

## Week 9: Condemned on Earth, Applauded in Heaven

### March 13, 2022

If you have a Bible, turn to **Acts 6-7**.

One of my favorite Christian thinkers is CS Lewis. Right now, I'm slowly introducing my kids to the Narnia series. His book *Mere Christianity* is a wonderful apologetic book that I'd highly recommend. But today I wanted to share with you a story about his life, and particularly a disappointment he had with himself. Lewis lived and wrote in England during World War 2, and he had a public radio show during the war that was broadcast to the entire nation. So you gotta think, this man had a major platform and was hugely influential during WWII.

And after the war ended, there was a black list found from the German army of all these influential English people, that, if Germany invaded England - these people on the black list would be the first to go to jail. And CS Lewis, to his disappointment, found out he didn't make the list. Apparently the Germans didn't think he was important enough to kill.

Which, for the record, I think most of us would think that's a good thing, right? No one's barging down his door, his life's not being threatened, but for Lewis when he found out he was not on the list, he was disappointed ----

----Because he understood that when certain people hate you for doing the right thing - it's awesome. When you find yourself hated by certain groups for doing the right thing, you know you're on the right track.

Which I don't know about you, but I like to be liked. My preference is when people like me. I'm particularly not a fan when people think badly of me - but according to Scripture, there is a category for doing the exact right thing and being hated for it. In fact Scripture has the expectation that this ought to happen when it comes to following Jesus.

**Matthew 5** Jesus says pretty clearly, When people persecute you for doing good, you are blessed. When people hate you and despise you, you're rewarded in Heaven for it.

And this is exactly what we see in our passage this morning in **Acts 6-7** with the story of Stephen. For the record we're not covering every single verse because there's little chance we could do that productively. So starting in v.1 chapter 6 we get the context:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

So this is coming on the back end of the church being so sacrificial and so generous in chapters 2 and 4. And soon thereafter, there's some church drama going on: it says in v.1 that the Hellenists, also known as the Greek Christians, are complaining to the Jewish Christians that their widows aren't being treated equally. So what happens? Keep reading:

**2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. **3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

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So basically the apostles acknowledge what's going on and so they create basically a serving ministry and raise up leaders to run it so they can keep on teaching and preaching about Jesus.

**5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

So there you go, they raise up trustworthy people, people who have good character and reputation. Little fun Bible nerd fact: all these names in v.5 are Greek names which is pretty smart on the apostles' end to install them as leaders - in v.1 Greek Christians were feeling undervalued, so the apostles install Greek leaders to address the problem. Brilliant.

And so what happens as a result of the apostles installing these new leaders?

**7** And 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.

Badda bing badda boom. Problem solved. The mission of God goes forward. But that's not the end of the story, the narrative now zooms in on one of those new leaders named Stephen:

**8** And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Then 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. **10** But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

So Stephen, a new leader in the ministry, begins to face some intense debate with some other Greeks - perhaps former associates of Stephen? We don't know. But we do know Stephen is filled with the Spirit and filled with Scripture that he wins these debates. So these guys try to find another way to beat him:

**11** Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." **12** And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, **13** and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, **14** for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

These men couldn't beat Stephen when it came to debating so what do they do? They go on this whole smear campaign against Stephen, spreading lies about him, they go to the Jewish authorities who had Jesus killed and say things like, "Yo you hear about what Stephen's saying about you guys? Not good....not...good."

And so Stephen gets roughed up a bit, he gets arrested and he now he's before the Jewish high council and notices in the midst of all of it - what's Stephen doing?

**15** And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

There's something beautiful about that. In the midst of the smear campaign, and the false accusations, Stephen is stoic, he's calm, he's at peace. Which, if it were me, I would probably be really frustrated - hey that's not true. That's not fair. No I got receipts that didn't happen!"

And at a certain point in **chapter 7**, Stephen finally gets to give his defense. He's calm, with the face of an angel and then he goes on this long sermon - where he basically recounts the entire story of Scripture in what feels like a last ditch effort for them to understand who Jesus really is - where he basically says "Jesus is the one! He's the one that your Bibles are about! He's the one you've been waiting for all this time." And as he wraps up and it doesn't seem to really land with the high priests - he brings his point to a blunt conclusion. Here's how he wraps up:

**52** Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, **53** you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

He says, basically, look guys, your response isn't all that surprising. Because you all have a long history of persecuting God's prophets. And whenever they tell you something you don't like, you have a history of persecuting them - and that's exactly what you did with Jesus. He was The One meant to lead you out of the darkness but you just tuned Him out like you always do and you killed Him for it.

And now, the Jewish leaders, as soon as Stephen finishes his defense, they do not like what he said at all.

**Acts 7:54-55**

**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.

That's a crucial detail, hold that in your mind and we'll come back to it.

**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.

They even stop their ears to keep themselves from hearing him. They're like kids. It's a stunning physical expression of an inward spiritual reality.

**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.

Saul, who would later be called Paul after his conversion, we're gonna hear more about him later in the book of Acts but right now the author is sort of giving you a bit of a teaser.

**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.

Which is a biblical way of saying he died. Stephen, who we were introduced to just a chapter ago, becomes the first Christian martyr. He dies by the same type of people who murdered Jesus. And even in his death, we see mirroring the story of Jesus' death. Praying to the very end, asking God to receive his spirit, asking God to forgive the very people who condemned him to death.

Stephen here is fulfilling the words that Jesus says in **Matthew 5** - you are blessed. You are blessed when others persecute you for following me. You will be rewarded when you step out and speak up for my name. And this what happens to Stephen, this is the price of following Jesus for him, and I think there's quite a bit to consider from the story...

For one, think about the point of view we get to see in this story. Like, most of the time when things happen to us we can be left with a, like, a **horizontal point of view**, trying to figure out what happened, why it happened, how it happened, but in this account, we're actually giving a vertical point of view in the story. In the midst of this really intense scene look what's going on in v.55:

**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."

The heavens break open in an instant for Stephen and He sees Jesus in the heavenly throne room. And notice what Jesus is doing, this is pretty big because throughout the Gospel stories Jesus talks about how when He dies, and rises again, and goes back up to Heaven, that He will be seated on the throne. Seated - it's a picture of completion. Of victory. That sin and death are defeated and He can now sit Himself on the throne as King over all.

But notice in these 2 verses - what is Jesus doing? He's standing up. It says it in there twice.

And this is a very meaningful detail the author is giving us here. It's not like Jesus needed to stretch his legs or anything - Jesus who is ruling and reigning, who is normally seated on his throne, when He looks down from heaven He is standing up.

Some commentators seeing this picture have said what Jesus is doing here, in this act of standing, is that He is showing honor, affirmation, and praise. It's like Jesus is giving Stephen a standing ovation for his faithfulness. To persevere to the very very end.

And just note the contrast going on here - all around Stephen: hatred, lies, death, and pure evil - but when Stephen looks up, he sees the smiling face of Jesus standing up from His throne - perhaps even applauding Stephen - as Jesus gets ready to usher him home to be with Him.

It's a beautiful image we get to see here. Jesus standing up. A standing ovation. Well done Stephen, my good and faithful servant, enter into my rest.

And here's the big point I want to draw from this that I wanna share with you today and it's this:

**You can be condemned on Earth while you are applauded in heaven.**

That's exactly what we see here. Stephen was, quite literally, condemned on Earth. Not just in a social sense but falsely accused and condemned to death. All the while, Stephen is being metaphorically applauded in Heaven. Jesus stood for him and gave Stephen the courage he needed to die boldly for Him.

**You can be condemned on Earth while you are applauded in heaven.**

So what do we do with this? And how do we apply it?

#### **Application - 1**

The first thing I wanna say is that I don't know if you've noticed or not, being a **Christian is not becoming any cooler today**. I would argue, it seems week-by-week, being someone who loves Jesus is less and less cool. To be a faithful of Jesus, it feels like, in our culture, especially in our city - you're seen as regressive or unkind or barbaric. Like, if you want to be cool in the culture's eyes, don't become a Christian - go join a band or a buy a leather jacket and just agree with what everyone else says.

And if you find that faithfully following Jesus means you get mocked or get strange looks, doesn't mean something is necessarily wrong - in fact, as we saw here it is a blessed thing to be hated by certain groups of people. And very very few cultures in history did you actually win brownie points from the culture for being a Christian. Now decades ago in America it was like that - saying you were a Christian, but not necessarily practicing it, opened up certain social doors, especially in the South. Now that's not so much the case, with more and more people becoming less and less religious and more and more are becoming secularized - to be a Christian who actually follows Jesus and what His Word says is becoming more and more the cultural minority - and that's no cause for alarm because as we see in the early church and the words of Jesus, we actually have an opportunity now more than ever to step into what it means to be blessed when others talk bad about us.

Because what's often been in the case though is that God sends out His people to hard places with people that dislike what Jesus stands for - because God actually loves those people a lot AND God wants them to know of the radical news of King Jesus.

We actually see this at the tail end of the passage in **7:58** - take a look in your Bibles - who is there among the crowd blasting hatred at Stephen? It's Saul. Saul is this young man who is so anti-the way of Jesus that he's seen hunting them down trying to get them killed and he's seen in this passage holding everyone's coats so they can pick up stones to murder Stephen in cold blood.

As we'll see later in the book of Acts, Saul is going to experience a radical encounter with King Jesus and become a follower of Jesus and he'll go by Paul and end up becoming one of the greatest church-planting missionaries ever. But right now he's in the background of this bloody, brutal scene. It makes you think, did Paul over the decades of following Jesus ever look back to this scene in Acts 7? If years later as an old man, he sees his hands bound in chains in some Roman prison and is reminded - these were the same hands that held the coats of people who murdered Stephen?

You see, God loves the people in the groups that speak ill of us, the people that persecute us one way or another, God loves so so much - and how are they to know about the unending love of God unless someone goes out of their way to tell them?

And there may be some people in your life who are greatly confused about the God of the Bible, and who Jesus is, and what sin is - and they have only a horizontal perspective on life that ultimately ends with their death. And they don't have a vertical perspective to see up in the clouds, beyond their grave, as Stephen can - to know that for those who follow Jesus - there's more to life than this world here. That there is an eternity awaiting us, where King Jesus is standing and welcoming us in. So when you have conversations with people about God's design for human flourishing - to them it sounds awful. What would be joy and freedom to them sounds like bondage because they only have a horizontal perspective. So they speak ill of you, they assume negative motives of you, they call you self-righteous or backward or judgemental.

They might be angry at your beliefs, with their ears plugged as we see with the angry mob in **Acts 7**, and yet God loves them so much and wants them to be fully loved and known by Him, to be restored to wholeness.

And you may very well be despised by them, and that may be exactly right.

**You can be condemned on Earth while being applauded in heaven.**

### **Application - 2**

A second application to consider is that we see here Stephen steps into this really difficult place and he says words that are really really necessary and really really needed - they're just really hard things to say. Stephen confronts these people, fueled by love, because he wants them to accept and follow Jesus.

Stephen here becomes the example you could say of saying the exact right thing at exactly the right time and be hated for it. And for us who wanna faithfully follow Jesus - this is a category we need to have. That there will be times when the most faithful and loving thing you can possibly do for someone is to say something that's really hard to say and be absolutely hated for it.

And I say this because this tends to be a fairly large weakness for Christians in our culture. We often don't have this necessary category to confront and rebuke out of love when it's necessary and appropriate. There's this assumption I think that to be a Christian in America we all need to mimic Mr. Rogers, which hey, big fan of that guy. AND we do need to have a category for loving confrontation and saying the hard things if we want to be faithful followers of Jesus.

And I say "we" here, just to be clear here, I mean most of us. But I do recognize that there's maybe 2% of us here who would - to put it as nicely as I can - just kind of a jerk. You know?

For the 2% of us, let's just say we have this habit of speaking and interacting harshly with people and you have this clear category in your mind that people won't like you for standing up and speaking truth. The problem is, the way you go about it might be petty and wildly unnecessary, even if you're saying the right things. It's not humble. It's not winsome. Even if you call it love, it's not seen as loving. Full disclosure, I've often been in that 2% and I've had a good couple decades of people rebuking that out of me time and time again.

So all that to say - if you're in that minority here and you're feeling really good about yourself and how you treat yourself - I'd say check yourself before you wreck yourself.

Because here's where it gets complicated and requires wisdom...

When it comes to near any issue - there are always two dangers on either side. We've talked about it before, how, let's say you're on a mountain and you're so afraid of falling off one side of the cliff that you back away from that side so far that you end up falling on the other side of the cliff.

And when it comes to speaking up and being a faithful witness for Jesus - I think most of us here see the Christian jerks and their sin of pride and arrogance and you reeeeeally don't wanna be those types of people and so we back away further and further from that you fall off the side of the cliff and just never say anything at all and you end up committing the sin of silence.

So for the 2% of us - I hope you know what repentance ought to look like but for the rest of us, I just want to reset our expectations and bit and let you know that there is a cliff on the side of this issue that I think many of us are living in.

And you gotta know: simply obeying the Bible will cause people to hate you. To react very negatively to you and dislike you. And there's no escaping it and there's nothing you can do about it.

- Sometimes when you follow Jesus and you call out a fellow Christian in sin and you say, "Hey man what you're doing is not okay and because I love you and want Jesus for you, I need you to know what you're doing is sinful and you need to repent." If you say that, there will be times when you say something like that where you might as well have thrown a grenade on the friendship. And they'll speak bad about you to their friends - and call you a judgmental monster and spread all sorts of lies about you.
  - AND - that comes with the territory sometimes when you're following Jesus

Telling people you should repent will sometimes get you hated - because here's the thing - people naturally don't like to repent. That's the catch. Jesus calls all of us - every single one of us - to repent and turn from sin and follow Jesus because it's for our good. But at the same time every single one of us has a natural bent towards our own self-interests and sin which goes completely against the way of Jesus.

So many of us need to remember that it is a good thing in the eyes of God to be disliked by the right people.

And so we shy away from this because we don't want to rock the boat, or upset the friendship, we don't wanna make things weird. We don't say what needs to be said because we fear losing favor with a friend so we mentally talk ourselves out of it and wait for this phantom perfect opportunity to speak up for Jesus when in reality it might never ever come up and you stay silent the whole time.

And if I can be a little blunt here, and this is gonna sound harsh but it needs to be said, please, please **do not baptize your cowardice.**

In other words, don't excuse your sin of silence and dress it up as something holy. Don't be this person who never wants to ruffle any feathers and call yourself godly for doing it. Don't justify it with mental gymnastics, just call it out for what it is: it's cowardice.

I know most of us, you don't want to cause conflict. It makes you super uncomfortable, to think that people don't like you keeps you up at night - been there, done that, I get it.

AND...**sometimes you are sinning if you don't cause the conflict.** If you have a brother or sister in Christ running headlong into sin the New Testament says to confront them directly in love. A refusal to obey those commands is sin by omission and a failure to love them. Even though you may justify your silence because of your closeness with them and fear of losing the relationship.

So when something needs to be said, or has to be said - then cause that weirdness, cause that conflict for the glory of God and know that you can be condemned on Earth while being applauded in heaven. And you can sleep at night knowing that God is in control and you were faithful to Jesus and said what needed to be said.

---And for the record, let me be clear - my hope for us is not to all become jerks. That's not the goal. I just want to help us see that I think many of us saw the small percentage of Christian jerks and overreacted too far the other way - and I think this is a huge huge blindspot that needs to be pointed out. And we need to be reminded that Stephen said what needed to be said and was killed for it while Jesus stood up in Heaven standing and applauding for him.

## **Conclusion**

So for some of us here - there may be some significant things to wrestle with here.

- Maybe you need to get in your mind this category of speaking up and being faithful to Jesus.
- Maybe you need to get into a posture of being more attentive to speak up for Jesus.
- Maybe you need to step into some tough conversations this week.

And then for the four of us in here, maybe you just need to stop being the jerk but you already know that. Or maybe you don't, and at LifeGroup this week, this will be a good opportunity for someone in your group to lovingly tell you. :)

It could look like to your friend who doesn't know Jesus, when they say something about how hard their life is going right now that you speak up and say, "Hey I'm sorry to hear, and full disclosure I'm a Christian, and what's really helped me has been this." And you share your faith in Christ. I don't know how it will go here, but I know how it will be viewed in heaven.

Or it could look like someone you're building with, who is not a Christian, when they talk about their lifestyle you could say, "Hey man, I love you and I want the best for you and whether you know it or not, I think what you're doing is actually setting yourself up for some real hurt. I don't think this thing you are chasing is going to give you what you think it will. And what's been really helpful for me is this." And you share with them the good news of Jesus. I can't tell you how they will respond, but I can tell you that angels are waiting to celebrate every sinner's repentance and you just gave them a chance to do that.

Or it could look like going to another believer or someone in your LifeGroup and saying, "Hey I've noticed this pattern in your life that I don't know if you're aware of or not. And because I love you and want Jesus for you, let me tell you this." And you point to a potential blind spot in their life. I can't tell you if this will make your relationship better or worse, but I do know that obedience is beautiful.

It could look like having a conversation you know you need to have with a friend, but you've just been avoiding it at all costs.

For some of us, this might be incredibly difficult to step into but I would argue this story gives us a good window to see how we actually adjust our minds to think correctly about this, look back at 7:55:

**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.

You see, for Stephen, what allowed him to be faithful to Jesus and receive the consequences was his attention. His gaze was fixed on Heaven the whole time.

Stephen's focus allowed him to be free. It allowed him to say, "Who cares what they do to me?" What power do stones have over me when I'm going there? You have to think, upon seeing such a glorious sight, how small did the anger and disapproval of the crowd seem?

While he's dealing with the scariest conflict of his life, his gaze is at heaven. His gaze is not on Earth. His gaze was not on the powerful social forces at work around him, or the severe personal costs he endured.

This freed him up in a radical, beautiful way to face his earthly death.

And that begs the question: When we face situations where we tend to be cowards—where is our gaze? Is it down here, where we're consumed by fear of how people will respond, and what costs that might have for us? Or is it directed at heaven, unfazed by what may come?

My prayer for us is that we will grow into people whose focus on the courtroom of heaven frees us up from the courtrooms of Earth. That we also would be full to overflowing with the Holy Spirit, gaze fixed into heaven, seeing the glory of God. Focused most on how we are received up there, not down here.

You can be condemned on Earth while you are applauded in heaven. May God help us to become people who know that. A people who can endure the hatred of Earth when necessary, because our eyes are fixed on heaven like Stephen.

**Prayer:**

Thank you Jesus that we get to step into this. Thank you that you call us to be your witnesses. Help us by Your Spirit to be faithful. Help us fix our eyes on you, knowing that you bless us when we're persecuted. Knowing that when we stand up for you, you are up in Heaven standing up for us. Help us have our attention fixed on you like we see Stephen has in this story, to have the confidence to know one day when this life is over, you will be standing up for us in your throne room as you bring us into eternal glory forever with you.