

The Acts of the Apostles

Lesson: 9

Topic: Stephen is Martyred for Preaching the Gospel from the Old Testament

Reading: Acts 6:8-7:60

Review

Scripture Analysis – Chapter 6

Verse 8

- “full of grace and power”
 - Once again Luke draws attention to the spiritual qualifications of Stephen.
- “signs and wonders”
 - Stephen had a special “favor of God” to perform miracles.
 - The Lord singled out Stephen as His instrument through whom He brought miracles when and where He desired.

Verses 9-10

- “...rose up and disputed with Stephen...”
 - These Jew arose against Stephen and forced a dispute upon him.
 - Most likely in the court of the Temple or somewhere on the street.
- “...they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking”
 - These Jews were man against one.
 - Yet, despite their number they had not the strength to resist Stephen.
 - Stephen, filled with the Spirit, had the authoritative Word of God.

Verses 11-14

- These Jews, on account of their unbelief, resort to foul means in order to silence the proclamation of God’s Word.
- QUESTION: What kinds of things happened to Stephen when the Jews were unable to contradict him?
 - False witnesses were secretly induced to speak against Stephen.
 - They stirred up the people in order have him arrested.
 - He was brought before the Sanhedrin.
 - They accuse him of many of the same things Jesus was accused of by false witnesses:
 - blaspheming Moses and God
 - wanting to destroy the temple and the law
 - wanting to change the customs delivered to them by Moses

Verse 15

- QUESTION: What did the council see when they looked at Stephen’s face?
 - They “saw his face as the face of an angel.”
 - The Spirit filled him to such an extent that his countenance shown with supernatural light and power
 - comparable to that of an angel.

- The Sanhedrists gazed in astonishment.
- His face shown for a purpose – to proclaim the mess of the Gospel to these unbelievers.

Scripture Analysis – Chapter 7

Verse 1

- “Are these things so?”
 - The prosecution had closed its case.
 - Caiaphas, who is high priest and presiding over the court, turns the case over to the defense.
- Stephen will chronicle OT history, showing how it is fulfilled in the person and work of Christ.
 - Verses 2-8: Abraham
 - Verses 9-16: Joseph
 - Verses 17-44: Moses
 - Verse 45: Joshua
 - Verses 45-46: David
 - Verses 47-50: Solomon
- Throughout this pay attention to how these individuals:
 - were persecuted but also
 - how God was with them.

Abraham (Acts 7:2-8)

Verses 2-8

- “Brothers and Fathers hear me” (v.2).
 - In the face of false accusations, Stephen address these men with respect
 - Brothers – Stephen belonged to the Jewish nations
 - Fathers – Recognizing he was under the Jewish authority.
- “the God of glory” (v.2)
 - Stephen asserts that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is both the subject and source of his message.
- Abraham
 - The first of the OT patriarchs.
 - Going up out of the land of his kindred, Abraham was obedient to God.
 - Yet, he was accounted righteous not by works but by faith in the promise (Gen. 15).
 - That his offspring would be as numerous as the stars.
 - Even though:
 - For the longest time, his wife was barren.
 - His offspring would be sojourners
 - He had no inheritance in the land.
 - Some of his offspring would be inflicted for 400 years.
- “circumcision” (v. 8)

- God gave this to Abraham and his offspring as a sign and seal of the covenant that Abraham would be father of many nations.
- This is reserved for those who believed in this promise made to Abraham.
- This will come up again later in Stephen's sermon.

Joseph (Acts 7:9-16)

Verses 9-16

- Stephen briefly mentions Isaac and Jacob (v. 8), but gets right to Joseph.
- QUESTION: What is the first thing we hear about Joseph?
 - That he was persecuted for the faith.
 - He was hated by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt.
- "God was with him"
 - Stephen emphasizes the contrast between those who are wicked and God.
 - God used this evil for good.
 - God was with Joseph and rescued him from his afflictions (v. 9-10).
 - God gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, who made him ruler over Egypt.
- QUESTION: What biblical narrative is Stephen calling to mind.
 - Joseph interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh.
 - Seven years of plenty and seven years of famine.
 - With his brothers coming to Egypt seeking food, Joseph is able to get his brothers to repent of their sins.
- As there were several years left in the famine, Joseph has his family move to Egypt.
- "and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb..." (v.15-16).
 - Jacob and Joseph died far from the land of promise.
 - Yet, we see their faith in the promise.
 - They only sojourned in Egypt, their real homes was in Canaan and so they were all eventually buried there.

Moses (Acts 7:17-44)

Verses 17-19

- "Now as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt..."
 - Stephen's shifts to Moses.
 - Begins similar to Exodus 1
 - People increasing (v. 17)
 - King over Egypt who didn't know Joseph (v. 18)
 - Killing of the male children (v. 19)
 - With this new king, God's people were afflicted.
 - However, God made certain that these events and situations served His plan of deliverance.

Verses 20-22

- "Moses was born and he was beautiful in God's sight."

- This phrase indicates that, even in the midst of these babies dying, God is with Moses even as a baby.
- God saved Moses in the most remarkable ways:
 - Keeping him hidden in his father’s house for three months. Then after this...
 - Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses in a basket that was place in the river by his mother. Pharaoh’s daughter brought him into her home and raised him (See Exodus 2).
 - The Hebrew Moses is raised in Pharaoh’s family.
 - Here, he is educated.
- FYI – We see Moses as a type of Christ.
 - He nearly perishes as a baby.
 - But is saved even in Egypt.

Verses 23-29

- “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers...”
 - Although Moses was raised and had grown to manhood in Pharaoh’s court, Moses had not become an Egyptian.
 - He knew that he was still a Hebrew at heart.
 - These enslaved Israelites where his real brethren, and he was one of them.
 - Even in the midst of rampant idolatry, Moses managed to avoid this.
- “...Seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man...”
 - Moses comes to the Israelites defense.
 - We see the love and loyalty of Moses to his brother, but...
 - They are badly misdirected.
 - “He is by no means ready for the great task of delivering God’s people.
 - He asks without a call or direction from God.
- “...thrust him aside...”
 - Moses
 - Moses assumed he would be appreciated for what he did.
 - Yet, his eyes are opened.
 - He’s thrust aside by the very person whom he saved.
 - His own brethren considered his deed plain murder, which it was.
 - Stephen:
 - Yet, Stephen is pointing out the fact that Moses’ own people were pushing him away.
 - Stephen returns to this phrase of “thrusting aside” in verse 39
 - Israelites thrust Moses aside, turning their hearts to Egypt.
 - In thrusting Moses aside they’re rejecting God.
 - This Phrase undergirds the them for Stephen’s speech.
- “Moses fled”
 - Pharaoh heard of Moses killing one of his soldiers sought to bring Moses to account.
 - Moses fled and became an exile in Midian.
 - Midianites were nomadic tribes.
 - Moses fled into the Sinai Peninsula, east of Egypt.

- Fleeting to Midian, Moses places both his people and their deliverance as well as himself entirely into God's hands.

Verses 30-34

- Forty Years:
 - The first forty years of Moses' life were in Egypt.
 - The second forty years of Moses' life were in Midian.
- Wilderness of Mount Sinai
 - God appears to Moses for the first time on the very mountain that He will later give Moses the Law.
 - Through a burning bush that wasn't burning to ashes, the LORD God makes Himself known.
 - From "fathers" God goes back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
 - This expresses the truth that this appearance has a connection with his great covenant.
 - God appears on Sinai because He will renew and advance his covenant with the children of Israel.
 - He has seen the affliction of His people in Egypt.
 - He has come to deliver them from their bondage.
 - He will do it through Moses.
 - The one rejected by man, God selects.

Verses 35-38

- "This..."
 - Verse 35-38 are tied together through five emphatic "This"
 - This Moses (v. 35)
 - This man God sent (v. 35)
 - This man led them out (v. 36)
 - This is the Moses who said to the Israelites (v. 37)
 - This is the one who was in the congregation (v. 38)
- "This Moses, whom they rejected...this man God sent..." (v. 35).
 - Calls to mind when Moses tried to reconcile the two Israelite men, but the one thrust him aside (v. 26-28).
 - Only one man utters the phrase, "who made you a ruler and a judge?"
 - But this phrase can rightly be attributed to all of Israel.
 - Their history shows this attitude.
 - Yet, while he was rejected as a ruler and judge, God calls Moses as both a ruler and redeemer.
 - Ruler - Moses was the head and leader of the young nation
 - Redeemer - Moses was God's instrument of delivering Israel from their bondage to Egypt.
 - QUESTION: How do we see Moses as a type of Christ?
 - Jesus was rejected by man (See Acts 3:13).
 - Christ redeems man from their bondage to sin.
- "This man led them out..." (v. 36)
 - Moses, the man who was rejected, accomplished Israel's' freedom.

- QUESTION: How does Moses accomplish this freedom for God's people?
 - Through many signs and wonders.
- QUESTION: What are some signs and wonders Moses did?
 - Ten Plagues
 - Parting the Red Sea.
 - Manna from heaven.
 - Water from the rock.
- QUESTION: How is Moses a type of Christ?
 - Christ did many signs and wonders.
 - Yet, Jesus was true God.
- “This is the Moses who said to the Israelites...” (v. 37)
 - A quote from Deut. 18:15
 - God promises to raise up another like Moses.
 - This pointed to Christ.
 - Christ is the stone the builders rejected.
- “This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness...” (v. 38).
 - This section highlights the fact that Moses was a mediator between God and His people.
 - Moses received directly from God:
 - Not just the Ten Commandments (Law)
 - God's grace in the promise of the Messiah and salvation.

Verses 39-41

- “Our fathers refused to obey him...”
 - Stephen uses the pronoun “our” to show they are connected to those who rejected Moses.
 - By rejecting Moses they reveal they are not true sons of Israel.
 - In rejecting Moses they are ultimately rejecting the One who sent Moses – God.
 - “their hearts” this is where the seat of unbelief is always found.
 - Sins against the first commandment
 - setting up idols for oneself.
- “Make us gods...”
 - We see their rejection of God.
 - The living God led them out of Egypt with miracles, yet...
 - They turn to dead idols of Egypt, manufactured in the desert by their own hands.
- “We do not know what has become of him...”
 - With Moses on Mount Sinai for 40 days, this was the Israelites excuse for making an idol.
 - It was a pretty lame excuse.
 - Here, they cast Moses aside.
 - They cast God's covenant aside.
 - They regard the miracles of God as nothing.
- QUESTION: Why is Stephen bringing these facts forward so prominently?
 - He preparing for his climax.
 - The unbelieving fathers rejection of the mediator Moses is a type of Stephen's present hearers rejection of the Mediator Jesus.

Verses 42-43

- Stephen passes over the rest of the story and mentions only the punitive act of God.
- “Turned away”
 - We’ve talked this before: to have God’s turned to you is to have his favor and blessing.
 - When the sinner is determined to follow his wicked ways, God punishes him by giving him over to his sin.
 - He uses sin to punish sin.
 - God turns His back on them.
 - Nothing can be worse than to have God turn and let the sinner who has turned from him go on into judgment.
- “host of heaven”
 - The sin God hands them over to is further idolatry.
 - God gave them over to serve the host of heavens:
 - Worship of the sun and other heavenly bodies.
 - Like the false gods of the Egyptians.
- “Did you bring me slain beasts and sacrifices...”
 - Stephen is quoting the Prophet Amos (5:25-27).
 - “Sacrifice from Israel had never been the basis of its relationship to the Lord. From day one, God’s chosen people enjoyed His gifts and protection as a free gift of His grace” (Lutheran Study Bible, 1466).
- “You took up the tent of Moloch...”
 - “took up” alludes to the practice of carrying these deities aloft while marching in religious procession.
 - The punishment for such a pagan practice will fit the crime.
 - Israel is forced to march “into exile” into Babylon.

Verses 44-50

- Overview of these verses:
 - The third part of Stephen’s address refutes the charge of blasphemy against the Temple.
 - He briefly reviews the story of the Tabernacle and of the Temple.
- “tent of witness” or literally, “tabernacle of the testimony”
 - Stephen contrasts the “tabernacle of your king” (v. 43) and the “tabernacle of the testimony.”
 - The Tabernacle is the place where:
 - God dwelt.
 - Where he testifies to Israel regarding Himself and regarding His covenant of grace.
 - This dwelling place of God had divine origin as the Lord gave Moses the pattern for building it on Sinai.
 - Through Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness, the tabernacle moved with them.
 - King David wanted to build a permanent house of worship for God, but it would be King Solomon who would eventually build the temple.

- “Heaven is my throne...”
 - Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2
 - Points to the fact that God cannot be locked within walls.
 - He is exalted above all things.
 - Heaven:
 - Heaven is only God’s throne, a royal seat for him.
 - It’s one of the things he has made.
 - Earth:
 - Earth is a simple footstool.
 - It’s something beneath him and insignificant.
 - Ultimately:
 - God intended His people to worship Him in spirit and in truth.
 - He doesn’t want their focus on their rituals or places of worship apart from Him.
 - Yet, the Jews had done exactly that.
 - Modern day equivalent:
 - Build grand church and fill it with crowds with great services.
 - Yet, void of contrite hearts is to treat God as an idol.
 - We invent what his will and word is to be to suit our own sinful hearts.
- QUESTION: To what did the tabernacle and temple point?
 - The body of Jesus – the LORD in human flesh who was born to suffer, die, and rise again.
 - The Word that was in the beginning, that was with God and was God (John 1:1), He became flesh and dwelt among us (John1:14).

Verses 51-53

- QUESTION: With what words did Stephen accuse the elders of being impenitent and unbelieving of the promise of God?
 - He called them “stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears” and like their fathers they “always resist the Holy Spirit”
 - “Stiff-necked”
 - Stubborn and obstinate
 - They refused to be obedient to God.
 - “Uncircumcised in the heart”
 - Since circumcision was reserved for those who believed the promise made to Abraham.
 - The men were called “uncircumcised in heart” because although they had received the circumcision of the body, they didn’t really believe the promise made to Abraham.
- QUESTION: How did Stephen connect these men to their fathers?
 - “As your fathers did, so do you” (v. 52)
 - He proclaimed that their impenitence and unbelief followed the same pattern as that of the fathers.
 - He did this so they might repent and be cleansed of their sin.

- QUESTION: How does Stephen tie all of this to Jesus?
 - From Moses and Samuel until Malachi and John the Baptist, all were sent by God to announce the coming of the “Righteous One” – Jesus Christ.
 - Yet, in doing so, each one of the prophets faced persecution from the people of their own nation.
 - When the Sanhedrin came face to face with the “Righteous One” the prophets proclaimed and were persecuted for, they:
 - continued in the unbelief of their fathers and
 - put Christ to death on the cross.
- “You who received the law...”
 - These men accuse Stephen of speaking against the Law.
 - But the Sanhedrin itself is convicted of breaking and abandoning the Law.

Verses 54-60

- QUESTION: How did they respond to Stephen’s preaching and the call to repentance?
 - “...They were enraged and ground their teeth at him” (v. 54).
 - God’s word of Law cut them to the heart.
 - Instead of repenting of their sin, they hated him.
 - They grounded their teeth at him indicating their rage.
- “...full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven...”
 - By the help of the Holy Spirit, Stephen’s mortal eyes were enabled to look right into heaven.
 - The Holy Spirit strengthened him to the point where he did not fear death but prophesied of the victory that was his in Christ Jesus.
 - He saw the vision of the glory of God in heaven and Jesus standing at the right hand of God to receive him into everlasting glory.
 - To the sharp Law, Stephen preaches beautiful Gospel.
- “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears...”
 - The Jews refused to hear the message of the Gospel.
 - They stopped their ears and ran at him to stone him to death.
- QUESTION: What did Stephen pray before he died?
 - He commended himself to the Lord and prayed for his enemies:
 - “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”
 - “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”
 - Picture of Christ:
 - How Jesus prayed for His enemies upon the cross.
 - He commended Himself in faith to God the Father in the care of His own persecution and martyrdom.
- QUESTION: At whose feet did those who stoned Stephen lay their garments?
 - Saul of Tarsus.
 - You know him by another name: The Apostle Paul.
 - We hear of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9.
 - The reference here indicates Saul had a hand in Stephen’s martyrdom.

Terms

Catechesis Summary

- Stephen's sermon is an example of how Christ's death and resurrection, and the call to repentance and faith, is to be preached from the OT Scriptures.
- Stephen's sermon is an example of what should characterize faithful preaching in the Church today.
- The history of the OT patriarchs and Israel not only looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, but also shows a pattern of impenitence and unbelief that was manifest in the Sanhedrin and Jews of Jesus' day.
- The pattern of the prophets' persecution in the OT, as well as Stephen's own stoning at the hands of those who refuse to believe, teaches us that persecution and suffering will continue to accompany the faithful preaching of the Gospel today.
- Stephen's message was firm and unyielding as he exposed the sin of impenitence, but it was delivered without hatred for his country men.
- He preached this way because, like his Lord, he desired to save his hearers.
- It was the content of Stephen's sermon that made his hearers angry.
- They were so imbued with self-righteousness and pride that they refused the message of God's love in Christ and desired to kill anyone who dared suggest that they were sinners of need of salvation.
- Stephen delivered his call to repentance with compassion, mercy, and love in his heart for his hearers, the same way that Jesus had preached.

Learn by Heart Catechism Connection

- In persecution, the devil, the world, and our sinful nature "do not want us to hallow God's name" through the faithful preaching of it, nor do they want "God's kingdom to come" by repentance and faith in the Gospel.
- Therefore, to pray "Thy will be done" is to pray for faithfulness to the confession of our faith in Christ in the midst of persecution and suffering for Jesus' sake.