

You're a sight for sore eyes. Has anyone ever said that to you? Have you said it? You were carrying 9 plastic bags of groceries on your arm, with a gallon of milk, up the long driveway into the house. Your arms were burning, you didn't know if you could make it another step, the bags were digging in! Then in the nick of time, your hero appeared to lighten your load, to lift your burden. If you've never said it yet, there is your opportunity. "You're a sight for sore eyes." To be clear, it is a good thing, not something that **makes** your eyes sore. A sight for sore eyes is something that you are glad to see, something welcome to your weary eyes.

In our reading, I'd say Stephen's eyes had good reason to be extremely sore. His people had heard his message, heard him point to Jesus, and rejected it. You know how I would feel if everyone got up right after I got done preaching and started furiously grinding their teeth at me? Pretty terrible! Perplexed! Pretty sore! Then imagine what came next for Stephen—being dragged outside the city and stoned to death by your own people—all for sharing the truth. But to prepare him for this trial of rejection and death, Jesus, the Great High Priest, appeared to Stephen and gave him the ultimate **sight for sore eyes**—a vision from heaven to calm and assure him. Jesus, Great High Priest, also appears to us, maybe not in the exact same fashion. Nonetheless he appears **with a sight for sore eyes** to prepare us for hardship, and ultimately for the moment we close our eyes in the sleep of death, only to wake in everlasting life.

First, let's take a step back to remember who Stephen actually was. Stephen had been chosen as one of the 7 men to be responsible for the distribution of food among the believers. When he was chosen for that role of leadership, the Bible goes over and above to describe Stephen. He was full of faith, and wisdom, and the Holy Spirit. He was full of God's grace and power. God even enabled him to do many great wonders and miraculous signs. You would think that response would be, "Praise God for the blessing of this wonderful God-fearing man." Instead the Jews began to argue with Stephen, but they were no match for his wisdom or the Holy Spirit speaking through him. So they got jealous, just like always. They stirred up the people and concocted some witnesses. "We have heard him speak blasphemy against Moses, against the temple, and against God!" Remember who else they accused of those exact same things? Jesus!

When Stephen got his chance to answer the charges, he didn't seem to be too concerned about what the outcome would be for himself. He didn't do any sugarcoating. He let them have the truth! Step by step over a history of 1000 years from Abraham to Solomon, he showed how their fathers were stiff-necked, how they always rejected God's prophets. Then he let the knockout punch fly. "Now you are just like them! You betrayed and murdered Jesus, the Righteous one." "You guys think I'm speaking against the law, but you're the ones who don't obey it." This was a stern and pointed preaching of the law. All the while they were looking at Stephen, they could see his face was actually somehow glowing, like that of an angel. This was a sign from God what he was saying was true! And it was the truth they needed to hear! But it was a truth they could not handle.

That's when our verses pick up. "When they heard this, his preaching, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him." They rejected his words, they scorned his message, they ignored all the signs and wonders. This was pure unbelief. And the next thing Stephen said, something about a vision of Jesus, threw them completely over the top! They shut their ears and their fury overcame them. Screaming at the top of their lungs, they rushed him and dragged him outside the city to silence him once and for all. This wasn't a ruling body making a judgement, they didn't have the authority under the Romans to execute anyone. This was an angry mob taking a man out to be murdered under the pretense of stoning him for blasphemy. The Jewish custom seemed to involve throwing the person down a height, and then hurling bigger, two handed size stones on top of them. It's ironic, they were taking Stephen to die the death of a blasphemer, when they were the ones who had literally put God himself to death.

"Ughhh! Those terrible Jews!" How could they not see it! How could they reject God's message through Stephen? His face was shining for crying out loud! How could they be so ignorant! What's your answer when the Bible speaks directly to you? How do you respond when God's law convicts you?

The law says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.” “Well what I do isn’t that bad, it’s just a little. That’s about them, those other people that are way worse than me.” That’s how the heart dodges the bullet of the law. How do you react when someone confronts you about your sin? “Who are you to talk, you’re not perfect either! Why don’t you worry about your own problems, and I’ll worry about me.” Our ears are stuffed and our hearts are driven to fury. Or are you like Saul, before Jesus converted him into the Apostle Paul? When someone else is about to rush headlong into sin, instead of turning them back, you stand by and guard their stuff while they do it. As if guilty by association doesn’t actually count!

I hope you’ve begun to see, the Bible convicts us all of a truth we simply cannot handle. It’s a truth we resent with every ounce of our being. That’s the law’s purpose, to convict us as stiff-necked sinners, who deserve the death that our sins inflicted upon the Jesus Righteous One. The law points us to our sin and looking at that sin makes our eyes sore! But it also points our sore eyes to our need for a Savior.

Now think again about the vision Stephen had. The Jewish leaders didn’t want to see it, but it was exactly the Savior they needed. “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” What an unbelievable **sight for sore eyes!** Jesus had actually told the Jewish leaders back at his own trial that from now on, this is where he would be. At God’s right hand! And that’s exactly where Stephen saw him—Jesus at God’s right hand, risen and living, just as he had said. At the time Stephen needed it most, when the temptation to cower back would have been the greatest—on trial, persecuted, facing an angry mob for the sake of the faith—our Great High Priest interceded. Jesus graciously appeared to his dear believer. He knew exactly how to reassure him and protect him from the evil one. If there was ever a sight for sore eyes, a sight to lighten the burden, this was it. Stephen got to see God’s glory. He got to see Jesus! In heaven! Standing to welcome him! This sight for sore eyes from his merciful High Priest would see him through the gruesome last hours of his life.

Stephen had pointed his hearers to their sin, and when he saw this glorious gospel vision of Jesus, he didn’t keep it to himself. He called to the very people accusing him to look up! It’s a sight for your sore eyes also. Look and see Jesus! The law showed you your sins, and your need for a Savior. Now look and see Jesus. He is standing at the right hand of God, interceding for every one of your sins—even your spite and rage against his law. “All I see when I look up is the ceiling!” Look and see all that our worship offers for sore eyes. Look and see Jesus standing to forgive you, as his words are spoken through his servant from this very step, “I forgive your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. See heaven opened as a baby’s sins are washed away by water and the Word. Look and see the miracle of body and blood given for you to eat and drink. These are all truly a sight for sore eyes, as Jesus our Savior comes to us with mercy in our hour of need. These sights fix our eyes on our High Priest, who was lifted up for the sins of the world, and reigns in victory at the Father’s right hand.

The more we take in the sights, the more we learn. The more we look at Stephen, the more we see God’s grace working in him to take up his cross and follow Jesus. Jesus performed miracles! Stephen had been enabled to do the same. Jesus was accused of blasphemy, Stephen was accused of blasphemy. Jesus preached stern law face to face with his accusers, and Stephen did not fail to do the same. Jesus revealed himself as Savior, and Stephen preached Jesus’ name faithfully. For both of them, it ended in suffering and a brutal death. It hardly seems like an encouragement to follow Jesus if it just ends in suffering.

But let’s look at one more similarity. Picture that sight for sore eyes—Jesus the Righteous one, lifted up on the cross for the sins of the world. Remember the words he spoke. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And just before he died, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit.” Remember the last things Stephen spoke? “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And, “Don’t hold this sin against them.” See what God’s grace does to the hearts of sinners! It fills the heart with faith and strength and love, to follow after Christ, even through suffering. And we have his promise, “If we died with him, we will live with him. If we endure with him, we will reign with him” (2 Tim 2:11-12). And to those who have been faithful even to the point of death, he will give the crown of life (Rev. 2:10) You know what the Greek word for crown is? Stephanos. The same word as Stephen’s name! I don’t think that’s just Biblical coincidence. At the point of death, Stephen prayed “Receive my spirit,” and he received from Jesus the stephanos, the crown of life. Jesus is there to this day, standing at God’s right hand, as your High Priest, waiting to receive you also. Amen.

Here the word of your Great High Priest. “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”