

"God's Ways are Higher"

Acts 7

Our last message in Acts left us in the middle of a confrontation between Stephen, a newly appointed leader in the church who started out helping distribute food to widows but they saw his Spirit-giftedness in sharing the gospel, and the religious leaders. For the 3rd time someone is arrested by the Sanhedrin because of their preaching about Jesus. Maybe they thought since Stephen wasn't an apostle they could intimidate him but they are wrong. We read in v.15,

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.

Back in v.10 we read that when Stephen debated with the religious leaders they could not stand up against Him because the Spirit spoke through him. So I think this is kind of like Moses' face shining with God's glory after being in His presence.

Stephen now defends himself in this section which is a little long but very easy to organize and understand. There are three scenes here: The accusations in 6:11-15, Stephen's defense in 7:1-53 and the outcome in 7:54 extending into 8:3. Let's review the accusations remembering that they were,

False Accusations **(6:11-15)**

Notice that the Sanhedrin "*secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." (v.11) ... stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law.*

To turn them against Stephen using misinformation and lies (and they didn't even have Facebook!) (v.12) they then "*produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law." (v.13)*

The two specific charges were 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.*"

Of course when we read John 2 we saw that Jesus never said He would destroy this temple. Instead He said 'you destroy this temple' and even then He was talking about His body; which we know is the presence of God (John 1:14). The temple "housed" the presence of God. To claim Stephen wanted it destroyed was saying that Stephen

Wanted to remove God's house of worship (v.14)

That he wanted to change where Israel worshipped or, even worse change the way they worshipped or even who they worshipped. We can see how one false accusation can be blown out of proportion.

The other false charge they laid against Stephen was that

Jesus was against the Law of Moses (v.14)

Otherwise why would they accuse Jesus and Stephen of wanting to change the customs handed down from Moses? Yes Jesus did want to change the customs the religious leaders made outside of the Mosaic Law, but Jesus actually fulfilled the Law. He wasn't opposed to it. Actually, He's the only one who ever kept it. So there's the charges. Now they confront Stephen in 7:1 'Are these charges true?' If you recall from Ch. 4 the Sanhedrin is made up of the High Priest, former High priests and 70 ruling elders all seated in a raised semi circle staring down at the accused. A very intimidating scene.

Stephen's answer seems to be a history lesson but he picks significant events and mentions specific people and places to show that not only are these charges false but you leaders are idolaters! You've made an idol out of the temple and you don't keep the Law yourself. Remember, Stephen spoke by the leading of the Spirit (6:10) and what we see here then is not just wisdom but a

A Spirit-Led Defense **(7:1-53)**

In Jesus' last week teaching to the disciples He warned them about times like these when they would have to stand before councils and give a defense of telling people about Jesus. So He said to them in Luke 21:12

¹² "But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³ This will result in your being witnesses to them. ¹⁴ But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵ For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

And this is what's happening here. This Scripture. The Holy Spirit guided Stephen to say what he said. And in his weaving of telling Israel's story he gives three answers to these false accusations that we will highlight every time when we come across them:

- 1) God has and always will be worshipped everywhere
- 2) God has always been *dwelling* with His people
- 3) God's deliverers (who tell Israel to keep the Laws of Moses) have consistently been rejected

Let's highlight these 3 things as we survey Stephen's Spirit-led defense. Stephen starts with Abraham – no actually Stephen starts with who? God has always been around. He made the world and everything in it for the purpose of our enjoyment but not at the expense of ignoring Him. The world was created so we would see God's hand in it and glorify Him. Nothing had changed. But notice how Stephen calls God here in v.2, "The God of Glory". This is clearly a reference to God's Shekinah glory that was visibly seen at the dedication of the Tabernacle (in the wilderness) and in the Temple (in Jerusalem). But here Stephen says the Shekinah glory was where? In Mesopotamia (Iran). And God told Abraham to leave his country and he gets as far as Haran, when his father Terah dies. God speaks to him there to continue his journey to Canaan. And then He recites His promises to Abraham about having many descendants and having their own land but not before they would be slaves in Egypt for 400 years. And when God brought Israel out of Egypt He did so that *"they will worship Me in this place"*.

Stephen is essentially saying, 'how can you charge me with wanting to get rid of worshipping God in Jerusalem when God has been worshipped in many places and dwelled with His people anywhere they went ever since He created the world! Have you never read your Bibles!!'

He quickly skips ahead from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob who had 12 sons but notice he specifically calls them the Patriarchs and were jealous of Joseph, who God raised up to deliver them from starvation in Canaan and moved them to Egypt where the Pharaoh showed favour to all of them. Again, God was with His people in foreign countries and delivered them from their problems. And Israel rejected this deliverer initially. And notice another key place name mentioned, when Israel returned to the land and brought back the bones of Jacob and Joseph to Shechem. The place of Abraham's family tomb. What's the big deal about Shechem? The Sanhedrin would have bristled when they heard 'Shechem' because Shechem was in modern day Samaria! So God has been in Samaria leading His people there? Un-huh.

Backing up to the main part of the story (v.17) Stephen mentions Israel being in Egypt under a new Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph and mistreated the Israelites. Where was God? Right there. He heard their cries for help and He raised up a new deliverer by the name of Moses. Miraculously preserving his life and even ironically allowing him to be raised by the Egyptians himself, getting a free education in their language and culture. Moses tried to deliver Israel from Egypt on his own when he killed a slave master who was beating an Israelite and the Israelites rejected him, thinking are you going to kill us too?

Moses escapes to the desert of Midian and guess who's in the desert? God. He appears in a burning bush where He says remove your sandals because this ground is holy and you are in My glorious presence. Note: worship, God's glory somewhere other than Jerusalem. (vv.34-35). Now God calls Moses to be Israel's deliverer:

³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.

Oh yes, Moses. The one whom they charged Stephen and Jesus as trying to change the laws Moses gave them. He's our hero! Oh really? Let's jog your memory says Stephen through the Holy Spirit:

³⁹ "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰ They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' ⁴¹ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made.

Did you forget that Sanhedrin? How Israel rejected Moses and worshipped an idol instead? After seeing all those miracles by God? Speaking of Moses whose Laws you hold so dearly (v.37)

³⁷ "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'

Which is a prophecy about Jesus! (Deut. 18:18). Let me quote the whole verse which the Sanhedrin knew by heart:

¹⁷ The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹ If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.

So Moses said, from God, that you need to listen to the prophet who will be like me (Jesus) because He will speak God's Words and if you don't listen, God will hold you accountable.

And by the way, didn't at the last trial of the apostles that they heeded the advice of Gamaliel to leave this thing alone because if it's of God you can't do anything about it and if its not it will die anyway? Why were they not listening to his advice now?

What happens when Israel refuses to listen to God's spokesperson? V. 42,

⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: [Amos 5:25-27] " 'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? ⁴³ You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

Over time Israel would worship many false gods, none of whom ever did anything for them. Eventually sending them to Babylon. Stephen picks up the story, and mentions Joshua who brought the Tabernacle (moving worship center which housed the presence of God) until Solomon built the temple [which was destroyed by the Babylonians and the one they had then was Herod's renovated version of the one God said to remake. And Solomon said that the temple couldn't contain God (2 Chron. 6) and here Stephen quotes Is. 66:1 saying something similar:

⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ⁴ " '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? ⁵ Has not my hand made all these things?'

So Stephen pointed out to the religious leaders that if you actually look at the Scriptures you will see that God moved around with his people, that He was worshipped in numerous temporary locations, not just in Jerusalem and that Israel has had a history of rejecting the leaders God raised up, including Moses and now including Jesus, the one Moses himself said, 'Listen to Him'.

Stephen makes his closing (not so subtle statement) using God's very words He used when describing rebellious Israel to Moses at the golden calf issue in Ex. 32-33

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers 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 put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Confronted with the evidence of Scripture, how does the Sanhedrin plead? Whoops, Stephen must have forgot he was on trail and not the other way around! But let's carefully note

The Sovereign Outcome **(7:54-8:3)**

How does God use this for His plan and purposes?

Israel rejects another messenger from God (7:54-60)

Instead of repenting of their sin of rejecting God and worshipping the temple as their idol, they turn on Stephen, chase him out of the town (because you can't stone a man in town) and throw

stones at Stephen until he dies. A brutal way to die. And yet, in the sovereign plan of God, whose ways are higher than our ways, God is using Stephen's death to accomplish His purpose to see the gospel go from Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Right now its been stuck in Jerusalem. So God uses persecution to scatter the Christians who are now afraid. And so we read in 8:1

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Persecution and martyrdom is a sad reality for believers. Yet when this happens we think now what? Who's going to replace this person when they die or move away?

But God is not limited by lack of people or resources (8:1-3)

Notice Jesus is standing watching what Israel is doing to Stephen. But is He only watching Stephen? Stephen prays that God would forgive his persecutors. I think Jesus is listening to Stephen's prayer and He's looking at Saul. And He is going to forgive Saul's sins and confront Him on the road to Damascus, where Saul will repent and become Paul and help take the gospel to ends of the earth, according to God's sovereign plan.

The religious leaders were guilty of limiting God to a geographical location. They were also guilty of honouring God's Word without obeying it; in other words hearers of the Word and not doing it. I think we are often guilty of the same things. We too can limit God by leaving Him here, at this location where we worship Him on Sundays and fail to believe He's at our job or at the golf course or arena or in the mall or on the streets as we walk about. We often don't think about God in our daily routines because we inadvertently don't ask Him to work in our life in the things we take part in most of the time. Do you call on God to show you He's with you wherever you go in whatever you do? If we're told whether we eat or drinking or whatever we do to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), then shouldn't we be inviting Him into every area of our life? Maybe God wants you to have a difficult day so you can be a witness through your patience and trust in God. Or, maybe He wants you to have a successful day so that you can humbly acknowledge it was God who did it for you, not yourself.

And aren't we guilty of not listening to Jesus' words as well sometimes? When we have known sin in our life that we know the Bible says confess and repent, why don't we? Or how many times do we need to forgive someone? Always, for everything because that's how God forgives, then why don't we? Why do we hang on to bitterness and unforgiveness and disobey God's Word? The Sanhedrin responded with anger and retaliation when confronted with their sins. Are we not guilty of the same at times?

Stephen exposed the sins of the Sanhedrin here who chose not to repent and stay angry at the Spirit of God, ultimately, who confronted them. Let's not walk away from this passage marvelling at how Stephen defended against these false accusations but rather ask God, Lord, have I limited You by not believing You can work in every area of my life? And what ways have I disobeyed Your Word and need to ask forgiveness? God is not limited by our unwillingness to allow Him to work in our life. He'll find other Stephens and Pauls. But what if we give God control of every area of our life and see every place we go in life as a place where God can be worshipped? What might God do then?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
at olivet@rideau.net