

Israel, A “Stiff-Necked People”

The text for today’s message is too long to read within the time we have, so I would ask you read it on your own later today. Please turn in your Bible to Acts chapter 6 because I will try to guide us through the story of Stephen, reading key verses from chapters 6 and 7, so we might come to an understanding of why Stephen said what he said.

Let me prepare us for God’s Word by prayer.

What’s Happening In Acts 6 & 7

Let me begin by reviewing with you what has and is happening. We began our study of Stephen two weeks ago with his being chosen as one of 7 men to be the 1st to hold the office of Deacon. It was said of Stephen, in verse 5, he was “[a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit](#)”. Stephen began working among the people and last week in verse 8, we learned, “[Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.](#)” Here is a man of purpose and focus serving God’s people and living to bring God glory, and sharing the Gospel of Good News and Salvation with the lost. This is a man I would like to have known and called brother. In verse 10, we learn the enemies of God “[could not withstand the wisdom of Stephen and the Spirit with which he was speaking.](#)” Because of Stephen’s deep faith he stood strong for the truth of God, not as a bully but as a man whose spiritual wisdom and power came from grace, the same type of grace by which he was saved. His power founded on grace, is seen in verse 15, after he was arrested, we read, the enemies of God brought Stephen before the council and

they “gazed at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” Who among us would not have been proud to have had Stephen as their brother or son.

Where, as believers, we would have been proud of Stephen and his testimony and would also have been aware that God was pleased with Stephen, on the other hand, the enemies of the God, the council of the Sanhedrin, responded with viciousness. They arranged liars, like themselves, to bring false charges against Stephen in verses 13 and 14, “they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law (first charge was blasphemy; to speak against the temple where God dwelled and was holy),¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place (second charge; Jesus would destroy the temple) and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us (third charge; Jesus would do away with the laws of Moses).’” The Sanhedrin’s goal was to charge Stephen with blasphemy to justify murdering him as we read in verse 11, “they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’” They were falsely judging Stephen by applying Old Testament law dishonestly;¹⁶ “Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.” (Leviticus 24:16) So, they have set Stephen up with false witnesses to be guilty of speaking blasphemy against Moses and God and bring him before the council to unjustly convict him and murder him.

The Stephen, the accused, was given the right to defend himself by the high priest as was the custom established in Esther chapter 8 and Psalm 82. The high priest says to Stephen, in verse 1 of chapter 7, “Are these things so?” Stephen responds to the high priest in a strange manner; instead of defending himself

against the false witnesses and the false charges, he begins giving a condensed history of Israel. In verses 1 to 8 Stephen focuses on Abraham, the father of the Hebrews. From there Stephen dwells on Joseph and how the Israelites came out of Egypt in verses 9 to 16. Then Stephen spends 28 verses, from verse 17 to 44 on Moses. Stephen closes the history of the Israelites with a brief reference to Joshua and David and Solomon in verses 45 to 50.

After Stephen finishes the history of the Hebrews, he draws his conclusion in verses 51 to 53, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.⁵² Which 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,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Well, hearing all this, what was Stephen’s defense? He had been charged with speaking against Moses and the law, and against God and the temple. His defense is that history proves the opposite is true: it is Israel as a “stiff-necked” people that have lived and behaved against God and resisted the Holy Spirit. They persecuted and killed the prophets of God, they killed Jesus the Son of God, and now they are about to kill a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”. They are the ones who need to give an account, not Stephen. In two weeks when Joyce and I return we will look at the response of the council and the high priest to Stephen’s defense.

The Two Implications Of Stephen’s Message

What we need to do today is to let Stephen’s message minister to us in at least two ways. He says that Israel “always resisted the Holy Spirit.” This means, first, that God had been working for Israel’s benefit again and again with repeated

acts of mercy and patience and long-suffering throughout their history. It also means, secondly, that they had repeatedly hardened their hearts and stiffened their necks and stopped up their ears to the work of God. The leaders of Israel sought their own glory, honor and power – they did not seek these things of God or the things God wanted for His people. From this observation, I believe God would have me speak about 2 key things; encouragement and warnings.

Encouragement

He wants us to be encouraged by the story of his patience and long-suffering with a rebellious people. Understanding “[The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...](#)” (Exodus 34:6-7) God is not eager to punish. He is eager to forgive and indwell the hearts of repentant and humble people who believe in Him and His Son, Jesus. This should be of great encouragement to those who believe in Jesus.

Warning

However, there comes a point when people stiffen their necks and harden their hearts towards God, we are told that God “... [but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.](#)” (Exodus 34:7) God wants us to be warned that there is an end to His patience. There is a point when one’s resistance to the Holy Spirit that goes so long and goes too far that God hands a person over into the power of his own sin. We observe God giving the people over to their sin as Stephen speaks of the Exodus, ³⁹“[Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,](#) ⁴⁰ [saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of](#)

Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: Stephen quotes from Amos chapter 5, ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?’⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch (See 1 Kings 11:7; An Ammonite god worshiped by human sacrifice.), and the star of your god Rephan (A deity worshiped by the Israelites they made during their wilderness wanderings.), the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon (Babylon is a symbol of demonic world power and beyond Babylon is reference to hell) ”” (Acts 7:39-43)

So, the second way God wants to minister to us today, is to awaken us to the terrifying truth that we can resist Him so long and want other things so much more than we want Him, that He finally turns away, stops convicting, stops giving the gracious feelings of guilt, and hands us over entirely to our sin. What we read in Romans can be applied to the Sanhedrin council of Acts 6 and 7,²² “Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts...” (Romans 1:22-24)

Ultimately God gives people of Israel and many of the Jewish forefathers and the Sanhedrin council over to the demonic gods like Moloch because of their hard hearts and self-seeking sins.

I want us to understand that of God’s promises of His patience and words either encourage or warn but both are words of grace. These words are very relevant to us in this very moment; they have to do with Stephen’s history of the Jews and with church today; make clear that anything in our lives we value more than God is wrong and is sin.

To support what I have taught so far, as to why Stephen chose to teach the history of Israel and its stiff-necked refusal to submit and live for God's glory, I am going to examine some of the highlights of Acts chapter 7, because I think the best way to hear God's encouragement and warn this morning is to take some of the high points of Israel's history where we see both Israel's rebellion and God's mercy.

Israel's Resistance To The Holy Spirit

Father Abraham

I begin in the middle of verse 2, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia”. So, before he lived in Haran, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, “To your offspring I will give it.”’” (Exodus 33:1) However, according to verse 4, Abraham makes it half way to the promised land and settles in Haran. But God is merciful and does more than merely tell Abraham to go on to the promised land or punish him for stopping before he got to the promised land, instead God moves him, God exerts some special power on Abraham. We see this in verse 4b, “And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.” So, God's mercy begins with choosing Abraham out of all the peoples on the earth to inherit the promised land; and God's patience begins by giving Abraham an extra push to get all the way to the promised land when he had settled halfway in Haran.

Joseph

Now, let's look at the way Joseph, one of Abraham's great grandsons, comes to Egypt from the promised land. Reading at verse 9, "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt." Here is another instance of resisting the will of God. They were jealous that God was speaking to them through Joseph and even implying that they might someday have to honor Joseph as their superior. Their efforts to prevent God's purpose to come about by selling Joseph, is answered in verse 9b to 10, "but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household." In other words, in and through the jealousy and resistance of the patriarchs, God was patient and merciful, and kept on working for their deliverance. They rejected God's word revealed in Joseph's dreams by God, but instead of judging them, God used their very sin to bring rescue to them when they ran out of food and had to come begging to Egypt and they have to submit to the brother they hated and sold.

Moses

The next illustration Stephen uses is Moses. God raises Moses up as a deliverer for His oppressed people in Egypt, but when Moses makes his first appearance to help his people, they resist him, as their forefathers did Joseph. In verse 26 he tries to break up a fight between two Israelites saying, "Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?" The response is not what Moses expected, verse 27 says, "But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?'" History shows they rejected Joseph who would later save them from famine. They rejected God's deliver from slavery, Moses. Now they reject God's deliverer from the wages of sin and death, Jesus the Christ. However, history also shows God's patience and mercy. God used the patriarch's sin to orchestrate their salvation from starvation.

God sends Moses back and we read in verse 34, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.” God is both patient and full of grace and mercy for those He has chosen, even when they are stiff-necked. God purpose is accomplished, reading at verse 35, “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.” Again, the Israelite history shows they repeatedly rejected those sent by God.

The Golden Calf

In spite of all this patience, verses 39 to 41 say, “Our fathers refused to obey Moses, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.” For many of the Hebrews, God’s patience came to an end, for as verse 42 reveals, “God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven.” In other words, since they reject the true worship of God and want idols made with their own hands, God gives them up to the reality behind all idols, which is, demons. So, comes God’s judgment, “You took up the tent of Moloch (See 1 Kings 11:7; An Ammonite god worshiped by human sacrifice.), and the star of your god Rephan (A deity worshiped by the Israelites they made during their wilderness wanderings.), the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon (symbol of demonic world power and beyond Babylon is reference to hell)” You would think God would be finished with the stiff-necked Jews, but after all this, God did not cease to

show mercy to all of them. In verse 45 it says that the Israelites “dispossessed the nations which God thrust out before our fathers.” So, even after the idolatry in the wilderness, God fought for Israel and gave them the promised land.

“Houses Made By Hands”

Finally, Stephen gets to the point of the temple and the accusation against him. He points out in verse 47, “it was Solomon who built a house for God.” The truth was the temple they prized so highly and dearly and had come to be worshiped as an idol, the temple Jesus said, if man destroyed, He would rebuild in 3 days, was referring to their murdering Him and His resurrection, which brings to the forefront the truth is that “the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” Stephen supports this claim by quoting both what King David in Psalm 11 and the Prophet Isaiah from chapter 66, reading at verse 49, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. (David) What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? (Isaiah) Stephen’s purpose for giving an overview of the history of Israel and the warning to the Sanhedrin is now laid out in verse 51, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.” Stephen is saying, both your forefathers and you resist the Holy Spirit. The temple has become your idol, it is not the house of God. Why do I say the temple had become an idol? Look with me in verse 41, “they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.” Like the calf they worship, so too, they worshiped the man-made temple and placed it before the worship of God. Also, this connects to verse 48, “the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands”

The root evil for many Israelites was that they derived their joy, their fulfillment, their meaning and their sense of significance, not from God, but from

what they could achieve with their own hands; as verse 41 says, they “rejoiced in the works of their hands.” They wanted a kind of god and a kind of worship in which they could control by their own power and by their own wisdom and by their own righteousness and by their own morality and by their own religious zeal, and they could contain their god in their man-made box they called the temple. They got their joy from what they could achieve and not from God. Especially not from a God so free and so great and so sovereign and so self-sufficient that He gets all the credit for everything good, and won’t let Himself be limited or controlled by a man-made temple. The temple in Jerusalem had become, for many in Israel, a symbol of what they could achieve, the work of their hands. Therefore, their worship had become a subtle form of self-worship. Even though it was all very religious, using all the right language, their worship came from uncircumcised hearts and stiff, un-submissive, self-exalting necks. The temple had become an idol. My beloved what temples or what idols have you placed before God?

What Jesus Destroyed

When the false witnesses accused Jesus of saying, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.” (Mark 14:58) they were speaking of the man-made temple, yet, what Jesus had referred to was, He would destroy this kind of self-glorifying religion. Stephen saw it as clearly as the noonday sun, because he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He did not look to the achievements of his own hands or to the performances of his own power. He looked to God in faith and relied on the Holy Spirit for power, so that “the God of glory” Luke spoke of, in verse 2, would be exhibited to Israel through Stephen.

Lesson From Stephen’s Witness

This morning God wants you to hear two messages: one is that, ⁸ “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.” (Psalm 145:8-9) when we connect this to Psalm 103, God is a God of forgiveness, ¹¹ “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:11-12) God does not turn from us or stop pursuing us because we have sinned once or twice or ten times or 70 times or 70 times 7 times. If you repent, God is still pursuing you.

The other message this morning is a merciful warning, God the Father, Jesus the Christ and Stephen the man of faith filled with the Holy Spirit are all saying, do not get your fulfillment from the works of your hands or from the achievements of your own strength but find your true fulfillment in your worship of the only true God.

I take the warning first for myself; will I rejoice in God and in His truth and in His mercy? If so His love, grace and mercy will be reflected imperfectly in me. On the other hand, if I rejoice in the work of my hands and my mind; then I am an idol worshipper and God will deliver His just judgment. This is the issue raised for me by Stephen. My faith waivers and can be weak, so I cry out to the God of mercy to strengthen my faith that I may run the race of a true believer and obtain the crown, which is heaven with God.

My beloved may we never worship the things of this world at the expense of God. For this would be self-worship, idol worship and the result will be God righteous judgment. All belongs to God, as we are reminded in verse 49, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.”

We are but stewards He has placed here at this time to care for His creation and the people He brings into our lives. May the work of our hands, everything we do and are - bring glory to God. As Paul wrote about Christ, I echo and shout, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Romans 11:36)