

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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STEPHEN'S FAITHFULNESS UNTIL THE VERY END

Acts 6:8-7:60

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INTRODUCTION: As you know from my sermons and your own study, the book of Acts tells us about the early church. It is the pivot point in Scripture. Acts is the historical account of the early church and how it spread in what we know now as the Middle East. It reads like a novel. It's an incredible story.

This message covers the second half of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7. Because of the amount of scripture involved, I'll not read all of it. You'll have to fill in any gaps with your own reading.

As you know, what we've covered in the book of Acts so far is Jesus' ascension, Pentecost, and the calling of Matthias to replace Judas. We have Peter healing the lame beggar and standing before the Sanhedrin. We have the believers all sharing their possessions. People who once hated each other were now sharing everything. That's what happens when a person receives Christ. Hate goes away, or it should. If someone receives Christ and has hate in his heart, something's wrong.

So people who had previously hated each other, to the point where they walked to the other side of the road, were now fellowshiping together, eating together at the same table, selling their possessions to give money to the poor. That was unheard of in those days because it was believed if you were poor, God willed it that way. Christ was the life-changer. I was going to say game-changer, but it wasn't a game. With Christ, people had a whole new way of thinking. This idea of collecting offerings and distributing them to the poor was completely new.

Then we had Ananias and Sapphira, who sold a piece of land but kept some of the money for themselves. They lied about their offering, so they fell over dead, and great fear swept among the people of the early church. We have the apostles who learned that some of the widows were not treated equally. So they elected people to

take care of the widows. Ministry went beyond the apostles and became something everyone was involved in.

So now, we find ourselves in Chapter 6.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 6:8-10

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

EXPLANATION: First let me note that Stephen did not do these great wonders on his own power. It was God's spirit working through him.

It's very important to notice patterns in the scripture – there are lots of them. For example, in the Old Testament, the Israelites had a cycle of obeying God and being blessed and disobeying God and being punished. Some of you who read the Bible often should make notes of the patterns you see.

A pattern we see in Acts is a miracle followed by criticism from teachers of the law. All these leaders were very educated men. They'd been taught in the Scriptures of the Old Testament and knew how to defend them.

These educated men were locked into a comfortable way of living out their faith, or so they thought, by following all the rules. Had they had “heart knowledge” of the scripture instead of merely “head knowledge”, they would have known the message of Jesus was the fulfillment of their years of study. Even today, all these years later, we know of people who spout scriptures but don't understand them or live them out. They know the words but not the meaning.

I believe the teachers of the law were really in denial. They did not want to accept change. They knew the old way was quickly fading, and they wanted to hang on to what felt normal to them. They knew all about Jesus and the crucifixion, but they failed to admit that the law and prophets had been fulfilled.

They were under the oppression of the Roman government, and they had

believed all their lives that a mighty king would come in and set up his throne, run off the Romans, and restore the nation to the greatness it once was. They affiliated with the other teachers of the law who had been taught and continued to teach the same thing. That's why they didn't believe Jesus was the Messiah.

They had a lot of baggage there. When we get our minds wrapped around one way of thought, when it doesn't happen, it wrecks our lives. They didn't see that the greater need was not political freedom, it was spiritual freedom - not an earthly kingdom, but a spiritual one.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 6:11-14

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

EXPLANATION: These teachers of truth, keepers of the law broke one of the commandments. "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" They found a group of people to lie about Stephen. Purveyors of fake news right here in the scripture. In their legalistic way of thinking, they would have said they were not breaking the Commandment because Stephen was not their neighbor. The accusation of Stephen's words against the holy place and against the law were no doubt referencing Jesus as the temple and Jesus as the fulfillment of the law.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 6:15

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

EXPLANATION: This description of Stephen was not thrown in here by mistake. "...*face like that of an angel.*" I believe this is a New Testament manifestation of the Old Testament expression which the rabbis called the "shekinah glory of God." These teachers of the law would have known about another time over a thousand years earlier when Moses' face shown brightly. Exodus 34:29 *When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of*

the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 7:1

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

ILLUSTRATION: With television court dramas, we see a lawyer demanding a yes or no answer. Sometimes yes or no is not the answer. That is the case here. Stephen had to explain himself.

EXPLANATION: Stephen highlights patterns by giving a history lesson about God’s faithfulness and how he provided salvation throughout history.

- In verse 2, he started with God’s promise to Abraham, and he then goes on to Isaac and Jacob, the father of the 12 patriarchs.
- In verse 9, he talked about how one of these 12, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his brothers. Then he described how later, Joseph saved their lives because of his powerful position in Egypt.
- In verse 14, he told how the tribe started with about 75 people and over the years, their population grew to a great number before they were enslaved.
- Then he started a detailed discourse about the life of Moses.
- He told of the wilderness wanderings.
- He talked about the building of the temple, the portable one that the people carried around.
- He told them about the permanent one dreamed up by David, built by Solomon, which was exactly where they were standing.
- Then he quoted the prophet Isaiah.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 7:48

“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

*⁴⁹ “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?
50 Has not my hand made all these things?’*

- He also quoted 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Stephen, being filled with the Holy Spirit, quoted the scriptures the Sanhedrin would know.
- Then, he goes for it.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 7:51-53

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

EXPLANATION: All of these stubborn, educated men, steeped in the scriptures, when presented with the truth they didn’t want to hear, turned into a mob.

The truth is painful for those who do not want to hear it. Refusal of truth does not make it less than true.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 7:55-60z

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Had Stephen committed any crime? No. Had he disrespected Moses? No. Had he disrespected the prophets? No. All he had done was share his testimony and the history of the people and introduced Jesus.

In response, these intellects, these respected men, acted like children. Then they dragged him out and stoned him, laying their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, who approved of what they were doing. Stephen paraphrased Jesus, *Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

Here's a harsh truth. There seems to be nothing worse than the anger of people who think they are religious. Because they think God is on their side. Another harsh truth: We do not know why God did not spare Stephen. But in his death, God gave him dying mercy and caused him to sleep. The pain would have been nothing compared to the sight he was seeing.

Watching all of this was Saul. Saul had no idea what was ahead for him. He was a religious guy who thought he was doing God a favor by killing Christians. But we know the story of Saul. He became Paul and became the boldest apostle of all. He had no idea as watched Stephen stoned that he would one day pen the words of Romans 8:18. *For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

What a powerful story.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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