

Acts ~ Reimagine

Acts 7:1-8:3

Last week we saw Stephen brought up on trumped up charges. In this week's reading we get to see Stephen's defense. His defense/message is the longest message we have preserved for us in Acts. It is a lengthy response that spans Israel's history from Abraham (Genesis 12—approximately 2100 BC) to Solomon (I Kings 8—roughly 959 BC); he additionally quotes a couple of Israel's prophets—Isaiah and Amos (about 750 BC). The point being, Stephen had a thorough grasp of Israel's history and God's activity within it. This backs up Luke's comment about Stephen from the previous chapter that when his opponents tried to argue with him "*they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke*" (6:10). Stephen was too knowledgeable, which is why they had to resort to finding false witnesses against him.

To review, this was the charge against Stephen:

- Blasphemy against Moses and against God (6:11)
- Speaking against "*this holy place*" (i.e. the Temple) and against "*the law*" (which is synonymous with speaking against Moses) (6:13)

To summarize...to speak against the Law and the Temple was viewed as speaking against God. But note, the Law and the Temple are at the heart/core of what it means to be Jewish. While it is true that the most distinct thing about Jewish people is their worship of and allegiance to YHWH...that was represented most clearly in how they related to the Law and the Temple.

The Sanhedrin, whom Stephen was standing before, rightly understood that Stephen was connected to Jesus and motivated by His teachings (6:14). But did they, themselves, rightly understand Jesus' teachings? Sort of. They correctly understood that the reality of Jesus (and the Kingdom He was inaugurating) would dramatically change forever the Law and the Temple. But instead of embracing such change (which was really a fulfillment of the purpose of the Law and Temple), the religious leaders wanted to hold on to life as they knew it (which demonstrates missing the entire point of their vocation).

Now as we read Stephen's defense we want to keep the charges against him at the forefront of our minds. Everything he says is in response to those charges.

Regarding the charge of speaking against the Temple...

- God appeared to Abraham *in Mesopotamia* (7:2)
- God communicated to Abraham while *in Haran* (7:4)
- God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham for his descendants, while he wandered *in Canaan*. (7:4-8)
- God was with Joseph *in Egypt* (7:9-10)
- God called Moses *in the desert near Mount Sinai* (7:30)
- God was *in Egypt* helping Moses and the Israelites escape Egyptian slavery (7:35-36)
- God gave Moses and the Israelites the Law *on Mount Sinai* (7:38)

- God was with the Israelites during their wanderings *in the wilderness* through the Tabernacle (7:44)
- God was with Joshua in helping with the conquest of *Canaan* (7:45)
- God was with the great king David (7:46)
- God allowed Solomon to build a Temple in Jerusalem (7:47)

Stephen recounts all this to demonstrate how active God had been throughout their history OUTSIDE OF/APART FROM the Temple and oftentimes OUTSIDE OF/APART FROM the Promised Land. The point: God cannot be localized and put in a box! Or, as Stephen states it, *“the Most High does not live in houses made by men.”* (7:48) He then quotes Isaiah, *“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is My footstool. What kind of house will you build for Me? says the Lord. Or where will My resting place be? Has not My hand made all these things?”* (7:49-50)

It is easy for us to focus on all the great names from Biblical history that Stephen mentioned (Abraham and the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon); we may remember many of the stories surrounding these people from Sunday School or Bible lessons...and that's all well and good. But Stephen is focusing his hearers on WHERE GOD WAS through all this. Answer: NOT in the Temple. Essentially, Stephen was building the case that the religious leaders have made an idol out of the Temple. This, sadly, is something we humans are really good at...making idols out of gifts instead of allowing those gifts to point us to the Giver. Additionally, Jesus said, *“I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.”* (Matthew 12:6), referring to Himself.

Personally, I think if Stephen would have stopped here (at the end of what we call verse 50), the religious leaders probably would have thought something like, *“Hmm, this guy knows his stuff. He makes some interesting points. Perhaps we've misjudged this guy.”* Things may have ended quite differently had he stopped there. Oh, but Stephen wasn't done yet. And we must assume he was still full of the Spirit as he proceeded...as he laid into them.

Stephen pointed the accusing finger at them and declared...(7:51-53) (emphasis added)

- *“YOU stiff-necked people...”*
- *“YOU are just like your fathers...”*
- *“YOU always resist the Holy Spirit...”*
- *“YOU have betrayed and murdered Him...”*
- *“YOU who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but you have NOT OBEYED IT!”*

Quick summary...to the charge of speaking against the Temple, Stephen's response made the point that they did not understand the role/purpose of the Temple or God's overall purpose. And to the charge of speaking against the Law, Stephen roared back that they were the ones not keeping the Law.

It is clear in Stephen's response that he was not really concerned about getting himself out of trouble but rather was taking the opportunity to point to Jesus. As John Stott describes,

“Stephen’s speech was not so much a self-defense as a testimony to Christ. His main theme was positive, that Jesus the Messiah had come to replace the temple and fulfill the law, which both bore witness to Him. As Calvin put it, ‘No harm can be done to the temple and the law, when Christ is openly established as the end and truth of both.’”

And as one would expect, things went downhill in a hurry after that. The Sanhedrin was *“furious and gnashed their teeth at him.”* (7:54) Stephen was unphased and unintimidated by them. There is something important to note in the next couple of verses (7:55-56). Luke more or less repeats himself one statement after another. That’s curious and is likely intended to signal to the reader that something significant is going on. Luke describes what Stephen saw, then he records the same thing with Stephen stating what he saw. (And let’s not miss, once again, that through it all Stephen was *“full of the Holy Spirit.”*) Notice what specifically Stephen saw...namely, *“I see heaven open and Jesus/the Son of Man STANDING at the right hand of God.”* (emphasis added)

What is usually invisible and hidden was suddenly seen and made visible. (Which ought to indicate to us that heaven is not far away...it’s simply an unseen realm around us.) But the posture of Jesus is very significant...standing as opposed to sitting. The present location of Jesus is at the right hand of God...and He is nearly always depicted as “seated”. There are many, many passages of Scripture that describe this...here are just a few: Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; Hebrews 8:1; Hebrews 10:12; Hebrews 12:2.

This, in fact, is the only description in Scripture of Jesus STANDING at God's right hand. We need to take in the full magnitude of this scene...of what was actually happening in this instance. A human court (the Sanhedrin) was condemning an innocent man to death. Keep in mind that one of the charges against Stephen was that he had spoken against the Temple...and everyone understood, theologically, that the Temple was the place where heaven and earth overlapped as God’s Presence was simultaneously in both. And with the coming of the Holy Spirit, God’s Presence now resided in the community of Jesus followers, represented here in Stephen. So Stephen saw the reality of this overlap...God was present. As the human court was delivering its verdict, the heavenly court was delivering its own verdict. The true Judge (who is also Advocate) was standing *with* Stephen, *for* Stephen, *ready to receive* Stephen. As F.F. Bruce puts it, *“Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God.”* As Craig Keener puts it, *“Judges normally stood to render verdicts; Jesus, the true judge, is now vindicating his servant as his opponents prepare to condemn him. As elsewhere in the narrative, Luke leaves no doubt as to who is really on trial before God.”*

The Sanhedrin went stark-raving mad, almost animalistic. This is the epitome of a mob mentality...they completely lost their minds. They did not have the authority to execute anybody. Capital punishment required the approval of the Roman authorities. (Remember, they had to seek Pilate’s sentence to execute Jesus.)

Notice that the first Christian martyr died exemplifying his Lord. Stephen was brought up on similar trumped up charges and also asked that the sin of his accusers/condemners wouldn't be held against them.

From a storytelling perspective, this tragedy is not without a glimmer of hope. Luke, the excellent writer that he was, introduces the reader to a new person who will become significant as the rest of the story unfolds...Saul. As transformation is the most profound result/fruit of the Gospel taking root in a person's life, no one will exemplify transformation as much as Saul. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Here we see him approving of Stephen's death and becoming the lead persecutor of the Church. He sought to "...*destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.*" (8:3)

What we see happening with Stephen in this chapter is a fulfillment of what Jesus told His disciples would happen to them because of Him. Namely, "*They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.*" (John 16:2) Additionally, Jesus prepared His followers for such times, "*When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.*" (Luke 12:11-12)

Two quick comments before we end this week. First, as we've seen numerous times before, and will continue to see again throughout Acts, everytime the Gospel (or the Gospel-bearing people) faced opposition, it/they overcame it. So what do you think happened when something meant to destroy the Church caused the Church to be "*scattered throughout Judea and Samaria*"? (8:1) Remember the outline of Acts from 1:8, "*...and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

Second, it is noteworthy that women were also dragged off to prison. Why is that significant? Because it means the women were perceived to be just as much a threat as the men were. This perception could only be held if the women were just as active, just as vocal, and held as high a profile within the community as the men.

Possible Discussion Questions:

- How are you/we tempted to put God in a box, so to speak?
- Christians can fall into the trap of thinking of our buildings and meeting places as having a bigger significance than they really do. The Church is NOT a building, but the covenant people of God, indwelt with His Spirit. How, or in what ways, have you over-emphasized a building? (Or, how/in what ways is your imagination regarding the Church stifled by being too building focuses?)

- As you read over Stephen's message/defense, how familiar are you with the references (people, places, stories) that he mentioned? (No shame if you're not familiar with it.) Was there anything he mentioned that was new to you?
- Just as Stephen highlighted all the places beyond the Temple that God "showed up", where have been some of the specific places in which you've had an encounter with God, or a spiritually notable experience?
- It is common today to hear people say something like, "*I'm spiritual, but not religious.*" Typically what they mean is that they are open to spiritual realities but are not open to (maybe even highly suspicious of) organized/institutional religion. Do you know any such people? When we read the story of Jesus (in the Gospels) and of the early Church (in Acts) we can see why people might think/feel that way. After all, ironically, it is the religious leaders who seem to be the primary troublemakers. They are more concerned about the religious system that gives them status and position over others than they are about representing the deeper reality of God. What are steps that we can take to insure that our systems, structures, forms, methods, organizational policies, traditions, etc, don't become a barrier to reaching/blessing the very people we are called to reach/bless?
- What barriers can you identify that might keep people from connecting with Jesus?
- Have you ever experienced intimidation by a religious leader? If you're comfortable, please share...
- The religious leaders in this chapter were, clearly, not open to change. How open to change are you? Particularly as it pertains to church, what would be a change that would be hard for you to accept?
- Or, describe some changes that you've experienced that were challenging to you. Describe some changes you've experienced that you are really glad you made.
- Has there ever been a time when you spoke truth to the powers-that-be even though you knew the consequences/result might not turn out well? Please share...
- When has your faith/confidence in Jesus helped you overcome fear?
- If you are willing, describe a time when you were out-of-control angry and acted out of that anger?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Developing Courage & Facing Fear

In this week's passage Stephen demonstrated amazing courage, likely knowing that the result of facing down the powers-that-be would be death. Courage is considered one of the Four Cardinal Virtues, and some (namely Aristotle) believed that Courage is the first virtue because it makes all the other ones possible.

This week we're going to spend some time looking at a couple of passages that deal with overcoming fear, like Stephen, by basking in the reality of God. As you spend time reflecting on them, ask God to help you identify the fears that really hamper your life, and to give you the courage to overcome them. (Don't forget to share the insights God gives you with others.)



Psalm 27 & Romans 8:31-39