

Acts #8 - From Opposition to Persecution

6:8-15; 7:1-60

Mid-week Service Sermon.

Good to see you tonight; glad you're here for part 8 of our Acts series. This series will stretch well into the New Year, and so far, I've enjoyed the format of these Mid-Week Services; to be able to spend time going piece by piece through a single book with the intent of developing a particular theme. In Acts, we are looking specifically at the establishment, development and growth of the Christian Church.

Sometimes, especially when you're bringing in a number of different speakers over several months' time, it can be difficult to bridge the gaps, so to speak, between the last week, the current week and the following week, but I hope you feel like we're doing a good job with that.

I am pulling a back-to-backer here...which gives me the advantage of knowing exactly what was on the mind of last week's speaker as he was preparing that message and looking forward to this week.

The intention here as we work through a months-long series, is to be able to *flow* the teaching from one segment into the next, but some books, the book of Acts, in our case, can be challenging in that "long-series" format, because while there *is* continuity there, it's not the kind of continuity you'll find in, say, one of the epistles or gospels. Acts is more history-centered and it isn't always set up to flow well.

Last week we left off at verse 42 of chapter 5 as we explored the challenges that the apostles faced as opposition to the early church began to mount. And verse 42 kind of closed out that train of thought with the following: *⁴²Every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.*

Despite repeated warnings from the religious leaders that made up the Jewish Court, they continued to preach. And the church continued to grow.

As we get into chapter 6, we see a shift in the story line as it moves from a focus on the Twelve, the Apostles as a group, into the larger view of the church as it expands and some of the individual parts the various apostles had to play in it.

I mentioned last week that you and I...in this nation at this time...we're free to speak the name of Jesus. People that disagree with you, I would suspect, would more than likely just tolerate you and hope you lose steam and eventually go away. In most circles you're not going to meet with much more than verbal opposition. Even if that opposition gets a little heated, you can probably rest assured that you won't be flogged in the public square for proclaiming the Gospel. Yet.

But the apostles have already faced the threats of the Sanhedrin and, at their direction, the whips of the prison guards, and it hasn't slowed them a bit. In fact, it has invigorated them to press harder into the task that Jesus left them with. If you're not already there, please open up your Bibles to Acts 6 as we get ready to read in verse 1. Ready?

¹In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. ²The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. ³Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

⁵This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. ⁶They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The church began from these twelve men, and when it was a fledgling organization, it was pretty simple for them to manage the affairs of the church on their own. They received property and donations from one group, assessed the needs of the many people that were coming to them to receive those donations, and distributed them in kind. And guess what happened? What began as a group of people committed and unified and dedicated to the mission of spreading the Gospel...started to morph into a non-profit dedicated to feeding widows and underprivileged children.

Complaints started coming in from the members of the church: “Hey, I think the apostles are giving the lion’s share of the booty out to their own people. That’s not fair, what gives?!” Legitimate needs probably got missed because of the time the apostles spent squashing arguments, and the time they spent in the physical act of distributing meals and other things. Most importantly, the work of preaching the Gospel wasn’t being done as effectively as it had been. It became clear the apostles were gonna need some help.

Back in the Old Testament we read of Moses’ father-in-law Jethro who was watching Moses one day as he provided conflict resolution for the Israelites from sunrise to sunset and simply asked the question... “What exactly are you doing?”

Let me read it to you...Exodus 18:13-23 - *¹³The next day Moses sat down to judge the people, and they stood around Moses from morning until evening. ¹⁴When Moses’s father-in-law saw everything he was doing for them he asked, “What is this thing you’re doing for the people? Why are you alone sitting as judge, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening? ”*

¹⁵Moses replied to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶Whenever they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I make a decision between one man and another. I teach them God's statutes and laws."

Well, that's a good thing, right? Moses has a mission here...he's teaching the people! But listen to what Jethro tells him:

¹⁷"What you're doing is not good," Moses's father-in-law said to him. ¹⁸"You will certainly wear out both yourself and these people who are with you, because the task is too heavy for you. You can't do it alone. ¹⁹Now listen to me; I will give you some advice, and God be with you. You be the one to represent the people before God and bring their cases to him. ²⁰Instruct them about the statutes and laws, and teach them the way to live and what they must do.

²¹But you should select from all the people able men, God-fearing, trustworthy, and hating dishonest profit. Place them over the people as commanders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²²They should judge the people at all times. Then they can bring you every major case but judge every minor case themselves. In this way you will lighten your load, and they will bear it with you. ²³If you do this, and God so directs you, you will be able to endure, and also all these people will be able to go home satisfied."

Moses' father-in-law wasn't just some dude off the street...he was the priest of Midian. He had some experience behind him when it came to running things, and in sitting back and watching, he saw something that Moses didn't see. He was letting the things that were important overtake and overshadow the things that were very important.

So this idea of selecting qualified leaders to help to shoulder the burden of administration is certainly not a new one. Like Moses, the apostles knew that they had a job to do. They had been charged by God to spread the news of the Gospel, and here they were, spending their days ministering to the needs of the people.

Not to say that isn't good work, and work that needed to be done, but that wasn't their charge. That wasn't the best use...the God-directed use...of their time. And they finally recognize that: *"It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables... we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*

They are to remain focused on developing the Church. To preaching the Word of God. So they chose seven men to serve the congregation and to free them up to do the work of preaching. Look at the affect that this had on the church, then...verse 7 tells us: *So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.*

The last half of chapter 6 focuses in on the contributions of one of those men, Stephen. Look at verse 8: *⁸Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.*

What kind of a guy was Stephen? Well, the very first mention of Stephen's name carries the phrase *a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit*. And here in verse 8 we read that he was *full of grace and power* and that he was *performing great wonders and signs among the people*. So here is a man that took his assigned job of serving food and performing menial tasks around the church... and reached past it. He went all in.

He served and did the things he was placed there to do, but he was also ministering to people, most likely healing people, doing the same kinds of works that the apostles themselves were doing. He was certainly taking time to preach the Gospel as well, and we know this because of the opposition that rose up against him in the synagogue he was preaching in!

It appears that Stephen was, as were the apostles, unafraid to stand in a Jewish house of worship and proclaim the resurrected Christ. But now it's not just the religious elite that are bucking this message, the common man is resisting it. The problem is that they kept losing their arguments against Stephen.

Have you ever watched a really good apologist at work? Ravi Zacharias, or Frank Turek? Their audiences always want to bring up some controversial point...something they intend to discredit the Christian viewpoint...and they dismantle people. And the audience interrogators get angry, flustered and frustrated to no end...simply because they quickly realize they don't have an answer for the apologist's counterpoints on questions that they are sure they "had them" on.

Clearly this is the same degree of frustration that Stephen's opposition felt during these debates that they engaged him in. Verse 10 tells us: *...they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.*

The Greek word used for wisdom here...*sophia*...is used as an indicator that Stephen spoke with an "inspired wisdom" that came directly from the Holy Spirit. Flip over to Luke 21. Jesus is speaking to the twelve and he is telling them then about the things that they are beginning to experience now as the church starts to form.

Verses 12-17: *¹²But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you. They will hand you over to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴Therefore make up your minds not to prepare your defense ahead of time, ¹⁵for I will give you such words and a wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶You will even be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will kill some of you. ¹⁷You will be hated by everyone because of my name,*

The events detailed in Acts are happening so close to this conversation in Luke, that the apostles had to have that on their minds as this unfolded. Keep in mind tonight Jesus' words to the apostles in verse 15, *¹⁵for I will give you such words and a wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict*, because we are going to see those words fulfilled in the life and words of Stephen throughout Acts 6 and 7. It's this wisdom that Stephen's opposition had to contend with.

Let's turn back to Acts 6:11-15 to see how these men dealt with being unable to oppose Stephen: *¹¹Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹²They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin. ¹³They also presented false witnesses who said, "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the law. ¹⁴For we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

Not gracious losers, are they? After failing to silence Stephen through debate, the Jews try to silence him through the law. As Stephen is dragged before the Sanhedrin, the high priest and the Sadducees and Pharisees that made up the court are once again faced with unwavering (and unsettling to them) faith in Jesus. Nearly all of chapter 7 is filled with Stephen's response to the high priest's inquiry of him in verse 1: *"Are these things true?"*

There is no way we have time to go through the next 49 verses; it would take me all the time I have left tonight just to read them. But there are some things that we can pull out and talk about before we wrap up with the last nine verses of Acts 7.

Right from the outset Stephen is “in the face” of the Sanhedrin and the Jewish crowd that had gathered to see what all the hoo-hah was about. The last verse in chapter 6 tells us that the entire assembly *saw that [Stephen’s] face was like the face of an angel*. I don’t think that is meant to suggest that Stephen had this soft, cherub-y look about him, nor do I think he was wearing the stern look of an avenging angel preparing for battle.

I think that there was this visible glow about him, the same kind of look that Moses had when he visited with God...he just kind of radiated the Holy Spirit as he rested in that promise of Jesus we read back in Luke 21. I mentioned earlier we would see those words fulfilled in Stephen’s life, and during this discourse is one of those times. Even though Stephen had not prepared in advance a defense for himself, the Spirit gave him the words to speak.

You heard me reference author F.F. Bruce last week, and I’ll do so again here. Bruce points out that this speech that Stephen makes for most of this chapter, which has been called Stephen’s “defense”, “is not a speech for defense in the forensic term. That is, it is not calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin. Rather, it is a defense of pure Christianity as God’s appointed way of worship.”

Ajith Fernando served as the national director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, and presently serves as its teaching director. He’s written several books, including “*Acts, The NIV Application Commentary*”, which is where I want to draw the next few points from. As we go through the three major themes of Stephen’s sermon, imagine you are a devout Jew, and see how as each successive theme is presented, your anger toward Stephen may begin to build.

The first of these themes is this: The activity of God is not confined to the geographical land of Israel. God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia and Haran. He blessed Joseph in Egypt. He spoke to Moses in the desert near Sinai during the incident of the burning bush. He performed wonders and signs in Egypt, the Red Sea, and the desert, and he also gave his people the law at Mount Sinai.

Now this statement might not mean much to us, mostly because we aren't fighting Jewish tradition in the modern American church. But the Sadducees and Pharisees had forgotten their history, it seems, and were claiming that God's activity was confined to the geographical land of Israel. Stephen refutes that using scripture to remind them that God was at work well before that nation ever existed.

Second theme: Worship acceptable to God is not confined to the Jerusalem temple. The burning bush was holy ground, and Moses had to remove his sandals there. Moses encountered God in Mount Sinai and was given living words. The tabernacle was a suitable place of worship for the people of Israel, no matter where it had been located throughout history. Stephen concludes that "everything necessary for pure worship was available to the people in the wilderness, before they ever entered the Holy land."!

The Jewish Scriptures testify that God does not dwell in houses made by human beings. In verses 44-50, Stephen quotes Isaiah 66 when he says:

¹This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What kind of house will you build for Me? Or where will be My place of repose?

²Has not My hand made all these things?

And in saying that, Stephen is implying that “to announce the suppression or destruction of the temple was not to commit blasphemy or sacrilege against God, because God was independent of any temple.” If you’re a devout Jew in the room, are you getting mad yet?

How about as a Christian? Now while it’s true that no Christian will claim that true worship can only be done at the Jewish temple, have we not come up with our own “Jerusalem temples”? Do we not claim “holy ground” status for so many different things?

For some it’s the church building. When I was young, even though I didn’t have any real relationship with God for most of my life, when I was in trouble, or I felt like I needed God to hear me, I would find myself in the dead of night at the door of a church. I’d just sit on the steps and tell “the person that lived there” what was going on in my life at the time and ask for help. Not until a few years ago did I finally realize that the church building held no power! Asking Jesus into my heart and being filled with the Holy Spirit meant I could have those conversations anywhere.

For some it’s the things attached to the church. The order of service, the worship style, the clothes that are expected to be worn by certain people... we have people in this congregation that say they are being forced out of relationship here, they are considering leaving the body...because we made a change from this (bulletin)...to this (one). If that’s you, please hear this. That’s exactly the kind of “holy ground” thing that Stephen preaches against in our passage tonight. When we allow our traditions to move between us and our relationship with Christ, we are in a really bad place.

If that's not you, but you hear those conversations, please tactfully ask those people to come talk to one of the pastors. We actually desire good feedback and we want to be able to have personal conversations with our people about things that bother them. But nothing good can ever come from sidebar complaints.

Third theme: The Jews have constantly rejected God's representatives. Joseph was rejected by the patriarchs. Moses was rejected when he tried to intervene in a quarrel between two Jews in Egypt, and yet this Moses was sent as Israel's deliverer. The message of Moses they rejected and instead erected a golden calf. Stephen climaxes his message in vigorous language by claiming that Israelite history is a history of rejection of God, not submission to him!

Read verses 51-53: ⁵¹*"You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also. ⁵²Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. ⁵³You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it."*

It seems that Stephen has to end his talk abruptly at this point because his audience has become so agitated. Verse 54: ⁵⁴*When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"*

That's the last straw. This large group of people has accused Stephen of blasphemy and plotting to overthrow the temple, so they're already riled up.

Then, Stephen openly chastises them using their own scriptures, challenges their understanding of those scriptures and calls them out as betrayers and murderers. He's not making any friends in the room. And when Steven says he sees Jesus at the right hand of God, that was all it took for them to break loose.

To the Jew, for anyone and certainly not this Jesus, to claim a position at God's right hand was heresy. To say that Jesus, the man they killed for claiming to be the Son of God and King of the Jews was standing there in glory was blasphemy of the highest order and merited immediate death! Verse 57:

⁵⁷They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. ⁵⁸They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he died.

See that in verse 58? Saul.

To really wrap up the whole story of Stephen, I want to read a little of chapter 8, *¹Saul agreed with putting him to death. On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. ²Devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him. ³Saul, however, was ravaging the church. He would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.*

Scripture doesn't tell us explicitly, but Saul may have been one of the young leaders of the synagogue that took issue with Stephen and hauled him in front of the Sanhedrin. Part of that group was made up of people from the area around Saul's hometown of Tarsus.

As Saul ravages the church, he unwittingly forces its spread throughout the world. So even though many are imprisoned and martyred for the faith, the persecution causes flight, and even as the faithful flee, they carry the gospel with them. All things work together for good...

I keep thinking back to that prayer for boldness in Acts 4. And I hate to sound like a broken record sometimes, but there are just things in our churches and in our faith that we need to be pressing on. One of them is the need for us to be bold in sharing our faith.

You don't need to practice your preaching in front of a mirror, or even worry much about what to say. If you have that close relationship with Jesus, his promise to the apostles is his promise to you; he will send the Spirit into you to give you the right words when it's time.

If Christ's church is to continue to develop and grow by bringing the lost to Jesus, we need to be available and willing to let him use us. As we close in prayer tonight, I'm going to just go quiet for a few seconds and during that time I'd like you to think of one person that you can share the good news with this week.