

Review

Stephen had been falsely accused of blasphemy and dragged in front of the Council. But instead of defending himself, he's about to use the opportunity to preach a sermon to these men who are Judaism's highest-ranking and most well-respected men.

It would easily take us an hour to review the content of Stephen's sermon. Unfortunately, Sunday mornings don't afford us the luxury of taking such time. And I think it would be detrimental to the context to try and stretch it out over two or three Sundays.

So, this morning, I'm going to summarize it into a few short sentences. But tonight at 6:00, we'll look at it in detail for the hour, mainly because there are details in it not found elsewhere in the Bible.

This way, we keep rolling along through Acts while keeping the context, but don't lose out on the verse-by-verse study of God's Word.

(7:1-50) Missing It The First Time

In a nutshell, Stephen's sermon is, "You Hebrews never get anything right the first time!"

- He starts by saying, "Abraham didn't do what God told him to do the first time. It wasn't until after his dad died that he moved to the Promised Land."

- Next, he says that it wasn't until their second visit that Joseph's brothers recognized him.

- Then, when Moses showed up the first time to deliver the Jews, he was rejected by the people, who told him, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us?"

- After that, Moses received the law of God on Mount Sinai, but the Jews missed that the first time too, making a golden calf instead.

- And when they made it into the Promised Land, they weren't able to stay, because they worshiped idols and God sent them to exile in Babylon.

The Israelites' repeating pattern was that they never recognized their deliverers or their deliverance the first time around. And they had done it with Jesus, too. Just like Moses, just like Joseph, Jesus won't be recognized by them until He shows up the second time.

And so Stephen brings the sermon to a climax with a statement of blatant truth, right in their faces...

7:51-53 You Are Stiff-Necked

The term "stiff-necked" describes a horse that refuses to be turned. The more the rider tries to pull on the reins, the more the horse stiffens its neck in stubborn refusal.

"Uncircumcised in heart and ears" refers to the fact that they had refused to cut away their flesh so that they would listen to God and be in love with their Creator.

Both of these attributes had been part of the Jewish people for most of their generations. That's why when God would send the prophets, they would always be persecuted, and often killed. And the same thing happened to Jesus. He'd been betrayed and murdered by the Jews.

John 1:11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

7:54 Cut To The Quick

Stephen's words had gotten to them. Their hearts were cut, not in sorrow, but anger. They were so enraged they began to grind their teeth.

7:55-60 The Stoning Of Stephen

Though the Sanhedrin were full of rage, Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. And while they were looking at a man they viewed as an enemy and a danger, Stephen was looking up and seeing the Lord.

And as soon as he told them what he was seeing, they'd had enough. They ran and grabbed him, dragging him outside of Jerusalem's walls. Intending to stone Stephen, the Council members removed their robes and left them with a young man named Saul (who we will later know as the Apostle Paul). They picked up rocks and began hurling them at Stephen.

As Stephen died, he called out two things: 1) "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" and 2) "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"

Now, this was not the typical reaction of a person being stoned to death. As you can imagine, most victims of stoning would cry out in pain,

beg for mercy, curse the throwers, or some combination of those things.

But Stephen was not most people. He was a man who'd been serving the Lord since he got saved. He'd been ministering to people, and pouring out his life as a sacrifice to God. He'd taken the Word of God in, and taken it seriously. He knew the words of Jesus:

Matt. 10:28 "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

And so he faced death without fear, and full of forgiveness. And in the most dreaded moment that most people could imagine, Stephen had only peace, for he knew that God was waiting to receive him.

8:1-4 Scattered And Preaching

That day, a terrible persecution broke out against all the Christians in Jerusalem. It was so dangerous and deadly that most of the thousands of believers were forced to flee Jerusalem for their lives.

Imagine if that were the case today in Cheyenne. What a horrible thing: fearing for your life, leaving your home, family, and most of your belongings behind. Running away to Denver, or even the west coast.

You'd probably be thinking, "It seemed like God was blessing this new church, but now this is happening! They actually killed one of our deacons and are going from house to house dragging us off to prison!" You might even feel abandoned or forsaken by God.

Now look at it from God's perspective. They'd spent a few years in Jerusalem, and the church grew wonderfully. But Jesus had said to...

Acts 1:8 "...be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

Spreading the gospel beyond Jerusalem was long overdue. God used this persecution to do just that. Suddenly, the gospel went from being isolated in that one city to go into Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

If you're going through turmoil today, choose to look at it with the eyes of faith. That there is a plan, and God is accomplishing His purposes. After all, Romans 8:28 still applies...