

Acts 7

Blasphemy, Martyrdom, and the Unstoppable Mission of God in the World

Good morning again church. So good to worship with you in the beauty of the beach today. I love church at the beach – my wife and kids especially love it because we don't have a setup to worry with on Friday afternoons. At any rate, welcome. We are continuing today in this series through the book of Acts, 1 chapter per week.

This week, in Acts 7, we will see that not even death can stop God's Unstoppable mission. For those of you that weren't with us last week – we looked at Acts 6 – when there was a problem that arose within the church. Some of the people complained that their widows were missed in the daily distribution – so the apostles, rather than handling everything themselves – called 7 men full of the spirit and wisdom, men with good reputations, to handle the daily distribution so that the apostles could focus on preaching ministry and prayer.

And we saw in 6:7 – the word of God spread, the number of the disciples increased, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Shocker – when the church prioritizes the things that God says are important – people hear the Gospel and respond to the Gospel.

Picking up where we left off last week, one of the men that was called to help in this way was a guy named Stephen. Now, we know Stephen was a man of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom because he was one of the men called to serve the church. The scripture also says that Stephen was full of faith. And in 6:8 it says Stephen was full of grace and power and was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

And, just like we've seen all along, the temple leaders hated to see the work of God through the early church. Says they began to argue with Stephen, but they were no match.

Then in 6:10 – they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. Hear me church, if you haven't been convinced yet about the UNSTOPPABLE nature of the Gospel, Spirit, Mission and Church by now – you should be. They are no match for Stephen – because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is UNSTOPPABLE.

So, what do you do when you can't win an argument? Make up lies about your opponent, and try to be louder than them. Sounds like both sides of the political climate in America right now. But anyway. They accuse him of speaking against Moses, the temple and the law. And in 7:1 Steve gets popped with the question: "Are these things true?"

They are accusing him of blasphemy – which was a capital offense punishable by death according to the Old Testament laws (Leviticus 24:15-16). This was no joke. There's no freedom of speech here in 1st century Judaism. And to speak against Moses, and against God, serious charges – they brought in witnesses – and Stephen's got a decision to make. He can try

and save himself, or he can boldly and confidently point the temple leaders to Jesus, as the long awaited Messiah – the promised One that all of the OT scriptures testified to.

I. From Abraham to Joseph

Stephen, in facing charges punishable by death – starts pointing them to the faithfulness of God through the Old Testament – starting with Abraham. That God calls Abraham, out of his home country, out of his worship of idols and other gods, and calls Abraham to the land of Israel and makes a promise to him.

God's promise to Abraham, not based on how great of a guy Abraham was, but based on how great a God God is.

God confirms His promise with Abraham with a sign, and Abraham at a very old age has a son named Isaac, and Isaac has a son named Jacob – who would become the father of the nation of Israel.

II. Joseph to Moses

Jacob's favorite son Joseph, hated by his brothers, sold into slavery in Egypt. Says in 7:9 that "God was with him and rescued him out of all his troubles." Unknown to Joseph, God was using his time in Egypt to protect and preserve his people because His mission is UNSTOPPABLE.

God would use Joseph's time in Egypt to preserve his family from famine, and the people of Israel would begin to flourish in Egypt. So much so that Pharaoh (just a fancy name for king) in Egypt would make all of the Israelites slaves and even try and kill the Israelite children.

Moses' parents though protected him and he would grow up in the home of Pharaoh's daughter as her son. Moses would end up running away from Egypt at 40 years old, but then when Moses was over 80 years old, God called him back to Egypt to deliver his people out of slavery and into the land God had promised to Abraham.

III. Israel Rejects God

Moses would lead the people of God out of Egypt – they would see incredible signs that God was doing through Moses, and would have this miraculous deliverance from Egypt.

But rather than worship God, the people of Israel rebelled against God and rejected him. They even asked Aaron, Moses' brother, to make them gods. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, it says that Aaron took their gold and made it into a calf. As a side note, when Moses confronted him about it, he kind of did the Ole' – said he didn't know what happened, he just threw the gold into the fire and out comes a calf! Apparently Aaron never took creative story telling class as a kid, because, come on that's a pretty awful explanation.

IV. Moses to David

V44 – Our ancestors had the tabernacle → a portable non-permanent structure representing the dwelling place of God. Was a physical representation of God’s dwelling among them.

But then God would raise up a king after his own heart – King David. David wanted to build a temple for God, but David’s son Solomon would instead build the temple. To represent the place where God would “live” among his people.

But hear me – hear Stephen – V48 “the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries made with hands.” And uses the OT scripture to support his sermon – in Isaiah 66.

Stephen is in essence saying that – you worship the temple but you don’t worship God.

- God is greater than the temple.
- They had limited their worship of God, their understanding of God, to be centered around the temple.
- This is the root of idolatry → we take a good thing, a good gift from God, and make it the ultimate thing. We see this in families, in churches, in our workplaces and schools → where we take the gift of God (in Israel’s case it was the temple) and raise it up to the ultimate priority over the worship of God.

Stephen is using their Scriptures to point them to the truth of Jesus as Messiah, as Savior, as the Fulfillment of all of the Laws of God that they loved so much, as the TEMPLE of God that they worshiped.

But they won’t have any of it.

V. The Final Verdict

READ V51-53

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also.

Uncircumcised Hearts – they missed that God’s desire for His people, isn’t an external sign, but a heart that has been changed, a heart that is desiring nothing but the greatness of God’s name over all things. Paul would write in Romans 2

²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. ²⁹ On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter.^[1] That person’s praise is not from people but from God.

All throughout the Scriptures, OT and NT, we see that God’s desire is a posture of trust toward him, and obedience to him. Not some agreement with a set of rules, or practices, but a new HEART!

Stephen continues in his verdict against them

⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. ⁵³ You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it.”

They were so convinced of the need to protect customs and traditions (based on a misunderstanding of the scriptures), that they completely missed the work of God right in front of them.

They were resisting the Holy Spirit – accusing Stephen of blasphemy all the while he was the one that actually understood the scriptures, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law.

VI. The Results

Read V54 – they were so enraged by Stephen’s message, they gnashed their teeth at him.

V55 – But he sees Jesus – standing at the right hand of God, calling him home.

They rushed him, dragged him out of the city and killed him by throwing stones at him until he was dead. And in Stephen’s final words – he says “Lord, don’t hold this sin against them.”

Reminds us (hopefully) of Jesus’ words on the cross where he asked God to forgive them because they didn’t know what they were doing.

8:1 Saul agreed with putting him to death. Little did Saul know that he would be the answer to Stephen’s prayer. We’ll see in a few weeks that Jesus saves Saul.

See – they thought killing Stephen would shut them up – but remember, God’s Mission is UNSTOPPABLE. The question for us though – is will we join God in his mission? Not all of us are called to be martyred for the faith. But every single one of us is called to share and show Jesus with people – our neighbors, our friends at school, our co-workers. Will you join God on His UNSTOPPABLE Mission?