

## THE BREAKING POINT

*Acts 6:8-7:60 // July 4, 2021 AM*

Tensions are continuing to grow between the old covenant leaders and the new covenant leaders. And now they reach a breaking point. Satan had tried threats, beatings, and imprisonment. None of it has worked to silence the apostles. The word of Christ has been overtaking the city of Jerusalem. If prison didn't work to shut up the new covenant leaders, surely death would. And so Luke's narrative zeros in on one of the seven newly appointed deacons who would become the first Christian martyr.

We are told in 6:5 that Stephen is a faith-filled, Spirit-filled servant of the church. And in v. 8 we see that Christ is continuing to do and teach through Stephen. Great miracles are being performed by him, demonstrating (as we saw in ch. 3) that the saving name and power of God is upon God's new covenant people. And this leads to continued confrontation with the old covenant people. In v. 9 there is a band of Greek-speaking Jews from North Africa and Turkey who begin to argue with Stephen, seeking to refute his gospel preaching.

- ⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen's wisdom confounds his Jewish opponents (v. 10).
- ⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen is falsely accused by his Jewish opponents (vv. 11-14).
- ⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen is undaunted by his Jewish opponents, possessing an angelic countenance as he is brought to trial (v. 15).

Luke is purposeful in ending this section of his account with Stephen's trial. This trial impresses two realities upon us that serve to highlight the stark contrast between the old order and the new. The first reality is that...

### **I. God's saving presence cannot be confined to Jerusalem's temple.**

That is what the Jews had done. They had bound God's covenantal presence to the temple. The temple had become an idol. And so when Jesus, in Luke 21, foretold the future destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem, it was extremely offensive. For the Jews, God could not be known, and His saving presence could not be experienced, apart from the temple in the holy city. If the temple was destroyed, God's saving purpose and presence would be destroyed. And so when Stephen follows in the steps of His Savior, proclaiming the destruction of the temple, it leads to an outcry among the Jews. They accuse him and seize him, bringing him to trial before the old covenant leaders.

#### **A. Accusation: Stephen is blaspheming God.**

This is the charge brought against him in 6:11—that he has spoken blasphemous words against God. How had Stephen blasphemed God? Not by denying God or speaking ill of God, but by speaking against the Jerusalem temple.

- ⇒ V. 13: "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place..."

⇒ V. 14: "...for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place..." For the Jews, to speak poorly of the temple was to speak poorly of God. This is because they had conflated God with the temple and confined God to the temple. They had imagined that God was imprisoned to a building. All of their trust and their hope was directed toward this massive structure in Jerusalem. And thus, it was nothing short of blasphemous to proclaim its destruction, especially by the hands of this heretic, Jesus of Nazareth. So the accusation is raised. And in 7:1, the high priest invites Stephen to give his defense. Here we have the longest recorded sermon in Acts as Stephen defends himself against this false accusation of blasphemy. What is his defense?

**B. Defense: to equate God with the temple is to be ignorant of redemptive history.**

Stephen (in vv. 2-50) sets forth the broad strokes of redemptive history from Abraham to Solomon. On the surface, it might seem like a scatter-brained, random sampling of OT accounts. George Bernard Shaw refers to Stephen as "a tactless and conceited bore" who tells his hearers what they already know. But when understood in its context, Stephen's speech is a brilliant refutation of the Jewish exaltation of the temple. That is really the main point of his speech. *God's redemptive presence has never been confined to Jerusalem or the temple.* That is why there is such a focus on geography in his message.

- ⇒ V. 2: "The God of glory" appeared to Abraham, not in Jerusalem, but in Mesopotamia.
- ⇒ Vv. 3-8: God's covenantal presence was known by the patriarchs even though they did not possess Canaan.
- ⇒ Vv. 9-16: God was with Joseph in Egypt and He saved the patriarchs through His provision in Egypt.
- ⇒ Vv. 17-43: God was with Moses in Egypt, He appeared to Moses in the wilderness (so that even the wilderness ground was holy), and He heard the cries of His suffering people in Egypt.
- ⇒ Vv. 44-46: God dwelt with His people in the tabernacle through the wilderness and into promised land until the days of Solomon.

In other words, Stephen is saying, "Look at the history of God's dealings with His people. Look at where He has chosen to reveal Himself. Look at where He has manifested His saving presence and power. God and His saving work have never been confined to a single building or geographical location. For centuries, He dwelt savingly with His pilgrim people apart from the Jerusalem temple, often in the most unlikely of places." Stephen goes on in vv. 47-50 to show that even once the Jerusalem temple was built, it could not contain God. God will not be conflated with a heap of stones. His throne is in heaven! John Stott summarizes this sermon by saying, "The God of Israel is a pilgrim God, who is not restricted to any one place." A simple reading of the most significant events in Old Testament history made this plain.

This should have been obvious to the Jews, but it wasn't. They had confused trust in the temple for trust in God. They had clothed their unbelief in the garments of temple devotion. And Stephen is wielding redemptive history to show them the folly of their ways. If God's saving presence has not been confined to the Jerusalem temple throughout redemptive history, it cannot be confined to it now. In fact, God is the one who is going to destroy this structure because of the Jews idolatrous exaltation of it. God doesn't need the temple. God doesn't need Jerusalem. He has long ago departed this structure. And that departure will be most clearly manifest in 70 A.D. when the temple and Jerusalem itself will become a heap of rubble.

While this is the main point of Stephen's message, he skillfully weaves a second reality throughout—the unbelief of God's old covenant people.

## **II. God's saving presence cannot coexist with Jerusalem's unbelief.**

These Jews believe they are contending for the faith. They are most zealous for God. They are zealous, not only for God's temple, but God's law. Unfortunately, as Paul tells us in Romans 10:2, their zeal for God (which was so great that it would lead them to kill) was void of a true knowledge of God and His word. In their self-deception, they accuse Stephen not only of blaspheming God, but also of rejecting Moses.

### **A. Accusation: Stephen is rejecting Moses.**

In 6:11 they claim to have "heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses." This is further explained once he is seized and brought to court. The false witnesses claim in v. 13 that Stephen "never ceases to speak words against the law." And in v. 14 that they "have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." The destruction of the temple would bring with it the end of the sacrificial system. For the Jews, this was a rejection of God's word. This was unbelief.

But Stephen turns this accusation on its head. He is not the one rejecting God's word. He is not the one rejecting Moses. They are.

### **B. Defense: to persecute God's prophet is to be on the wrong side of redemptive history.**

There is a lot of talk in our day about being on the wrong side of history. That is precisely what Stephen is saying here. From Abraham onwards, God's believing people have been pilgrims in an unbelieving world. But even God's people have themselves been unbelieving. Stephen has been accused of rejecting Moses, and that is why the bulk of his speech focuses upon Moses. He sets forth Moses as a type of Christ.

⇒ V. 35: he was sent by God as ruler and redeemer.

⇒ V. 36: he led the exodus of God's people with mighty signs and wonders.

⇒ Vv. 37-38: he spoke God's word as God's prophet.

But in spite of all of that, Israel rejected him. Instead, they turned toward idolatrous Egypt. V. 39: “Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt.” They turned to the world by giving way to idolatry, an idolatry that according to Amos 5 (which Stephen quotes) would lead to their eventual exile. God’s old covenant people were predominantly unbelieving and apostate. They rejected Moses.

And Stephen draws a direct connect from them to these first-century Jews. V. 51: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.” They had outward circumcision. They had the external temple ordinances. They possessed the law on scrolls. But the law was not in their hearts. They were strangers to the internal grace of the Spirit. Their fathers had rejected Moses, but they had rejected the greater than Moses. Their fathers killed the prophets who foretold of the Christ to come, but they had murdered the Christ Himself! V. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” Here is the irony:

⇒ The Jews, in seeking to preserve the temple, kill the one in whom God was savingly present. They killed the fulfillment of the temple.

⇒ The Jews, in seeking to preserve the law, kill the one through whom God is speaking. The coming prophet whom Moses commanded the people to hear.

In their unbelief, they could not tolerate the saving presence of God in Christ. That is why they killed him. And now in their unbelief, they cannot tolerate the saving presence of Christ in Stephen.

### Conclusion

They are filled with rage (v. 54), in contrast to Stephen who is filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 55). And as they grind their teeth at him in seething anger, Stephen is given a sight of the glory of God. The God of glory had appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. And the God of glory now appears to Stephen, not as he looks to the Jerusalem temple, but as he looks to heaven where Christ (the one these Jews killed) is reigning in redemptive glory. Stephen proclaims (v. 56), “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

This is the breaking point. The tension has been building. The rage within these Jews has been growing. And now it bursts forth in murderous fury. V. 57: “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.” This is mob violence.

⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen is taken outside of the holy city.

⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen is stripped of his garments.

⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen is killed at the hand of the Jews, but instead of a cross, he is stoned.

⇒ Like Jesus, Stephen utters two petitions with his final breaths.

- He commits his spirit into the hands of the Lord. V. 59: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”
- He prays for the forgiveness of his persecutors. V. 60: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Like Jesus and the prophets before Him, the church as the people of God’s saving presence and word will be opposed by unbelief, not only in the world, but first and foremost by the old covenant people. The Jews murdered Christ, the one in whom God’s saving presence and power were known. And now they murder His disciple. And this is only the beginning of what Luke calls “a great persecution” in 8:1.

We see here that following Jesus is most *costly*. Stephen was a man little different from us. Presumably, he had a family. He had hopes and dreams with regard to the future. Following Jesus cost everything. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness exchanged for a cross. And Stephen would be the first of multitudes who would seal their testimony with their blood. In many parts of the world this is a reality—to follow Jesus brings with it the sentence of death. As American Christians, we need to recognize that. Jesus calls His church to come and die. And we should not be surprised when that call to cross-bearing discipleship leads to literal death. You who profess Christ, is your life shaped by the cross? Has following Jesus cost you anything? Or do you view Him as little more than a buddy who offers you forgiveness as you live for the comforts and pleasures of this world? Jesus said that one should count the cost before following Him. Discipleship costs everything.

But we see here that following Jesus is most *profitable*. As Jim Elliott famously said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Yes, following Jesus cost Stephen comfort, prestige, health, family, and life itself. But one day all of us are going to lose these things anyways. Stephen gave up these fleeting treasures for something that would endure everlastingly—the enjoyment of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. That is what he is beholding as he breathes his final breath. God’s heavenly glory, not confined to some building in Jerusalem, but pervading the heavenly realm and one day covering this earth as the waters cover the sea! Is that what you are living for? Or are you like these Jews, claiming to follow God but having hearts set upon Egypt? Hearts set upon this world? Idolatrous hearts? We must forsake our love of comfort, friends, and give ourselves unreservedly to Jesus. That is what discipleship demands. And only true disciples know God’s saving presence and power in Christ now and possess hope of enjoying it eternally.