

When Innocent People Are Murdered

Acts 6:8 – 7:60

Introduction:

- Memorial Day – remember those who served our country – freedom from tyrants and tyranny
 - From 1775 – 2019, there have been over 2.8 million U.S. military casualties because of war
 - WW 2 and the Civil War suffered the greatest loss of life
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_military_casualties_of_war
- Uvalde, TX – a teenager shoots his grandmother in her face, goes to an elementary school and kills 2 teachers, 17 young kids and wounds several more
 - Every parent shivers in fear about sending their child to school
 - Every teacher worries about sufficient safety measures in their classroom
 - Every police officer goes to work each day wondering the price he/she will pay in protecting our community
- African Americans were shot senselessly in Buffalo by a white supremacist
- Taiwanese church goers were shot by a China nationalist
- Ukraine – Feb 24, 2022 Russia invaded the Ukraine – over 6.7 million Ukrainians have fled, with over 4,000 killed and 4,700 wounded.
 - Children and other innocents are being routinely murdered
- Many Christians will be martyred for their faith – an extreme response to someone who merely wants to communicate the love of Jesus.
- Murders that shocked the world – 9/11, Sandy Hook Elementary School and every other school shooting, and the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross
- Atrocity = an extremely wicked or cruel act, typically one involving physical violence or injury. (Oxford Languages)
- **Proposition:** There are 3 things we need to know to shape our perspective in an atrocity

1. Atrocities Are A Result Of The Failure To Stop Progressing Sinful Choices (6:8-15; 7:54-58)

a. Heated Disagreements (6:8-9)

^{6:8} 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.

- Stephen was a powerful witness – full of grace and power, accomplishing great wonders and signs
- Synagogue of the Freedmen – one of the synagogues in Jerusalem that had worshippers from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia (Bruce, *Acts*, NICNT, p. 124)
- Many of the worshippers were Hellenistic Jews
- Paul, formerly Saul of Cilicia, may have been a part of this congregation
- “Freedmen” – former slaves or children of former slaves (Bruce, p. 124)
- You can have disagreements, but they don’t have to be heated or create a grudge

b. **Frustrated By Failure** (6:10)

¹⁰But they **could not withstand** the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

- Their inability to withstand the Spirit of God and wisdom of Stephen was frustrating
- The critics of Stephen met their match – not in Stephen, himself, but with the Spirit that empowered him and the wisdom God gave him
- People hate it when they know the other person is “right” and can’t do anything more to subvert them
 - Frustration and desperation elevate
 - Instead of dealing with his argument, they set up lies

c. **Mob Motivation** (6:11-12)

¹¹Then they **secretly instigated men** who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹²And 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,

- V. 11 – instigated rumors that Stephen was blasphemous (he was not, he never claimed to be God)
- V. 12 – stirred up
 - For Jewish folks, life surrounded around the Temple
 - To have the Jewish temple swirl untrue rumors about you can basically end your economic livelihood
 - The charge of blasphemy would end his physical life

d. **Untruthful Accusations** (6:13-14)

¹³and they **set up false witnesses** who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”

- Stephen was remarking that Jesus would destroy the temple of His Body and that by raising it up again, Jesus would resurrect His body
- But there was selective hearing in this accusation – they thought Stephen was threatening the Temple
- He was only being a truthful witness
- But he was set up

e. **Powerlessness To Challenge Intellectually And Spiritually** (6:15)

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

- His face wasn't defiant or smug, but confident in the empowerment and purpose of God
- When you can't out argue a person, you attack
 - Character
 - Physical life
- People hate it if we're confident we have the truth and have been transformed

f. Hysterical Rage (7:54)

^{7:54}Now when they heard these things they were **enraged**, and they **ground their teeth** at him.

- That's why we try to teach our kids to control our temper
- That's why anger management for adults is so important
- They got enraged and ground their teeth
- The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness, kindness and self-control

g. Ignoring God (7:56-57)

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.

- Stephen got a glimpse of heaven and Christ
- But the crowd didn't want to hear it – they plugged their ears and rushed as a mob toward him

h. Hurt Not Solve (7:58)

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.

- How do we handle problems in a marriage? Work?
- What are we modeling to our kids?
- Do we just yell, insult and hurt?
- Or do we put energy into solving the problem?
- It's not Who Is Right, but WHAT Is Right!

2. God Overcomes Our Atrocities (7:1-53)

Passage	Parallel	Person(s)	Purpose
1-8	Genesis 1-36	Patriarchs	Enemies Enslave And Afflict, God Judges
9-16	Genesis 37-40	Joseph	Jealousy Imprisons, God Rescues
17-41	Exodus - Leviticus	Moses	Disobedience Destroys, God Delivers
42-44	Numbers – Deut	Israel	Idolatry Rebels, God Corrects
45a	Joshua – Ruth	Joshua	People Wander, God Settles
45b-47	1 Sam – 2 Chron	David, Solomon	People Aspire, God Fulfills
48-53	Ezra – Malachi	Jesus	Sinners Suppress The Messiah, God Still Sends A Savior

- God delivers us from the problems we get into

a. Enemies Enslave And Afflict, God Judges (1-8)

^{7:1}And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" ²And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. ⁵Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would **enslave** them and **afflict** them four hundred years. ⁷'But **I will judge** the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' ⁸And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

b. Jealousy Imprisons, God Rescues (9-16)

⁹"And the patriarchs, **jealous** of Joseph, **sold** him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰and **rescued** him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹²But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

c. Disobedience Destroys, God Delivers (17-41)

¹⁷"But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. ¹⁹He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would **not be kept alive**. ²⁰At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, ²¹and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. ²²And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

²³"When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴And seeing one of them being wronged, he **defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian**. ²⁵He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. ²⁶And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' ²⁷But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?' ²⁸Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

³⁰"Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³²I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³Then

the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to **deliver them**. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.'

³⁵"This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, '**God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.**' ³⁸This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹Our fathers **refused to obey him, but thrust him aside**, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ⁴¹And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

d. Idolatry Rebels, God Corrects (42-44)

⁴²But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: "'Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'

⁴⁴"Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen.

- V. 43 – Tabernacle of Moloch (Molech) – semitic deity that had children sacrificed before it (strictly forbidden in Lev 18:21; 20:1-5); Solomon and other kings sacrificed to Molech; Josiah overturned it; Jehoiakim returned it
- "Star of your god Rephan" – a star god that Israelites followed after deliverance from Egypt
 - Stephen cites Amos 5:26

e. People Wander, God Settles (45a)

^{45a}Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers.

- Israel went from wandering in the wilderness to claiming the Promised Land
- But they did have to drive out those who refused to worship the true God

f. People Aspire, God Fulfills (45b-47)

^{45b} So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

g. Sinners Suppress The Messiah, God Still Sends A Savior (48-53)

⁴⁸Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ "'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?'

⁵¹"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵²Which 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, ⁵³you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

3. Dying With Forgiveness Is A Triumph Over Atrocities (7:54-60)

a. Look To Jesus Our Ascended Savior (54-56)

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."

- V. 54 – "enraged" = furious, lit. cut through their hearts (which takes great force when they have stubborn uncircumcised hearts)
- V. 55 – "gazed into heaven" – *atenizo* – focus, concentration, locked in on
- Whether we are dying as a victim of an atrocity, martyrdom, accident or natural causes, focus on the Savior whom we will soon see.
- If He's not your Savior, trust Him as Savior or deal with Him as Judge.

b. Commit Your Soul To Jesus (57-59)

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."

- What are we committing our soul to when we die? Fate, kismet, karma? Buddha, Mohammed and Confucius are dead.
- Are we committing our soul to some unknown force to use an unknown determiner of righteousness to decide which undetermined place we will end up?
- Also, don't look for Peter at the Pearly Gates
- Stephen committed his soul to the Lord Jesus – who Himself was crucified, buried, then resurrected and ascended to the Father.
- His is Savior and Judge.
- He is the Arbiter of righteousness because He is the basis for righteousness.
- He is in heaven to welcome us and give us rest.

c. Forgive Your Attackers (60)

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.

- ie/ Gary Inrig, *Forgiveness*, tells the story of a man bitten by a dog which is later found to be rabid. This man was taken to the hospital for a battery of tests. The doctor, unfortunately, had to inform this man that he had rabies. Being the early days of medicine when there was no cure, this patient was told by the doctor to get his affairs in order because he couldn't cure him. The man sunk in despair, but later gained the energy to ask for a pen and made a list of names. When the doctor returned, he commended the patient

for being so diligent in preparing a will. The patient responded, rabidly, "This ain't no will. This is a list of people I'm going to bite before I die."

- To die well is to make sure we're not leaving any grudges or unresolved hurts on our part – not biting people on the way out
- To die forgiving and being forgiven is beautiful
- Jesus died forgiving those who crucified Him

Luke 23:24 Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do

- Ultimately that's our hope in salvation – we die being forgiven by God
- Forgiveness is not pretending that you're not hurt or that you have not been wronged
- Forgiveness acknowledges that a wrong has occurred
- "Forgiveness is taking seriously the awfulness of what has happened when you are treated unfairly. Forgiveness is not pretending that things are other than the way they are."
(Archbishop Desmond Tutu)
- Stephen acknowledged those who were murdering him were sinning against him
- But in forgiveness, he wasn't holding a grudge
- **Forgiveness Is A Cancellation Of A Debt Resulting From An Injury**

Colossians 2:13-14 ¹³And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

- **Forgiveness Grants A Full Pardon, Not A Probation**

2 Corinthians 2:7 So that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.

- There is a time to forgive. A lengthy period of unforgiveness causes grief and defeat in the offender.
- Once forgiveness is given, the offense is not brought up again.

Conclusion:

- The results of man's sin are horrifying. Our ultimate hope is not through sinners, but our Savior from sin.
- Reform and legislation are good, but limited. Our ultimate help is from God saving and transforming us from sin's power and effect.
- Evil and death are ugly realities. Our ultimate healing comes through giving forgiveness and receiving forgiveness.

Discussion:

- How does this passage help explain to children the reality of evil and sin and the hope of salvation and forgiveness?
- How does Christ's forgiveness from the cross transform the way we deal with evil in the world today?
- How can we prepare ourselves to forgive, even if our treatment and/or death is unjust?