

Text: Acts 7:1-60

Title: Stephen's Witness

Shaft: Stephen summarizes Israel's history, their opposition to God, and is killed for it.

INTRODUCTION

The Main Point in Acts: Jesus is King of the universe and everyone must know.

A. Personal Intro

Texan getting to preach on the hottest and coldest days of the year, a dubious honor. A personal thank you for everyone who has worked on the building. We are 1 week out.

B. 2nd Circle of Acts

As we have said in our sermon series, Acts is very much the answer to what happened between the Gospels and the Epistles. It explains why there are churches all over the world.

Furthermore, Jesus provides a road map for us in Acts 1:8 where he tells his disciples that they will be **my witnesses** in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. And so, we shouldn't be surprised here in Acts 7 when we see the speech of Stephen the witness, or otherwise said, Stephen the first martyr of the church. Moreover, this is the 2nd circle of movement for the gospel mission that Jesus predicted. From this point the gospel message makes a jump from Jerusalem into the surrounding area, Judea. But this is not a dispassionate event that causes this transition. It is a bold and passionate sermon from Stephen, led by the Holy Spirit that we find in Acts 7.

C. What Can We Learn from Stephen?

If you are a Christian, then you have an immense amount to learn from this man. If you are not a Christian, then can you not at least acknowledge that it is worth your time to understand why he willingly died for his beliefs?

So today we will ask one question: What enabled Stephen to be a witness of Jesus unto death? After studying this passage, I am persuaded that Stephen was gripped by three things that even death failed to shake from him.

Main Question: What enabled Stephen to be a witness of Jesus unto death?

Points:

1. A Christo-centric view of the Scriptures
2. A conviction of man's broken nature
3. A two-court reality to life

1) A Christo-centric view of the Scriptures

Main Question: What enabled Stephen to be a witness of Jesus unto death?

1. A Christo-centric view of the Scriptures
2. A conviction of man's broken nature
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A. Stephen's Orthodoxy

I know that I am starting off the sermon with a 2\$ word, but it is an important one: **Christo-centric**. We are a church that preaches through the Bible with a Christo-centric view of the Scriptures because the overall message that we get from the Scriptures themselves is the message of Jesus. I'll give you one text from Jesus that supports this before getting to Stephen.

John 5:39

Jesus told the Jews,

³⁹You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me.

If it wasn't true, it would be arrogant. It would be ludicrous. But Jesus argued that the Scriptures had a message, and the message was him.

Along this idea Stephen (who is being falsely accused of blaspheming God, Moses, and the Temple), gives a historical overview of the people of Israel as an answer. And Stephen begins where all good orthodox Jews do, Abraham.

(God)

- Stephen affirms that the God of glory appeared to Abraham directing him to the land he would give to him (v.3)
- Stephen affirms the life and covenant of the other patriarchs as well (v.8)
- Stephen affirms the life and leadership of Joseph who became leader of God's people in Egypt during the famine (v.14)

(Moses)

- Stephen affirms the bondage of Israel in Egypt and God's magnificent deliverance through Moses and the giving of the Law (v.34)
- Stephen affirms Israel's low point in worshiping the golden calf and counts himself among the descendants of such egregious actions (v.39, 44).

(Temple)

- Stephen affirms the kingship of David and Solomon, who desired to build a house for God to always live in the midst of his people and be worshiped by all nations (v.46)

B. Stephen's Orthodoxy + Jesus

Overall, Stephen shows that he holds all the basic tenets of Judaism, except for one major difference- Jesus. So how did Stephen read the Scriptures?

- Jesus is the promised son to receive the blessing of Abraham that all nations might be blessed through salvation in his name.
- Jesus is the hope of the Patriarchs that though they died without a land they will be apart of a new kingdom under Jesus's Kingship.
- Jesus is the better Joseph and sits at the right hand of the King and forgives those who betrayed him.
- Jesus is a better prophet than Moses is that he delivered the fulness of God's revelation to us in himself and rescues us from the bondage of eternal death.
- Jesus is the true Israel who did not succumb to temptation but succeeded at every step where Israel failed.
- Jesus, like David, fought the battle his people couldn't and defeated, Satan, sin, and death on their behalf.
- Jesus is also the better Solomon who rules over his people as wisdom incarnate and the eternal King.

This is how Stephen read the Scriptures. Stephen is orthodox + Jesus. He is not a blasphemer. Or, another way to say it is that Stephen is more orthodox than the orthodoxy!

EXAMPLE: The Hobbit

Here is a thought experiment to help drive this home. What if I were to cut Bilbo Baggins out of The Hobbit and give you the book. Answer- it would make no sense! Why? The central character is missing. Oddly enough, that is how these Jews are reading the Scriptures. Even further, it is often how we read the Bible.

There is a temptation for believers to read the Bible as if we are the hero of the story. And I'm right there with you. This is the way I was often taught the Bible; that it is merely a book of a bunch of good examples to follow.

EXAMPLE: David & Goliath

I have often seen the meme of a picture of David and Goliath that says, "If God puts a Goliath in front of you, He must believe that there's a David inside of you." That is not the biblical point of that story. The point is that God's people were shaking in their boots with fear, that's us, and God intervened in a hopeless situation to save them.

Let's be a church that reads the Bible like Stephen did, with Jesus right at the center. We must have a Christo-centric view of the Scriptures because Jesus is the message they are telling. **At the end of the day Stephen knew that life was not about Him, but Jesus.**

2) A conviction of man's broken nature

Main Question: What enabled Stephen to be a witness of Jesus unto death?

1. A Christo-centric view of the Scriptures
2. A conviction of man's broken nature
3. A two-court reality to life

Not only do we see in Stephen a firm understanding that the message of the Scriptures is about Jesus, but we also find that Stephen had a solid conviction of man's broken nature. Stephen pulls no punches at the end of his speech. While working on the title for this sermon I jokingly wanted to call it "Hurting feelings for the glory of God." And it's because of what he says next.

Acts 7:51-53

⁵¹"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵²Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

A. A stiff rebuke

Stephen's words come as a stiff rebuke, and that is not a bad thing. Before we get up in arms with the religious leaders, we should remember that this is not the first time that a stiff rebuke has been given. Back at Peter's first sermon during Pentecost he said this.

Acts 2:32-36

³²"God has raised this Jesus; we are all witnesses of this. ³³Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear. ³⁴For it was not David who ascended into the heavens, but he himself says:

**The Lord declared to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand**

³⁵until I make your enemies your footstool.'

³⁶"Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

The words are not as intense, but Peter is still holding the Jewish people at large responsible for Jesus' murder. The response? Repentance and 2000 people are saved. This stiff rebuke is meant to lead these religious leaders to repentance, but they are unwilling. The truth here is that we all have a broken nature.

Stephen freely admitted that he was a part of the same group. In verse 39 he said, “our ancestors were unwilling to obey Him” (God), concerning the golden calf betrayal. This is a deep problem in the human heart, idolatry. Worshiping other things, people, or self over God.

Idolatry was THE KEY reason that Israel was exiled in the OT. So, they stopped worshiping other Gods. Instead, they ratcheted down their morality and became what Stephen was standing in front of- worshipers of self.

But then Stephen makes a change as if to say, “That was me, but not anymore.” The pronouns shift from “our” to “you”. And as they do Stephen will tell them the real issue.

B. A heart problem- 3 images (Hapax)

In his stiff rebuke Stephen gives three images of Jewish behavior towards God, which point to one truth.

Stiff-necked | (**Exodus 33:3**) After Israel sins by the Golden Calf incident God says they are stiff-necked. Moses says the same in **Exodus 34:9**, and it is repeated multiple times in Deuteronomy.

Uncircumcised | (**Jeremiah 9:25-26**) Circumcision was given as a sign to Abraham and his line to signify that they are a people who are sensitive to God’s commands. Circumcision uncovers the most sensitive part of a man’s anatomy. The point is that he is able to feel. And this is how God routinely speaks of man’s heart- that he is unable to feel.

Resisting | Third, Stephen argues that this council not only is stiff-necked and uncircumcised, but that they also resist the Holy Spirit. Isaiah speaks of this by saying,

Isaiah 63:9-10

⁹In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. ¹⁰But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.

Though God loved them and cared for them, his people resisted him and grieved him, like a spouse who has committed adultery. God’s own people forsake him from the heart.

Another way of saying it is that God’s own people do not seek him. Paul says, “¹⁰as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (**Romans 3:10-12**)

These verses are not saying that no one ever does good. They are saying that God knows WHY we do our so-called “good works” and apart from life in Him they are all self-serving.

One of the key things that enabled Stephen to be a witness to Jesus unto death was his conviction that mankind has a broken and perverted nature that doesn't seek to love God. He recognized it in himself and he recognized it in the religious leaders. But there was one more thing that Stephen believed that made him bold in the face of death, a two-court reality to life.

3) A two-court reality to life

Main Question: What enabled Stephen to be a witness of Jesus unto death?

1. A Christo-centric view of the Scriptures
2. A conviction of man's broken nature
3. A two-court reality to life

Let's read the final section and see what this two-court reality is like.

Acts 7:54-56

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

A. Court 1- Earth

In one of the most remarkable scenes in the NT the heavens part and Stephen sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at His right hand. By this Luke is reinforcing that Stephen's sermon is divine revelation.

Stephen now stands in the company of Abraham and Moses due to this revelation. And the religious leaders hated him for it. In response they took him outside in a flurry, picked up the heaviest stones they could find, and pelted him to death.

To the naked eye- that's all that happened. I'm sure that's what Rome heard. There was a religious dispute concerning the Judaism, a fanatic of a new cult didn't know when to stop and got himself killed. That is court 1- and it has real power. The religious leaders, Rome, and every other world government has real power.

In **Romans 9** the apostle Paul tells us that the government has been granted the power of the sword by God and they are his servants. And so, Christians should live rightly under

the authorities God has put into place. What we say and do as Christians has real consequences in a real world. It did for Steven, obviously. But we must always keep in mind that there is a right order to our submission to authorities. The Christian must always submit to God before, and if necessary, against all earthly powers. This is Court 2.

B. Court 2- Heaven

The incredible truth that Stephen knew was that he had a foot in both courts, an earthly court and a heavenly. In the earthly court he was wrongly accused, persecuted, condemned, and killed. But as a witness to Jesus he also stood in a heavenly court where the Lord Jesus rules, and reigns and it is only a matter of time till all earthly powers are under his just rule.

Stephen's sermon still hangs in the air to this effect.

You see, as Stephen, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has been speaking, a clear point has emerged that I'm sure the religious leaders would have understood.

There is a pattern to his history lesson.

a. Rejected then accepted

God's leader is always first rejected, then accepted in the Scriptures.

- Abraham was rejected by the Canaanites
- Jacob was rejected by Esau
- Joseph was rejected by his brothers
- Moses was rejected by the Israelites
- David was rejected by Saul
- Solomon was rejected by his brother
- And of course, Jesus was rejected by his own people, the Jews.

Stephen's sermon essentially ends by saying, "You rejected the Righteous One, Jesus, but the second time he comes, you will accept him. Our entire history and tradition points to this one truth. He is the Promised One of God."

b. A Witness unto death

And how does Jesus respond to Stephen witnessing for him? He stands. I think it's a significant thing that Jesus is standing. It could mean:

- 1) Jesus is standing to welcome Stephen
- 2) Jesus is standing in judgement (as authorities would do at pronouncements)

It is a profound irony that as the Sanhedrin are standing to put Stephen to death Jesus stands as ruler and judge over them.

You see, we all stand in the court of God, guilty and condemned to eternal punishment, but except for the cross. It is uncanny how Stephen died like Jesus died.

Stephen died just like Jesus did with 1) the request of his spirit to be received, 2) his loud cry, and 3) his request for the Lord to not hold this sin against his persecutors.

But there is one big difference. Stephen does not cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" because Jesus did. Stephen can stand in God's court because he has already been declared innocent. His prayer was not God receive my spirit, but Jesus receive my spirit. The only reason why Stephen's prayer was accepted is because Jesus' prayer was rejected

Jesus is ready to accept you now, in love, and not in judgement if you believe in his death, burial, and his resurrection for your sins.

APPLICATION

3 points of application so that we can be witnesses like Stephen.

1. Let's be a people who reads the Bible with Jesus, and therefore his gospel, in view.
2. Let's be a people who freely admit our need for grace because we are all idolaters.
3. Let's be a people who keep in mind that we are citizens of heaven and though we are misjudged and misrepresented here on earth we will be welcomed with open arms by Jesus.

EXTRA SERMON INFORMATION

Sermon Description

In Acts 7 the first martyr of the church, Stephen, witnesses Jesus despite the wrath of the Jewish religious powers of the day. How could he stand so boldly in the face of death? In this passage Stephen tells us three truths he held closer than his own life.

Slides

- Main Question: What enabled Stephen to be a witness of Jesus to death?
- Point 1- A Christo-centric view of the Scriptures
- John 5:39
- Acts 7:1-50, I'll jump over this section quickly quoting parts of it.
- David & Goliath Meme Quote: "If God puts a Goliath in front of you, He must believe that there's a David inside of you."
- Point 2- A conviction of man's broken nature
- Acts 7:51-53
- Acts 2:32-36
- Isaiah 63:9-10
- Point 3- A two-court reality to life
- Acts 7:54-56
- Application
 - Let's be a people who reads the Bible with Jesus, and therefore his gospel, in view.
 - Let's be a people who freely admit our need for grace because we are all idolaters.
 - Let's be a people who keep in mind that we are citizens of heaven and though we are misjudged and misrepresented here on earth we will be welcomed with open arms by Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

1. What main lesson about reading the Bible does Stephen teach us?
2. Who can you encourage this week with the truth that Jesus rules from heaven?
3. In what areas of life do you need to drop your guard like Stephen by freely confessing a sinful nature?
4. What opportunities has God given you to be a better witness for Jesus?

Prayer Points:

1. Pray that we would be a community of believers that suffers injustices with a godly attitude.
2. Pray for God to grant us a boldness to be witnesses of Jesus to the lost.