

Stephen's Heavenly Vision

Acts 7:54-8:1 NIV

There's an old saying, "One person's trash is another's treasure." This fact of life is what fuels garage sales, thrift stores, and institutions like Goodwill and St Vincent de Paul. Most of us have been in a situation where a friend has bragged about the great deal he or she got on a specific item and when we see the item, we might make over it like it's the best deal ever, but we're thinking, "I wouldn't have paid that for it."

In today's economy, most of us have to be cost conscious. We know the price of gas changes minute by minute; the cost of food puts a dent in the budget; and then we stop at a yard sale for a new wardrobe, careful not to purchase what we sold in our own yard sale.

The cost of tangible items is ever changing. We have to cut corners where we can.

But what about intangibles like loyalty, bravery, or love. How do we calculate the value or anticipate the cost when some of the price may be hidden.

How about the hidden cost of a dream or vision? Most church folk know the story of Joseph; how his dreams got him in trouble with his brothers. The cost of revealing his dreams was being sold into slavery. Had he known that this would be

the price for revealing his dreams, maybe the story would have taken a different twist.

We meet Stephen in the beginning of chapter six. We don't know much about him. But we can't leave Stephen's story without taking note of his heavenly vision.

The majority of Acts 7 is Stephen's answer to the false charges of blasphemy. Beginning in verse 54 is the reaction of those who heard Stephen's defense:

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin

against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. (Acts 7:54-8:1)

Last message, we observed that Stephen's responsibility of waiting tables did not stop or limit him from doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. But Luke does not tell us anything specific about the link between these ministries. Were they separate ministries or one and the same? We don't know.

Stephen's story is unlike the story of Joseph, or the apostles for that matter, where we have more information to work with.

For example, Matthew was a tax collector. Some of the apostles were fishermen; businessmen; one was a Zealot-one who radically resisted the Romans. It's a miracle in itself that these men got along. It's amazing that we don't read about more arguments between them than we do.

If we could have interviewed them before they met Jesus, and ask them about their goals and dreams; their plans for the future, I'm sure that we would have found that they were just like us.

The same would be true of Stephen. He had his dreams; his plans for the future. But, I bet he didn't wake up one day and say, "I think I want to be a

deacon.” And I’m sure he didn’t plan to be the first Christian martyr.

All the disciples that traveled with Jesus, including those who became apostles, and those who became believers after Pentecost had dreams and plans for their future before meeting Jesus; but meeting Jesus changed things.

It would be interesting to go around the room today and see how many followed the dreams and goals they had in high school. Using myself as an example, becoming a preacher was not even on a top-ten list when I graduated high school. I started college to study drafting and architecture. But, meeting Jesus changed things. Not all at once; but slowly my dreams and goals changed. And I bet some of you experienced the same thing after meeting Jesus.

We may not know much about Stephen, but we know that he was a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus was leading and guiding him; he was walking in God’s will. Whatever his goals and dreams were before meeting Jesus, Stephen was willing to put aside or give up his goals and his dreams, because of his love for Jesus and also for God’s people.

What price can you put on love? How can you possibly anticipate or calculate the hidden cost?

To the Romans, Paul writes: **I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to**

offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual^[a] act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

To the Galatians, he writes: **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)**

It takes some time to put a message together, but relatively speaking, it’s not too hard to stand up here and preach a message about a transformed life. With the above passages and others like them, I can tell you how the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life and begins to change the way you think.

I know that it is hard to stay awake, but it’s not too hard for you to listen and even say amen from time to time.

But when an angry mob is dragging you down the street and gathering rocks on the way; or when you are tied to a whipping post with your back exposed; or when your children begin paying the cost for your faith...it’s good to know that Jesus has changed some things.

Stephen paid the ultimate price because of his love for God and God’s people.

Most of us have lived long enough to know that we are going to give our life to something. Some people spend their entire life accumulating possessions and gathering wealth. Others give up their lives on a quest for knowledge. Love is not necessary the worst thing that we can end up spending our lives on.

Paul writes of faith, hope, and love, the greatest is love.

This change that Jesus made in Stephen enabled him to do something absolutely remarkable. Stephen’s last words were similar to Jesus’ when he was on the cross. Stephen cried out to God, “Do not hold this against them.”

At some point in our lives, all of us have been wronged. Unlike Stephen we often spend a great deal of time holding grudges and seeking revenge.

Vengeance is a passion to get even; a hot desire to give back as much pain as someone gives you. The problem with revenge is that it never gets what it wants; it never evens the score. Fairness never comes.

At times we rationalize to ourselves that we are justified in being unforgiving. We might struggle at other times to forgive and realize that forgiveness is not an easy one time action. Stephen’s

example challenges us to forgive even the most unforgiveable words and actions. Such forgiveness is the price of love. You could say that letting go of revenge is a hidden cost of love.

Now to Stephen's heavenly vision...

⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man on numerous occasions. Rather than using Lord, Christ, or Jesus, Stephen chose Son of Man. But that is not the most unusual part of this vision.

Let's begin with some scripture.

During Jesus trial, The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ,^[a] the Son of God."

⁶⁴ "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:64)

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul prayed that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength,²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised

him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1:18-21)

The letter to the Hebrews opens with this: ¹ In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Again in Hebrews: ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

These passages that I just read to you have Jesus seated at the right hand of God. We understand this to represent the finished work of Messiah. But Stephen's heavenly vision has Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

There is no lack of opinions as to why Jesus is standing rather than sitting. Here are a couple of possibilities.

First, Stephen has just made the point that the Most High does not live in houses made by men. (Acts 7:48) Heaven opens and Stephen directs his listeners to God's heavenly home. He told them to look. Wonder if any of them did. If they had, might they have seen what Stephen saw?

Second, just as Stephen is testifying before the Sanhedrin in an earthly court, Acts 7:56 shows another court, a heavenly one, where the true high priest makes intercession for Stephen.

What can we take home with us today from Stephen's heavenly vision? How can we apply what he was going through and what he saw to our every day?

Sooner or later everyone goes through a time when life seems to be closing in. Prices are going up and income is going down; responsibilities are increasing and physical strength is declining; friends disappoint and circumstances seem to favor the opposition; the doors of opportunity quietly close and the lights on the horizon dim, flicker, and one by one go out; a dense dark fog surrounds.

Then suddenly something happens that clears the air. It may be an event on the outside, or something that happens within your secret place. The clouds break and heaven opens. Obstacles are removed and you can see clearly to move ahead with the reassurance that God is good and you can do all things that he strengthens you for.

Imagine what might have been going through Stephen's mind. He may have questioned: are these men for whom Jesus died? These prejudiced bigoted brutes; is there any love in them? Is there any hope for them? Are they worth the price?

And then heaven opened and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It was all the reassurance that he needed. Love reigned; love mattered; God cared. Even these prejudiced bigoted brutes had a chance. Was it worth the price? A young man named Saul witnessed all of this.

Whatever happens this side of heaven, nothing is going to change the fact, whether standing or seated, Jesus is at the right hand of God. He was forgiving when abandoned; prayed for others when the powers of darkness were closing in; he loved when he saw nothing but hate; and from the cross the words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," (Luke 23:34) are just as powerful and needed today as they ever were.

You might think that it is not possible for a human to love and forgive the way the Son of Man did, but Stephen's story shows us that it is possible.

Jesus command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:12-13) When you meet Jesus, Jesus changes things.