

Acts 7:1-53 - Stephen's Speech

In response to the charge that Jesus and his followers oppose the Mosaic law and aim both to abolish it and destroy the temple, Stephen retells the story of Israel to reveal Jesus as the fulfillment of God's dealings with Israel throughout history (just as Jesus himself claimed to be; Matt. 5:17). In Stephen's speech, God's redemptive plan starts with his promise of an inheritance to the offspring of Abraham. Throughout Israel's circuitous history of wandering, slavery in Egypt, the exodus, settling in the Promised Land, and the construction of the temple under Solomon, God was graciously orchestrating events to lead to the coming of the promised offspring, the Righteous One, Jesus.

As Stephen retells the story, he highlights the fact that God's chosen prophets—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David—have always been mistreated by their own people. Jesus stands as the last in the long line of God's prophets, and he too was persecuted by his own, even to the point of death. The great difference between the prophets of old and Jesus is that *they* spoke of the Righteous One to come, whereas Jesus *is* that Righteous One. It was through the persecution and death of the Righteous One that our sin was removed and we can now share in his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

Stephen then recalls the days of David and Solomon, showing how the Jews have mistakenly associated God's presence only with the temple. But even in the Old Testament, God was not limited by a structure made with human hands. God is near to all who call on him (Psalm 145:18), and he has drawn near to us most fully in Jesus. Does the gospel "destroy Moses"? Is Christianity something new that breaks away from the Old Testament? These are the sorts of charges that Luke continually refutes in Acts. Christ's incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection are ***the true fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of God***. Jesus did not overrule and obliterate the revelation of God that had been entrusted to the Jews; he embodied and fulfilled it.

In the Old Testament...

- ...God made his dwelling among the Jews in the form of the tabernacle, a temporary tent that allowed Israel to say, "The glory of God is with us" (cf. Ex. 40:34-35). In the incarnation of Christ, God came to dwell among us, taking on flesh so that we may truly call him "Immanuel, . . . God with us" (John 1:14).
- ...God revealed his concern for justice and his love for the weak and oppressed. In the ministry of Christ, God himself brought good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed (Luke 4:18).
- ...God required the lives of spotless lambs so that the curse of death would pass over his people (Ex. 12:15). In the death of Christ, God *became* the Lamb, whose sacrifice would once and for all defeat death (John 1:29; Heb. 7:27).
- ...God brought life out of death, empowering barren women to give birth and bringing the dead back from the grave (Gen. 25:21; 1 Samuel 2:21; 1 Kings 17:19-22; 2 Kings 4:34-35).

In the resurrection of Christ, the Son of God walked out of the grave, triumphantly offering new life to those under the curse of sin and death. The God who raised Jesus is the same God who acted powerfully and faithfully throughout the Old Testament—indeed, the Christian gospel depends on this identification. People are not merely urged to join a new fad but are offered the undeserved gift of being grafted into God’s own people by the blood of Christ. We were once slaves, but now we are adopted as sons and daughters.

Acts 7:54-8:3 - Stephen Stoned for His Faith

Amid the very worst incident of persecution in Acts, we meet briefly a person who later will be used by God to proclaim the gospel more widely than any other person in the early church: Saul of Tarsus (7:58). Here we receive a glimpse of the radical grace that God will show to and through Saul: God does not leave behind even the worst of sinners. This offers hope to sinners who feel unforgivable: we must never write off either others or ourselves as beyond redemption.

Acts 7:54-8:3 - The Mission to Samaria

Samaritans, though technically “half” Jewish, were considered non-Jewish, even of lower status than a Gentile. The Jews regarded them as not having any part in the promises of God to his people. In this chapter the gospel reaches Samaria (fulfilling Acts 1:8) and thus the first cross-cultural barrier is breached. Acts 8 begins the process of the gospel being preached to all people groups. Disciples are scattered not just into Judea but Samaria (v. 1). Thus Philip, one of the proto-deacons of chapter 6, goes to Samaria to proclaim Christ, and many people are healed.

Here we see how God cares for the suffering. God’s heart has always been with the afflicted. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, God heard their cries, saw their affliction, and knew their suffering (Ex. 3:7). He was involved. After redeeming Israel from Egypt, he gave them the law, which was replete with instructions to protect the poor, the outsiders, orphans, and widows (Deut 10:18-19, 157-11; etc.). God’s suffering servants have always been sinners as well. While much of their pain was inflicted from without, their deepest pangs were self-inflicted. God’s people often went after idols, forsaking him and enslaving themselves to gods that could not deliver them. Many of our greatest pains are still caused by the folly of idolatry. But Christ was the obedient servant who suffered without any sin. He walked in obedience to the Father but still suffered greatly, allowing him to identify both with the Father in his perfection and with us in our weakness and pain. This allows Jesus to be the unique Mediator between God and humanity.

Acts 8:26-40 - Phillip & The Ethiopian

The Spirit prompts Philip to “go over” and meet an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:29). We discover that as the eunuch is traveling out of Jerusalem, he is reading the book of Isaiah (v 28). In the ancient world reading was done aloud. So, as Philip approaches the chariot, he hears the eunuch reading the prophet, and asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (v 30). We should note the centrality of the word of God in this encounter. Even as the Spirit supernaturally guides Philip to this conversation with the Ethiopian, the Lord uses the word of God and the ministry of Philip as the mechanism of the Ethiopian’s conversion. Our temptation is to wish for supernatural displays of power. But God delights in using his written word to convert the lost and expand his kingdom. Further, conversion is the greatest display of God’s supernatural power. Paul teaches that it takes the power that created light to create saving faith in the Lord Jesus in a sinner’s heart (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Questions for Group Discussion:

1. What high points in the story of the Jewish people does Stephen bring out in 7:16? Why might he have chosen to focus on those? What main points of Moses' life does Stephen choose to emphasize?
2. How is Stephen's death reminiscent of Jesus' death? How have the passages this week shaped the way you view, and react to, personal or church-wide persecution?
3. The message of the gospel was received "with much joy" in Samaria. Recall your own conversion. How did you experience the joy of discovering who Jesus was and coming under his rule? How might you recall that joy each day, so that it continues to be a mark of your life?
4. What reasons could Philip have come up with for not preaching the gospel at various points through chapter 8? What would he have missed out on if he had given up?
5. God delights in using his written word to convert the lost and expand his kingdom." Why is this good news for us? How does it remove our excuses for avoiding sharing our faith?