

The Sheep Scatter!

Nov.18, 2018

Acts 7:51-8:3

We come this morning to the end of Acts 7 and the beginning of Acts 8. In our ongoing study of the book of Acts, we will break after today until after Christmas, when we will resume right where we leave off today. But for now, we are finishing Stephen's time before the Jewish authorities. He has laid out a selected history of God's people, answering the charge brought against him by showing that the Jewish faith has never been solely anchored to a particular piece of ground, nor a building. Indeed God has met with His people in Egypt, in the desert, in a tent. Our God is a God of the journey. He journeys with His people. He meets with them wherever they are.

But then he builds on that point to remind his hearers that God's people have a history of rebelling against their God and against His spokesmen. He has highlighted Moses as his example. These "wise" leaders liked to lift up Moses as their hero to be revered, but Stephen tells them they are just like the people in Moses' day, who rejected him as their leader. God's people have a disgusting history of rejecting the ones God sends to lead them.

And so, we pick up the text at 7:51, where Stephen goes over the line in equating the Jewish leaders before him with so many other rebellious people throughout history who have rebelled against the one God sent to lead them. Hear these words from this humble, yet bold preacher of the Word of God. READ Acts 7:51-8:3.

Main point: Speaking truth to rebellious people leads to death and persecution.

Fulfilling a prophetic calling so often has consequences for the prophet. You would think that God's people would respond positively when God speaks through one of His own. But this is often not the case. Too often, the people show their rebellious hearts by seeking to destroy the messenger. This was true throughout the Old Testament, was true with the early church leaders here in Acts, continues to be true even today. It was certainly

most true of Jesus. He was put to death for declaring the truth. But the overarching theme here is that how we treat the one who speaks for God reveals our hearts. Such rebellious people would like to think that it speaks to the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the messenger. But as we see here, it really reveals our hearts. When we hear the truth of God and rebel against it, it is on us, not the one who brought us the message.

So, as we ponder these grievous words here as Stephen is put to death, we must not just categorize them as words from history. They come to us as the Word of God, to warn us not to be like them. Just as Stephen warned these leaders not to be like their fathers, so I warn you not to be like your fathers either. The principle still holds. Rebellious people have a habit of seeking to destroy those who tell them the truth about themselves. (2 parts)

I. When rebellious people don't like the message, they kill the messenger! vv. 7:51-60

I trust you can see my perspective. I see this passage not so much as "this is what happened," but as more, "this is what always happens. This is how rebellious people act." And the picture makes me sick!

v.51-"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

V.51 represents a shift in the speech. Until this point, Stephen has lumped himself in with his audience, calling them brothers, fathers, using first person pronouns like "our." But here he switches to "you." Clearly, he is distancing himself from them. In fact, I think most of us might think he is a tad bit over the top in his language: stiff-necked, uncircumcised hearts and minds, you always. But the truth is that these are terms used by God against His people, Ex. 9 and 10, Lev. 26, Jer. 4 and others. So, this is not a man under attack lashing out at his enemies. This is a man of God speaking out against God's rebellious people with God's own words. He is simply declaring God's perspective on them. The truth is that God sends messengers among His people so that they might turn to Him and follow Him. But because of their pride, because of their hardened hearts and closed ears, they resist God, they resist His Holy Spirit's voice to their spirit. They reject God's message and go their own way. Stephen here is simply speaking the truth about sinful man.

52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—

He continues to build his case against them by reminding them that the prophets were routinely put to death by those they came to serve. Ouch! That hurts. Could that actually be true? Could people who claim to be followers of God actually be guilty of putting to death the ones God sends to speak to them? Sadly, it's true. Indeed, notice here that they put to death those who came to preach good news to them, that there would one day come a Righteous One, a Savior, the Messiah. Even though they came with very, very good news, they were still rejected and destroyed by the very ones who should have been overjoyed at the news. Such is the life of a prophet. Such is the life of those who have to bring the bad news before people will hear the good news.

Pause: this preaching of the bad news in order to be in a position to hear the good news is a basic premise to all who lead God's people. It has always been the case, and will always be the case. And the temptation to try to please people by only telling them the good news is a temptation faced by all prophets, all preachers, all sent by God to speak to His people. Just like the prophets of old, we all know that we never get in trouble for delivering good news. But as a prophet, if you tell the king what he doesn't want to hear, it could mean your head! And there will always be some who choose to tickle ears rather than faithfully proclaim the truth. But true, faithful spokesmen for God will regularly say things that God's people do not want to hear. I'm not saying we must be like Stephen and call people "stiff necked" and hard hearted, but I assure you, it does you no good to have a preacher who never says anything negative. As a good friend of mine puts it, "We preach God's no as well as His Yes." Resume.

53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

The problem was not with the message but with its reception. The problem was not with the one who brought the message but with the obedience of those who heard the

message. The problem is not with the law, but the failure of those who have the law to actually do what it requires. To not obey means we do not view it as law, but merely suggestions, or wise words, or things to ponder. If it is law, then we are required to obey it. Right?

54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

That was it. They were done. Stephen had gone too far. He was preaching to the preachers, or teachers of preachers and was taking them to task. In response, they were filled with rage...against the messenger.

55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Did their rage stop him? No. He doubled down. Notice the details here. Being completely obedient to God himself, Stephen looks up and then describes what he sees. He sees the glory of God, the evidence of the presence of God. That in itself probably offended them. They didn't see the glory of God when they looked up. But then he saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. And he told them what he saw, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Significance? This is the very thing Jesus said about himself before this same group just a short while ago. In Mark 14, Jesus is standing on perhaps the same exact spot before the exact same group and He says this (14:62) "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Jesus had just affirmed that He was the Christ, and the evidence would be that He would be seen sitting at the right hand of God. Now, Stephen declares that he is seeing that sight before him.

Some might wonder about the difference between sitting and standing. The text does not tell us the significance, but I see it as rising to testify on Stephen's behalf, or perhaps rising to welcome His faithful servant home, or some such thing. Standing to me

implies active, engaged, involved in the situation. They thought they had gotten rid of Jesus and here He was, still showing up in their courtroom from the throne room of God! This made them go ballistic!

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

They were done. They would hear no more. They attempted to drown out any more testimony with their own screams. They charged him, dragged him out of the courtroom, out of the temple area, out of the city. This man had to die. Whether the “they” was a mob, or the Sanhedrin, or perhaps both, we are not told. But the implication is that the Sanhedrin were leading the charge. This was an official act by the highest Jewish leaders in the land. This blasphemer had to die!

58b- Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Ooh! A plot advancement. A new character enters the scene. His name is Saul, whom we will come to know as the Apostle Paul. This person, so central to the early church shows up for the first time as being there when Stephen was stoned, having some role of authority, given the fact that the stoners paid him honor by spreading their clothes before him. Once more, whether he was a member of the Sanhedrin, or had some other official role we are not told. All we know from here is that he was a young man (not a child but 20's perhaps?) and that people who saw what happened paid him honor. In other words, he is not a good character at this point in the drama.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Notice to whom Stephen prays...Lord Jesus. Did you catch that? Jesus is in the heavenly realm. He has the glory of the Lord around Him. He is standing as One who is in charge. And here, he is the one to whom Stephen prays to receive him, to welcome him into His presence. He pleads to Jesus to forgive those who were killing him...just like Jesus did on the cross! First, from the cross, Jesus prays these words. And then, Stephen prays these words to the One who died on the cross. Powerful! Stephen's last words were for his Savior to forgive others, just like Jesus.

You could not get a more stark contrast: Jewish leaders gnashing their teeth and screaming and dragging this man out of the city to stone him. As he is being pummeled, he is praying to the last one they had put to death, saying virtually the same words, pleading for their forgiveness. He is preaching the gospel as he is dying.

Folks, this is tough stuff. It hurts to read it, to preach it. And it hurts even more when you realize that we are too often more like the Sanhedrin than we are Stephen. At our core, we are rebels, not martyrs. We are screamers, gnashers, stiff-necked and hard of heart. We need to hear the good news, but we must hear the bad news before we will receive the good news as good news. May we learn this profound lesson from Stephen's life.

II. Persecution serves God's purpose by spreading the gospel. vv. 8:1-3

I can only imagine how the early church received the news of Stephen's murder. Yes, they put Jesus to death, but now they were putting to death the followers of Jesus. Now they were coming after them! Now, they were not safe. If the Jewish authorities were willing to murder the head of the food distribution committee, who was safe? Quick, run for the hills!

8:1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

I see this as one of those panning the camera to freeze on one character. Of course, Saul was giving his approval. If they were laying their clothes at his feet, he surely would

have been in approval for what was happening. So, the detail here, I believe, is for effect. Luke the author wants to draw our attention to Saul, the young persecutor of the Church. His figure looms large here, even if he was not a vocal participant.

1b- On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

If you were to draw a chart here, the arrows that would have been drawing together would be suddenly headed in the opposite direction. To this point, the church had been gathering, coming together, meeting together, sharing life with each other. But now, they were scattering. They were headed out. They were running for the hills. They were not safe anymore. Instead of receiving the favor of the people, they were being persecuted. Instead of meeting without fear in the temple courts, they were running for the country, headed for Samaria the land of the outcasts. Wait! Isn't that what Jesus told them would happen back in chapter 1? Of course, they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The spread of the gospel has begun.

But notice it was not mission that began the spread. It was persecution that precipitated the spreading. As was pictured by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount with the calling of His followers as salt and light, the power of the church would not be in large groups massed together, but in small groups spread out everywhere. This is how the church was designed by God to function. Persecution causes scattering, and that is not all bad. Some aspects of it are good, indeed very good.

2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

The Church's first martyr is laid to rest. The Church goes into mourning. Death, violent death has come to them. And more loomed on the horizon. Led by this young zealot named Saul, he hunted down Christians, dragging them off just as Stephen was

dragged off, putting them in prison “for safekeeping.” No, he sought to destroy them. As we know from later in the text, he sought to put them to death. He went out with official written permission to seize Christians and bring them to justice, to their deaths. He wanted the full weight of the law to come down upon the Christians. He was the Jew’s enforcer. So, as the Church was mourning the death of one of their own, their enemy, Saul, was out hunting down the next in line. The Church was under attack! This is a great place to break for the Christmas season.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will boldly speak truth, even to God’s people, even when it will hurt.
- 2) We will expect to be treated poorly when we speak out for God.
- 3) We will listen and obey God’s “no” as well as His “yes.”
- 4) We will be ready to suffer the wrath of man for the sake of God.
- 5) We will see persecution as not all bad, but perhaps even the means to a greater good.
- 6) We will picture our Savior as He truly is, in the highest position of authority in heaven.