focus wasn't on the rage. His focus wasn't on the difficulty.

His focus wasn't on the hostility. His focus was on Jesus in heaven. And it was the Spirit of God at work that was doing that, was directing him upwards.

Of all the things he could have focused on that day. We do the same. We don't even need to be in such hostile situation.

We focus on, there's always some appliance in the house or another that's breaking down. There's always more appointments than we can possibly drive our kids to. There's always a lot going on, even sometimes in COVID.

There's always so much to detract our attention from Jesus. But the Holy Spirit, this is what he wants to do. He is active in the human life and he will, as we surrender to him, submit to him, receive him, he will always be directing us upwards.

Notice, it wasn't that Stephen was even looking on heaven. The Bible says he was looking into heaven. He gazed into heaven.

He gazed into another reality, a reality that is over and above our reality, that is greater than our reality, a reality that we call heaven. And he gazed into heaven as one would look behind a curtain. And it was the Holy Spirit that was pulling back the curtain for Stephen to see.

This is what the Holy Spirit does. He takes heavenly truth and he makes it personal. He takes the truth of God and lets you see it for yourself, lets you enter into it personally, lets you experience the powerful truth of God in the most intimate way.

From the moment he had become a Christian, he had heard about the ascension of Jesus. He had believed it. But on this day, the Holy Spirit said, how about I pull back heaven and let you see it for yourself? And there's something in that that our heart wants so badly that the truth of the Christian life becomes internalized.

It's something that takes hold of us. It doesn't seem like something, well, it's true out there, it's true for everybody else. I guess it's true in some way, but a truth that invades us and sets the heart on fire.

We could say this, that God's truth becomes our truth. I love this in the Gospels when St. Paul, one occasion it could seem audacious, he referred to the gospel as my gospel. It could almost sound audacious.

Because the gospel had become so personal to him. It had become so real to him. And that's what the Holy Spirit does.

And so on any truth, when I realize it's the truth of Christian life, but I feel I have not entered into that, I ask the Holy Spirit, would you pull back the curtain? Because I'd like that truth to be on the inside of me. I want to be gripped by that truth. I want to be animated by that truth.

I want to be possessed by that truth. I want it functional. I want it to be my truth.

And I want to live my life every day with that truth of God at work in me, compelling me. And so nothing could have encouraged Stephen more in this moment than seeing his Lord, so the Holy Spirit showed him Jesus, an ascended Jesus, a victorious Jesus, and an enthroned Jesus. A church full of the Holy Spirit is always going to be a church focused on Jesus.

A church who welcomes the Holy Spirit is always going to be a church with a high exalted view of Jesus. Normally when Jesus is being referred to as being at the right hand of the Father, he's normally spoken of as sitting there. Sitting at the right hand of the Father.

And yet as the Holy Spirit enables Stephen to gaze into heaven, we see Jesus in this instance not sitting but standing there. What should we make of this? Well, first of all, it's important to clarify that when the Bible talks about Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father, that doesn't mean eternally he is restricted to that posture. It's not like the Father is saying, don't move, don't move.

A million years later, don't you sit there, son. That's not what's happening in the scripture. No, it's a theological statement.

It means that he has completed his work and he has won his victory, which makes the seated position a position of rest and of rule. Kings and queens are seated on thrones. However, something interesting is happening in this story.

Do you know, because the word stand is used three times. Chapter 6 verse 9, it is said that these people rose up against Stephen and the word literally means to stand up. In this case, to stand against or to resist.

In the very next verse, chapter 6 verse 10, it says that they tried to withstand what Stephen was speaking. Same Greek root word. That word means to stand against, to withstand.

And so many forces are standing against Stephen on this day. So the Holy Spirit wanted Stephen to know that there was one who was standing for him. The scripture says, if God before us, who could be against us? And I think that at some level we all believe that, but the Holy Spirit took that truth and he made it pop.

He brought it home to Stephen. He opened Stephen's eyes to see this for himself, because when Stephen looked in this plane, there's so many people standing against him. So the Holy Spirit draws him upward and he sees the very Son of God standing up for him.

That's a truth that's worth taking into your week. That's one that's worth waking up to Monday morning, because you may not be angry people. It could be ill health.

It could be a tough situation at work. The circumstances are unlimited. You could wake up Monday morning talking to all kinds of forces are against you.

You're an intercessor. It could be spiritual warfare. But whatever form of opposition you face, I guarantee you what the Holy Spirit is going to want to do is not to direct your eyes to all the earthly things that are standing against you.

But you can tell it's the Holy Spirit, because he will be directing your focus to the one who is standing for you. And when you see him, it changes everything. When you see him, and you know he's standing up for you.

I mean, he's in the middle of a situation with all kinds of ugliness. And the Bible says, as he looked to heaven, he saw the glory of God. The glory of God.

So what was it? Which was true on that day? Was it a day with ugliness or glory? The truth is it was both. Just depending where you look. There can be an artificial reasoning inside of us that if I really was full of the Holy Spirit, I wouldn't see days that had ugliness in them.

Well, you better talk to Stephen. The gospel doesn't impose that kind of either or on our life. It's not a case of that.

It's a case of whatever form of ugliness you may experience in life, the Holy Spirit will direct you up, and he will cause you to see where the glory of God is trying to invade your day. Where the glory of God is seeking to break through the dark clouds. And so it has been a practice of mine for so much of my Christian life.

I was really first moved by Isaiah chapter 6, where Isaiah is just having a horrible day. He says this is the time that King Uzziah died. It was his friend, his provider, his king, his sense of security.

And so the state was in a time of national mourning. And yet the scripture says, on that day I saw the Lord. And he was high and lifted up.

And one of the things that stands out to Isaiah in this experience is that the angels are going around saying, glory, holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of his glory. And Isaiah looked back and says, my whole earth wasn't full of glory. Where are you looking? And the angels are teaching him they knew where to look.

Was the whole world full of sorrow and sadness? Absolutely. But that's not the whole story. It was also full of glory.

By the end of that story, his perspective got shifted and the call of God came on his life. And it's actually the day that he was commissioned as a prophet. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and he saw the glory of God.

And he saw Jesus, his Savior and Lord, standing up for him at the right hand of God. And he said, behold, he said this out loud in full of all these circumstances, I see the heavens opened. That is such weighty language.

In the Old Testament, that phrase, the heavens over, was a sign of divine favor. Start in Deuteronomy 28, first reference to something more than just rain. Sign of divine blessing, a sign of divine favor.

In the New Testament, the first we hear about the baptism of Jesus, as he's been baptized, it says the heavens opened. And what happens when the heavens are open? Who comes down? The Holy Spirit.

And here he is on this day once again, the Holy Spirit is present.

And he knows that in the middle of all this human disfavor, the favor of God is shining brightly upon him. The heavens are open. God is making himself accessible to him, open-hearted to him, available to him.

There's a second reason, or at least a possible reason, that Stephen sees his Lord standing. And that is to welcome him home. Stephen was cast out of the city, he was stoned to death, but he died as he lived.

A man full of faith in the Holy Spirit. A man focused on his ascended Lord. And because of that, his death is very much like the death of Christ.

Not a defeat, but a victory. And so, as he dies, the last words out of his mouth are the last words out of Jesus' mouth. Do not hold the sin against me.

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. So, I want to call you today, on this third Sunday of Pentecost, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit afresh. And to live as the Lord Jesus lived.

To live in the power of the Spirit. And to follow Stephen's example, and to be a person full of the Holy Spirit. I think you can just bow your heads in a word of prayer.

Because I want to give you a moment to ask the Lord for that now. Ask him for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit. Ask him that you too would be a person full of the Spirit.

Maybe you're new to the church. Maybe you are thinking, I don't even really know what makes a charismatic church, a charismatic church. Acts 7 depicts a lot of that.

Maybe you're here today, and you're new, and you're thinking, how do these people worship Jesus like he's in the room? How is Jesus so vivid and real to them? How come out of their heart pours adoration? And we would say, the Holy Spirit has fixed our eyes on heaven. He has shown us the greatness and the majesty of our Ascended Lord, the glory of our God. Father, thank you for this beautiful church who's always loved you, and has always received the blessed gift of your Spirit.

And so won't you bring her into another season of fullness. I pray that wave after wave or wave of your blessing would be upon this church, and that she would be a very bright light in this city and region. And so may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

May the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be amongst you, unify you, remain with you always.

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