

# The Lord Prepares You to Die

Prepared By His Law - Prepared By His Resurrection - Prepared By His Forgiveness

**Acts 7:51-60** <sup>51</sup> "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so *do* you. <sup>52</sup> "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, <sup>53</sup> "who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept *it*." <sup>54</sup> When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth. <sup>55</sup> But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, <sup>56</sup> and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" <sup>57</sup> Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; <sup>58</sup> and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

It can be very shocking when a main character dies in a movie or in a book. Especially when it is a character you identify with. You always expect the hero to come back. You always expect the author to find some way to bring them back. Sometimes, however, even in stories they don't come back.

We might be similarly shocked in today's text. If we didn't already know the account of Stephen so well, we might be surprised that Stephen dies. We might be holding our breath thinking he must come back or something in the next chapter. We might be thinking why did the Lord go to the trouble of preparing him the way he did if he was just going to die.

The mistake we make is assuming that the Lord was preparing him for a life of service. He wasn't preparing him for life, at least not life on this earth. The Lord was preparing him for death. The Lord prepares us all for death.

Stephen shows how well the Lord had prepared him for this task in three ways

1. Because He expertly uses God word to cut to the heart – through his word
2. He sees the kingdom of God – through his resurrection
3. He able to forgive as he is forgiven – through his forgiveness

These three things not only show us how well prepared Stephen was but it also shows us how he tried to prepare those who were listening and how the Lord prepares us for our death.

These three things prepare us for death, the law of the Lord, the resurrection of Christ, the forgiveness of sins.

## **We are Prepared by His word**

When healing a wound it is always important to remove any dead tissue. This can be done with maggots that eat away the dead flesh or with a sharp knife in the hands of a skilled medical practitioner. Neither of these options is very appealing but it is necessary.

The writer to Hebrews reminds us:

**Hebrews 4:12** For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Just like a skilled doctor or nurse Stephen uses God's word to cut away the dead flesh. He skillfully use God's law to piece them to the heart. This was unpleasant for them, and it is unpleasant for us as well. Nevertheless it is necessary. Before we can receive and rejoice in the glorious news of Christ's resurrection, we must first learn repentance.

Learning repentance isn't easy for us. We are as stiff-necked as the people Stephen is talking to. We must be cut to heart again and again. Our natural reaction is to make excuses and to blame others, rather than to admit, "I was wrong."

**Galatians 3:24** Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

Nor is this something that happens only once and then we are good to go. Our sinful nature is such that the deadness must be continually cut away by God's law so that we continually learn to put our trust and hope not in ourselves but only in Christ our Lord.

In our text Stephen reminds the Jews that they "**received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.**" **Acts 7:53**

With these words Stephen is not merely implying that they failed to do all that was commanded. They had indeed failed in that, but Stephen is actually pointing to a much deeper sin. They had failed to guard, treasure, keep the word which given to them by the mouth of Angels.

It is easy to grow to dislike the sharpness of God's law which cuts to our heart and exposes the deadness and sinfulness of our actions. Yet this law given through angels is a precious gift which should not be avoided or neglected.

It is an extremely sharp knife which when wielded correctly can and does cut away our dead sinful deeds in order to open our hearts to the forgiveness which is ours in Christ Jesus. This is unpleasant but by it we are prepared for the day of our death, so that we may come to that day in the hope of Christ and the not in the useless of our own arrogance.

## **We are Prepared by His Resurrection**

God's law cuts our spirit. This is very unpleasant and even terrifying, our bodies because of our sin are doomed to death and this also is unpleasant and scary. And yet Christ's resurrection takes the sting and fear out of both.

**1 Corinthians 15:55** O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory?

Stephen was prepared for his death and welcomed it because he saw Jesus who was dead, alive and standing at the right hand of God. Jesus' resurrection is a thing we can cling to when all other things fail. He went first and made it through and reassures us that with him at our side it is safe.

Many people like roller coasters and water slides, but can you imagine being the first. Here is the world's tallest waterslide, you want to be the first to do down and test it out? We have comfort in the knowledge that many have gone before. You often even get to watch them as you stand in line.

Death is terrifying, but what a wonderful thing to know that we are not the first. Christ also died and then he arose and showed himself alive to the Apostles and here also to Stephen as if to say, look its safe it's ok. You're not only going to make it through you will live with me in heaven on the other side.

No wonder Stephen cries out, **"Look I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."**

If there was any doubt before there is no longer.

Jesus lives and reigns and because of that we too can walk with confidence to our death. We know what waits us on the other side.

He prepared us for our death by going first.

### **We are prepared By his forgiveness**

One of the major themes of this particular Sunday is dealing with changes.

This Sunday is itself a Sunday of change. So far we have been rejoicing in Jesus resurrection and we always rejoice in his resurrection but now while we still rejoice in his resurrection we also have to start facing the truth of his ascension. He is going to leave. We heard that in our gospel reading. That is going to be a big change for the apostles. How are they going to deal with that change? How are we going to deal with the changes in our life?

This change is seen in our text in Stephen's death. Death is of course the ultimate change. The death of others can completely change our life, and our own death is a change we can't even imagine.

How do we deal with all this change? How can we be prepared for our death?

Stephen can face this change because his whole life is wrapped around Christ's promise of the forgiveness of sins.

One of the ways we deal with change is to cling with an iron grip to anything we can hold on to. But we have to be careful that we find the right thing to cling to. Clinging to our friends isn't going to do any good if they are falling with us.

Clinging to the promises of Christ, the forgiveness of Christ, on the other hand is something that will never fail you.

Look at Stephen because he had that forgiveness from Christ and that is what he clings to, everything else is just nothing. The unfairness, the pain, the suffering, the fear, the hatred, he passes it all off as not important.

Christ forgiveness is so strong and certain and solid, that Stephen is able to say, **"Father forgive them."** It doesn't matter that they are pelting me with rocks.

Ultimately we are prepared not only for death but for all the changes of this life by that one sure certain word of God, than no matter what else happens and no matter what we have done we are forgiven by his eternal unending love.

Jesus has not prepared you for life on this earth. That is not his goal or his plan for you. He leaves us all here on this earth for a little while, in order to prepare us for death and the life that is to come. He prepares us through his word. He prepares us through his resurrection and He prepares us through his forgiveness.