

I. Intro

- A. Ever know a Projector? Someone who projects all their faults on others
- B. This is the exact situation we find Stephen in, in Acts 7. Accused of what his accusers are guilty of.
  - 1. Stephen: Deacon, miracles, preaching Jesus
  - 2. Accused of preaching against God, Moses, Old Covenant Law, and Temple
    - a. They dragged him before the Sanhedrin (Jewish court), false witnesses
    - b. Before Stephen is murdered, Stephen answers his accusers. BRILLIANT
  - 3. Stephen gives history lessons: subtly calling historical witnesses against his accusers: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Scripture, and even the Tabernacle and Temple.
  - 4. Spoiler: does not go well for Stephen
- C. **God's blessing and validation are not shown by keeping us safe, but by keeping us faithful.**

II. Acts 7:1-8. Witness #1: Abraham

*And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to **our father** Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, [to Jews, the glory of God was in the temple; but here, God's glory is showing up in a foreign land, without a temple!] and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship Me in this place.' And He gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs."*

- A. Without Temple, homeland, people of origin, God blessed Abraham.
- B. Stephen implies: **God is not tied to an earthly locale. God's presence and work are tied to His people who remain faithful.**
- C. Abraham, witness #1 testifies to the pattern that the people of God should always follow: God mercifully initiates relationship with people and those people ought to respond with faith-fueled obedience despite the consequences.
- D. Stephen is following this pattern of faithfulness. His accusers are not.

III. Acts 7:9-16. Witness #2: Joseph

*And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him [God was with Joseph IN EGYPT] 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. Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and **our fathers** could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he*

sent out **our fathers** on their first visit. And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and **our fathers**, and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

- A. Just like Joseph, **the one who faithfully carries on the mission of God is often the one who will be rejected and abused.**
- B. Just like the brothers were jealous of Joseph, so religious establishment were with Jesus.
- C. So witness #2, Joseph, stands as evidence against Stephen's accusers saying: "Joseph was abused and rejected by the rest of the family of Israel. Joseph was the righteous one and his brothers were unrighteous. In this current trial, between you accusers and Stephen, who stands in which place? Who emulates who?"

IV. Acts 7:17-36. Witness #3: Moses

But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced **our fathers** to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, "Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?" But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob." And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 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."

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. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

- A. Moses, chosen by God as a savior to Israel, was rejected by those he was saving.
- B. So witness #3, Moses, shows that the pattern continues: Israel missed and rejected their deliverer, the One Whom God would use to save them.
- C. Moses stands in accusation of Stephen's accusers testifying that they too have missed and rejected their deliverer, Jesus.

V. Acts 7:37-43. Witness #4: The Scriptures

*This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers." This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with **our fathers**. He received living oracles to give to us. **Our fathers** refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 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," And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of Heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon."*

- A. Moses predicted that at a later time, God would raise up another prophet like him. (Jesus)
- B. Moses's legitimacy was attested to by signs and wonders. "Remind you of anyone else who had been doing signs and wonders until you killed him?"
- C. But in the face of all the miraculous evidence that Moses was God's chosen prophet to Israel, they chose to turn aside to false Gods.
- D. So witness #4, the Scriptures, testify against Stephen's accusers once again: "By rejecting God's chosen servant, Jesus, YOU, Israel, have once again turned away from the true path of God, ignoring the very Scriptures you say you believe."

VI. Acts 7:44-50. Witness # 5: Places of worship (The Tabernacle and the Temple)

**Our fathers** had the tent of witness [tabernacle... portable "temple"] in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. **Our fathers** in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before **our fathers**. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, "'Heaven is My throne, and the Earth is My footstool. What kind of house will you build for Me,' says the Lord, 'or what is the place of My rest? Did not My hand make all these things?'"

- A. The Tabernacle (portable) and Temple (permanent) are physical reminders that God desires to be with the human beings He created... but the people of Israel had wielded these places in order to contain and control God's blessings for only Israel!
- B. **There is something deeply wrong when the people of God are not zealous for more people to know Him.**
- C. Quotes Isaiah 66:1 to show that God never intended to be limited by a building. Don't forget all the places God showed up: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Sinai, wilderness.

D. So witness # 5, the Place of Worship testifies against Stephen's accusers: "You disrespect God, Moses and the Scriptures by how you have misinterpreted and misused the Temple as a place that contains God and keeps Him belonging to Israel and not the rest of the world."

VII. Acts 7:51-53. Stephen's closing argument: "You all are guilty of your own accusations."

*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As **YOUR FATHERS** did, so do you. 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.*

A. Stephen draws a line. Two sets of fathers and their descendants

1. Up until this point: "Our fathers" but now a fork in the road.

a. Set 1: The faithful fathers

- 1) Obeyed God, preached His Word and pointed to the Messiah, ultimately bowed to God's Messiah King, Jesus, when He came.
- 2) This is the family that Stephen and followers of Jesus are in. He and others stand in a long line of God-followers who are rejected for their faithfulness.

b. Set 2: The unfaithful fathers and their descendants

- 1) Self-deceived, thinking that by rejecting God's Word, His prophets, and ultimately His Messiah, they honor Him by their blasphemy
- 2) These accusers descend from a "family" with a long history of persecuting the very ones that God is with.

2. **Our spiritual heritage is not defined by our family of origin, our church affiliation, or even by our claims of belief, it's defined by who we actually trust and obey.**

B. Stephen describes this unfaithful family

1. Stiff-necked: stubborn, unyielding, un-bowing to God. (Like a stubborn ox)
2. Uncircumcised heart and ears: Circumcise sons, but not your own hearts (Jeremiah 4)
3. Always resist the Holy Spirit ("always constantly")

C. As YOUR fathers did, so you do

1. You are the same religious mafia family who have been resisting and murdering the prophets since the beginning.
2. Not only THAT, but now they've actually betrayed and murdered the Righteous One Himself, Jesus

D. You say that I dishonor Moses, the Scripture, and the Temple. But it is I and those who follow Jesus, who honor God, His Word, and the Temple you should have ushered Jesus into as His throne room.

VIII. Acts 7:54-8:3. The Murder of Stephen and the Aftermath

*Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into Heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

- A. The accusers' response to Stephen is not repentance but rage (gnash: Luke 13:28)
  - 1. They don't answer his charges with rebuttal, but with violence.
  - 2. They had no defense.
- B. Contrast: Stephen, like the prophets, is full of the Holy Spirit.
  - 1. He sees Jesus standing (not sitting) at the right hand of God (Jesus is Judge!)
  - 2. I think this vision is meant as a foretaste for us today too: foreshadowing for that final day when Jesus returns and ushers in the "age to come."
  - 3. Just like Jesus, right before his death, Stephen asks Jesus to receive his spirit and forgive his murderers rather than judge them.
- C. A new character in Acts: Saul
  - 1. This is the first time we are introduced to a character named Saul.
    - a. Watches over the cloaks of the murderers; doesn't participate but approves.
    - b. Dark moment with Saul's face on it, literary dark backdrop to a beautiful future
    - c. Because this Saul, persecutor, would later become the Apostle of Jesus, Paul.
  - 2. In his hate he accidentally caused its spread to the world outside of Israel.
    - a. Stamp out the fire of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, spread the glowing embers
    - b. Tertullian: Blood of the martyrs, seed of the church. Obedience of the Christians?
    - c. Friend: "Do you want to see where God is working? Look where all the hard stuff and the pain is."
    - d. When Jesus finally captured Saul's heart, Paul would continue spread the Gospel to the rest of the world on purpose!
  - 3. **If Saul can become Paul, there is hope for every single human being who ever lived.**
  - 4. God answered Stephen's prayer, at least for Saul.

#### IX. Conclusion

- A. Reflex to Stephen's accusers might be,
  - 1. "What horrible people." Yes, but Wrong.
  - 2. Or my own "enemies" or who I view as "standing against God" Wrong again.
- B. We don't have to, AND SHOULDN'T, ignore the brokenness and injustice in the world around us.
  - 1. But we have to deal with our own stuff FIRST. (Matthew 7)
  - 2. Jesus commanded a sequence of dealing with sin and we must obey it: Me first, y'all later.
- C. I said earlier that "God's blessing and validation is not shown by keeping us safe, but by keeping us faithful."
  - 1. If we want to remain faithful, we have to join God in His battle against our pride and rebellion.

2. Am I joining God in His fight against my own stiff-neck and rebellion and hard heart for the sake of my faithfulness to King Jesus? Or am I watching and waiting for everyone else to go first?
- D. And so a Holy-Spirit-led response to this passage is to look in the mirror and say **“Father, how am I stiff-necked? How am I resisting the Holy Spirit? How am I missing and rejecting Jesus, the very Savior that You sent to show me mercy?”**
1. If you listen long enough for an answer, I’m pretty sure God will show you a place in your life that remains an outpost for the enemy.
  2. And in His mercy, God will transform us into the opposite of Stephen’s accusers: a church that surrenders, embraces, and welcomes Jesus’ reign on Earth despite the suffering it will surely cause us.
  3. I cannot cause Jesus’ Kingdom to come and His will be done even a little bit by condemning those around me. Why? Because I don’t have any control over their response to God, but I do have control over mine.
  4. And as God shows me the stubborn, rebellious parts of my will, and as I surrender those enemy outposts to Him, I become that much more effective for Jesus’ Kingdom.
  5. And then, as I walk with others and God asks me to speak into the areas in their life that aren’t submitted to Jesus, I do so as a fellow struggler and advocate, not an accuser.
- E. Response: Ask God these questions now, sit in silence for His answer