

Acts 7:54 – 8:4

“A wise use of the wastebasket,” says a distinguished editor, “is the secret of all successful editing.” A wise use of the wastebasket, it may be said, is also the secret of successful living too! Do you clutter your life with garbage you should have long ago discarded? How often don’t we hold on to old worries, silly grudges, and smoldering resentments as though we were afraid of losing them or misplacing them?

What difference would there be in our life, in our congregation, in our workplace – and even in our families if we learned to purge the evil emotions of vengeance and hatred with every setting sun? Do you want to start each new morning fresh, without a backlog of scores you feel you need to settle? Let’s learn from Stephen, who forgave even his murderers. The question to ask is **“How will you respond to God’s mercy?”**

The Bible describes Stephen as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He was one of the seven deacons, chosen to help administer the Jerusalem congregation’s offerings given to support the needy. He also boldly proclaimed the Gospel of Christ, the crucified and risen Savior. As the Holy Spirit was bringing more and more people to faith in Jesus, however, the unbelieving leaders of Judaism grew jealous. They resorted to the same tactics they had used to get rid of Jesus. They persuaded certain men to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. In his defense Stephen reviewed the long history of God’s mercy to the Israelites and their repeated rebellion and unbelief. Stephen’s words cut to their hearts. But instead of repenting of their rejection of Jesus as their Savior, their hatred erupted into mob action. Picture these dignified men covering ears like an enraged children! They rushed at Stephen, dragged him outside the city and hurled rocks at him until he lay at their feet, a mangled corpse. But their fury didn’t subside. They began persecuting all the Christians in Jerusalem, ruthlessly driving them from their homes in their fanatic effort to wipe out the very memory of Jesus.

Did their efforts to destroy the church work? If they had, we wouldn’t be here this morning, worshipping Jesus as our Savior. You see God, in His mercy, can make even the most difficult trouble turn out for His good. Those who were scattered preached the Word of God wherever they went. God turned persecution into proclamation! God foiled Satan’s short-range plan to destroy the church and instead fulfilled His own long-range plan to spread the gospel.

What can we learn from this? First, may God keep us from refusing to listen to His holy Word! Often we resent it when someone admonishes us from the Bible. Like the Jewish leaders who in their pride and self-righteousness rejected Stephen’s biblical message, we stubbornly insist on doing what we want even though it is against God’s will. What a dangerous course of action! Little by little, our sinful nature would lead us farther away from God’s Word. Little by little we would become calloused to His truth, and little by little we would get used to disobeying God to suit our own desires. Christian, accept God’s Law when it convicts you of sin. Thank your brother or sister who loved you enough to admonish you and to warn you. Then look

at God’s mercy and love for you! He sent His Son to be your righteousness by his holy life. Jesus’ lowly and painful death removed your crushing guilt. His resurrection is your guarantee of God’s forgiveness and life! The Lord tells you, “My Son has cleansed you from all sin!” Believe it!

Secondly, look how God works out all for our good. The persecution that broke out after Stephen’s death actually helped spread the gospel. God will also work good in all our pain and suffering. The misery in the world reminds us how deeply sin has ruined God’s perfect creation. Yet no misery can separate us from Christ’s love. Our present sufferings will seem like nothing compared to the future glory we’ll have in heaven. Often we wonder, “Why is God doing this to me?” A better question might be, “Why is God doing this *for* me?” Satan may try to cause us to give up our faith through pain and suffering. God will use it, however, to mature us, to discipline us, to enable us to help others who suffer, and to conform us more and more to Christ’s character. When the Lord frees us from all suffering by taking us to heaven, the mystery of pain and the question of why God lets us suffer will no longer bother us, for we’ll know the final fulfillment of His loving plans for us. Furthermore, even Stephen’s painful death delivered him to eternal glory. He saw the heavens open and Christ ready to welcome him home to heaven! Through the pain of death, Christ triumphs! If I asked, “Are you afraid of dying?” you might say, “No, of course not. I know I’m going to heaven!” But perhaps you’re at least a little afraid of the way you’ll die. I know I sometimes wonder, “Will my death be sudden? Will it be painful? Will it be an accident, an illness, or a drowning?” It’s no coincidence that the first death of one of Christ’s followers is recorded in such detail. Stephen didn’t express pain or fear, did he? He saw heaven open, and so will you!

How will we respond to God’s mercy? Learn first of all that He will work out all things for our good and to His glory!

But our lesson teaches us a second important truth. Despite the injustice, despite Stephen’s own earthly dreams shattering with each stone striking his bruised body, when a prayer ascended from his dying lips, what did he pray? “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” He didn’t ask God to deliver him by a miracle. He didn’t insist that God punish that murderous mob. Why should he seek bitter revenge? He was going to heaven! He responded to God’s mercy by showing mercy and forgiveness to even his enemies.

Stephen wasn’t alone. Many others willingly faced the hatred of Christ’s enemies, and for the love of their Savior, were willing to follow Him wherever He led. When persecution struck, they didn’t deny their faith in order to save their earthly possessions and creature comforts. Evicted from their homes, deprived of their income, cast out of the city, they went into exile, scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. The Holy Spirit gave them calm assurance that their Lord and Savior would never leave them nor forsake them. They gladly proclaimed to others the gospel, which had given them life, peace, and heavenly joy.

Oh that we may be live in that same joy. Oh that we see God's promises in all, even what seems evil, so that we forgive those who sin against us. What does our sinful nature lead us to do when others sin against us? We can so easily denounce others in a critical spirit, judge their hearts, and demand perfection of them. When we truly trust the Lord, however, to work out all for His good purposes, and when by faith we truly accept His forgiveness for all our sins, then we cannot help but love our Savior and show His love to others. Wouldn't you rather be the one persecuted for righteousness sake, than to be the persecutor; the one hated for Christ's sake, than to be the hater; the one losing this world and yet gaining your soul? Don't you in fact have compassion on those who are Christ's enemies and won't you seek to win them to repentance? You see, no matter what others take from you, you have eternal life for Jesus' sake. But unless those who hate Christ repent, their destiny is the fire of hell.

Anger is an emotion. When it flares because someone is sinning against us, our anger is actually a reflection of God's anger at sin. Rage, however, is uncontrolled anger. It is vicious, vengeful, self-centered, and seeks to harm others. Resentment is a form of anger that develops when we suppress angry feelings. It churns within us, making us hostage to feelings we don't want to have. Then there is another kind of anger, controlled by God. The apostle Paul wrote, "In your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:26-27). How can we be angry and not sin? Stephen expressed this righteous anger when he decried the stubborn self-righteousness of the Jewish leaders. In your anger you don't sin when you respond to it in a God-pleasing way, directing others to repent, to believe in Jesus, and to show their faith by a God-pleasing life. Then you're acting on anger for the good.

But if you've been hanging on to resentment and vengeful thoughts, if you've been seeking to repay others to get even with them, confess those sinful ways of dealing with your anger. Then, as Christ poured out His blood to cleanse you of your sin, believe God has forgiven you. You may have been holding anger for years, angry at yourself for failing to achieve all you thought you could, or for viewing yourself as a failure; angry because of situations beyond your control at work; angry because of family situations; ir angry because others have rejected or harmed you. Acknowledge the anger. Identify the source. Then act as Christ's love compels you, forgiving those who harm you, speaking to try to bring them to repent if they have sinned against you, or apologizing and asking their forgiveness if you've sinned against them. Deal with anger quickly, biblically. If you wait for the other person to ask for your forgiveness or to apologize, you may have a long wait. Go to them to forgive them as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.

So, dear brothers and sisters in Christ's family, how will you respond to God's mercy? Trust that He in mercy will work out all for your good. Show mercy and forgiveness to others. Amen.