

The martyr and the miracle \* Acts 6-9

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Today I'm excited to share with you a story of heroic faith and radical forgiveness, a story that shows that God redeems both the worst of circumstances and the worst of sinners. Stephen's martyrdom and the miracle of Paul's conversion are pivotal moments in the growth of the Church and I hope that their stories will give you confidence to follow in their footsteps and to share Jesus with others. We're going to cover a lot of ground - Acts 6-9 - so you can follow along in your Bible if you'd like.

If you think back to Sunday, you'll recall that in Acts 6, we met a man named Stephen. Stephen was one of the disciples chosen to be a deacon, chosen to spearhead the Church's food distribution program. Evidently though, Stephen also had an effective preaching ministry – so effective in fact that it stirred up opposition from what I like to think of as the NT's only biker gang – 'The Synagogue of the Freedmen' – probably a collection of Jewish freed slaves (6:9).

They argued with Stephen but couldn't outwit him because of the Holy Spirit working in him and so in a smoky room with just one lightbulb dangling from the ceiling, they persuaded some guys to lie about Stephen. They dragged poor Stephen in front of the ruling elders (the Sanhedrin) and accused him of blasphemy.

Stephen though was the picture of peace and he proceeded to launch into an OT sermon (chp 7) – really a review of THEIR history – to show that all God's promises pointed to Jesus and that they, just like their forefathers, were resisting Him again.

Well, this did not sit well with the Sanhedrin and gnashing their teeth at him, foaming with fury, they rose as a man, seized him and dragged him out of the city to stone him. They dumped their coats and picked up stones and started to launch their projectiles at this innocent man of God.

Stephen meanwhile, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (Act 7:55 NIV). And as these foolish murderers stoned him to death (really because he had offered them eternal life!), Stephen prayed 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit and do not hold this sin against them.' And with that, he died, a heroic martyr for the faith.

And looking on approvingly, making sure everybody's coat was ok, was a proud and too-smart-for-his-own-good young man named Saul.

On that day, a great persecution arose out against the church (8:1), but, joke's on them. Because in trying to stop the Word of God, they actually caused it to spread. All the disciples scattered throughout the land - Judea and Samaria – just as Jesus had said would happen (Acts 1:8) – as guess what they did when they were there? They shared the Gospel with anyone who would listen. The Word of God spread despite opposition. The sovereign God brought good out of a bad situation.

Now, Acts chapter 8 tells the story of another of the deacons, Philip, but we're going to zip ahead to chapter 9 to find out what happened to that proud young man named Saul.

As it turns out, Saul was more than just a coat check man; he was a murderous hit man who wanted to destroy the Church. He went door to door to systematically hunt down disciples, to drag them out and throw them in jail (8:3). And then, he went to the high priest to get permission to take his opposition

road show up to the North – to Samaria. Acts 9:1 gives us a good sense of where Saul was at – “he was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He was bound and bent that he would destroy the Church, no matter how many lives it cost.

Little did he know that God was at work in him, bringing good out of another bad situation.

Saul got his way – he got permission from the high priest to go up to Damascus in Samaria to persecute the believers there – but as he travelled, God stepped in. God had a better plan for his life. Acts 9:3: As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:3-6 NIV).

Saul got up from the ground and suddenly realized that he couldn't see. The men who were with him had to take him by the hand and lead him, blind, into the city where he sat without food or water for three days. Humbled and shaken to the core, he had a lot to think about.

Meanwhile, in Damascus, a disciple named Ananias received a vision from the Lord, who told him to go a particular house to find a man named Saul, so that Ananias could lay his hands on Saul and restore his sight. To which Ananias replied – ‘are you sure?’ Evidently, word had reached Damascus of this one man persecution machine named Saul and Ananias wasn't so sure that he really wanted to be anywhere near Saul at this point.

15 But the Lord [replied] said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16 NIV). Put yourself in Ananias' shoes. Would you trust God enough to go? Would he?

Verse 17 - 17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again (Act 9:17-18 NIV). And not only that, the scales fell off his heart and he gave his life to serving the Lord. He experienced the undeserved grace of God and came out a new man. And the man who once persecuted the church was now preaching the faith he tried to destroy (Galatians 1:24). And who better to share the faith than the one who needed it most? In the sovereign grace of God, Saul became Paul.

These are powerful stories - of heroic faith, of radical forgiveness and the sovereign grace of God.

Just imagine what it took for Stephen to stand before the Sanhedrin to say ‘Jesus is Lord! Jesus is good! He is the Saviour who will never fail!’ Just imagine what it took for Ananias to go over to where Saul was at, to actively walk up to the guy who was systematically killing your brothers and say ‘The Lord is with you.’ How did they do it? They had heroic faith in a trustworthy God. They trusted that God would take care of them, that God knew what He was doing. Even as he lay down life, Stephen saw that God would never fail or forsake Him, the heavens opened up to welcome him home. Heroic faith in a trustworthy God.

And just think about the radical forgiveness on display here. Stephen, asking God to forgive his killers; Ananias forgiving Saul for the murders he had committed; God forgiving Saul for the murderer he was. This is radical forgiveness – a forgiveness we don't deserve - the very forgiveness that Jesus died to secure. Do you realize that you have been forgiven as radically as that? Are you as different from who you were before as Paul was? And are you willing to extend that forgiveness to others? Jesus gave His life, so that when we are forgiven, we too can forgive like He did.

And just think about the sovereign grace of God here. The Jewish leaders tried to shut down the Church. They tried to wipe out the faith. And yet what did they do? In the sovereignty of God, they spread it through the land. The worst of persecutors became the best of preachers. God redeems both the worst of circumstances and the worst of sinners. In His sovereign grace, even opposition advances His Kingdom.

So what's the take away here? Because of God's sovereignty, we can share fearlessly.

God is in control. He is sovereign over the world. People freely chose to resist God, oppose the church; they make their own decisions about what to do. But in God's sovereign care, it all works together for good. Even persecution advances the Gospel!

Knowing that, we can share fearlessly His message of forgiveness and hope. Jesus died to save sinners like Paul, sinners like me. And if God can forgive Saul, then He can certainly redeem our friends and neighbours. That's a message that we need to spread. And when we trust that God is good, we can spread it fearlessly, knowing that we are safe in His hands.

Because of God's sovereignty, just like Stephen, just like Ananias, just like Paul, we can share fearlessly.