

Different Journeys

[Acts 6:1-7 / 6:8-15; 7:51-8:1 / 8:1b-8; 26-40; 21:8&9]

The last recorded words of Jesus in John's gospel are: "Follow me."

Jesus had just indicated to Peter that his journey of following him would end in being crucified, but Peter looking round sees John coming along behind says, "Lord, what about him?" "That is not your concern Peter – YOU must FOLLOW ME."

Peter died for his faith whereas John lived to a good old age...**DIFFERENT**

JOURNEYS. The same journey as "followers of Jesus", but different journeys in what following Jesus meant for them individually as they sought to fulfill God's will for their lives.

Jesus calls us to follow him.

Christians are followers of Jesus.

Following Jesus is the way to find peace with God, forgiveness from God, and joy in God. Following Jesus is living life with a purpose because living for Jesus we are called to participate in the on-going mission of Jesus:

Jesus who said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life..."

Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world, he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Christians share in the call to be followers of Jesus; but as we work out God's specific will for our lives we will find that we are called to different ministries & different roles in the work of the kingdom of God → DIFFERENT JOURNEYS.

*Someone leaving Chiang Mai called into my office yesterday to say good-bye and he asked about what we'd been up to, and when I told him about our recent adoption and the consequent 22 years span in the ages of our children from 29 -7, he shook his head and said, "Well, that's a special calling!" O. K.! It's for each of us to hear the calling of God on our lives and to pursue it – and, as Jesus said to Peter, to make **that** our focus rather than comparing our journey with other peoples!*

Today as we continue our series in the book of The ACTS of the APOSTLES, we are looking at the different journeys of Stephen and Philip.

READ ACTS 6:1-7

Right at the beginning of the community life of followers of Jesus [= the church], Satan [the enemy of God, the author of evil and the father of lies] brought 3 attacks to disrupt and destroy their work and witness:

1. persecution
2. corruption
3. distraction.

Under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit they overcame the first two, and now here's the third:-

"Let's make them so busy with secondary issues that they get distracted from their primary goal!" ["The good is the enemy of the best."]

The 12 apostles discerned the danger of this spiritual attack and overcame it by the appointment of 7 men to address this time-consuming complication that had been brought to their attention. In order to keep to their focus and priority of the ministry of the word of God, the apostles chose 7 men "to wait on tables".

The 7 were "known to be full of the spirit and wisdom" [6:3] *...to wait on tables.*

The apostles "Prayed and laid their hands on them" [6:6] *...so that they could wait on tables.*

At CMCC we appoint a Management Team to look after the practical matters of the church. We want people who are "Full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" so that the work of:

Fellowship / outreach / financial accounting / property / social concerns / Christian education / Running the Raintree Resource Centre / looking after Worship / secretarial work and administration

...is all led by the Spirit, gifted by the Spirit, equipped by the Spirit; so that wise decisions are made that glorify God; and so that there are others whose service to the church is freed up from all these concerns to focus on the ministry of the Word and prayer.

So right at the start of the history of the church there were these attacks:

1. persecution }
2. corruption } attacks against continuing the mission of Jesus.
3. distraction }

Stephen and Philip contributed significantly to the on-going mission of Jesus through their different personal journeys:

One died a brutal death – the other lived a long life.

One had a very short ministry – the other had a long one

Both of them fulfilled their God given roles...

READ Acts 6:8-15; 7:51 – 8:1

Stephen is described as "Full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" [6:5]; and as "Full of God's grace and power" [6:8].

His life and witness created opposition but those who argued with him could not stand up against his wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke [6:10] So they stirred up the people, and seizing Stephen brought him to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, where they falsely accused him of blasphemy. Note:

- a. Stephen's face
- b. Stephen's message (which we didn't read)
- c. Stephen's vision
- d. Stephen's death

1. Stephen's face

“All the members of the Sanhedrin stared intently at him and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” (6:15).

Who else in scripture is recorded as having a radiant face? MOSES. In Ex 34:29 “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the 2 tablets of the law **he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.**”

So here’s the irony: when Stephen is accused of opposing the law of Moses, God gives him the same radiant face as Moses had when he came down from the mountain! GOD is showing that Moses law and Stephen’s interpretation of it had his approval.

→ We are called to partner with God in his work! As we live lives of faith, filled with the Spirit, and full of grace and power – God will confirm his work and witness in His way!

2. Stephen’s message

Stephen has been falsely accused, but his speech is not a self-defense but rather a proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Christ.

Stephen’s message can be summarized as follows: “God has never been restricted to a place. He’s always been on the move, calling his people to move out into fresh adventures and accompanying them and directing them as they go.”

→ some of you are leaving in a few weeks for a home assignment, to report back to supporters in your home countries what God has been doing in Thailand and S.E.Asia...what are you going to say? I hope you share some of that with us from time to time – in the testimony slot! A relationship of reporting back (Acts 14:27 “On arriving there, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them...”) should create a climate of expectation!

Stephen said that God is on the move, accompanying them and directing them as they go! I experienced that this week – and so did Paul Utley as he shared at the L.T. mtg about how he really felt the need to see somebody. He and Judi were going out to eat that night and he wanted to go to one place, but Judi wanted to go somewhere else...guess who won – Judi of course! And when they went to Judi’s choice of restaurant there was this person and they had a great conversation that God blessed...We can Live with expectancy because God is with us, accompanying and directing!

3. Stephen’s vision

When we read that Stephen looked up to heaven and saw the “Son of Man” standing at the right hand of God [7:56], this is the only N.T. use that expression outside of the gospels, and Stephen is the only one apart from Jesus to use the title.

The “Son of Man’s” role is to intercede. Stephen, realizing the certainty of an unfavourable judgment from the Sanhedrin, appeals to the judgment of a higher court, the court of heaven!

→ Stephen looked up and recognized that ultimate judgment lies with God, so should we. Stephen appealed to a higher court, so should we.

Stephen looked up and saw Jesus at God’s right hand praying for him – the Son of man who had been just where Stephen was on his life’s journey – so should we.

Stephen appealed to a higher court, to God who saw his life's journey in the big picture of his unfolding purposes – so should we.

4. Stephen's death

There are several parallels between the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen:

- There are false witnesses and charges of blasphemy
- As they die they both pray
 - For forgiveness
 - The words: "Receive my spirit".

With his last breath Stephen breathed forgiveness for those stoning him to death. He's been falsely accused; his rights had been violated; he is brutally crushed to death – and he prays for forgiveness for the perpetrators!

Stephen has described as

"Full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" [6:5]; and as

"Full of God's grace and power" [6:8].

What happens when you squeeze the last breath out of someone who is full of God's Holy Spirit and of God's grace...what comes out? Self -defense? Anger? Frustration?

NO – the last breath of someone filled with God's grace is gracious.

NO – the last breath of someone filled with the Holy Spirit is spiritual.

→ Many of us heard the author Philip Yancey last week – he was speaking about grace. He was saying that the Christian distinctive is grace; the Christian characteristic is grace. What should identify us as Christians is GRACE. Let our first and our last breaths be filled with grace.

How might people have responded to the news of Stephen's death? How do people respond to similar deaths today?

What a waste! Such a promising leader.

What a tragedy! He had such potential.

What an injustice! Those responsible should be tried – the persecuted minority should demand retribution.

The church would have been shocked, even stunned by this brutal martyrdom and the violent opposition that followed...but Luke's record in Acts does not emphasize his martyrdom but rather the development of the worldwide mission of the church of Jesus Christ through his life and death.

→ A comparative example would be the communist's expulsion of 637 missionaries from China. What must it have been like to be made to leave your work – it would have affected a whole range of people at varying stages, and some would have felt failures and that all their efforts had been such a waste of time. To the church looking on at the time it seemed a disaster – but in hindsight, it's a different picture! The Chinese church that went underground multiplied exponentially, and others, within 4 years 286, moved and worked elsewhere. Like the oldest member of our congregation (94):

In 1948 DON RULISON was studying Chinese in Shanghai when, due to the communist take over in 1949, it was decided that he shouldn't work in China as planned but should come to Thailand. He went to BKK and then straight here to Chiang Mai, staying initially in a guesthouse that was right here! He subsequently gave 32 years to working with the Hmong people and when we went to celebrate his 94th birthday he was wearing a beautifully embroidered shirt – a "Thank-you" gift from the people who consider that he has beautiful feet because it was his feet that brought them the good news of the gospel.

READ Acts 8:1b–8; 8: 26-40; & 20 years later...21:8&9

The strategy of Satan, the enemy of God, had been to smother the church, but the persecution following Stephen's death scattered and spread the church!

Just as Don came to Chiang Mai when the door to China closed, so Philip went to Samaria. There had been hostility between the Jews and Samaritans that had lasted 1000 years, and this dividing wall of hostility was being torn down by the gospel of Jesus Christ, bringing Jewish followers of Jesus and Samaritan followers of Jesus to be members of one family! Oh the grace of God that was evident then and there! Philip was a peacemaker with the good news of Jesus.

Acts 8 is permeated by the preaching the good news of the gospel:

- **V4** *Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*
- **V12** *But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised*
- **V25** *Peter and John preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages*
- **V35** *Philip told him the good news about Jesus*
- **V40** *Philip traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea*

John Stott in his commentary writes, "Effective evangelism is only possible when the church communicates the biblical gospel with a joyful confidence in its truth, relevance and power."

There was **great joy** in the whole city that Philip went to in Samaria, because he had a joyful confidence in its truth, relevance and power!

→ May we be the means of great joy in Chiang Mai because we effectively communicate the gospel joyfully confident in its truth, relevance and power.

God directed Philip on his journey:

- An angel said to Philip: "Go South to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza (8:26)
- The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." (8:29)
- The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away (8:39)

→ These accounts are recorded for our encouragement and inspiration that just as God directed Philip, leading him at just the right time to people prepared, God can us and will use us if we give ourselves trustingly into his guiding hands.

CONCLUSION

Stephen had a short ministry before his stoning for which a religious zealot named Saul gave his approval.

Philip had a long ministry. He settled in Caesarea where after 20 years he was visited by Luke and a man named Paul, who many years before had witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen.

→ **different journeys!**

Stephen's death unleashed a wave of persecution...

And Philip, carried by that wave, traveled far and wide preaching the good news to the despised Samaritans and led the first African to Christ.

→ **different journeys!**

But both of their lives work formed the foundation of the mission of the church – to bring the good news to the gentiles – that's you and me!

→ Don't look over your shoulder and focus on the comparison of someone else's journey, but make it your aim to follow the LORD in what he has planned and purposed for your life – for His glory. AMEN.