

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: The Double-edged Gospel

Acts 7:1-53

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Today we are in Acts chapter 7. Please go ahead and grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or open the one on your device. We are going to cover a large section of text today – 53 verses – and so we aren't going to read the whole thing. That means you've got homework this week. But even though we won't be reading through the text please open up to it anyway as we will be referring to several verses throughout.

If you've been with us over the last several weeks you know that we are in the middle of a book study through Acts. Acts is the story of what Jesus started doing after He was crucified, resurrected and ascended back to heaven.

It turns out just because Jesus was gone doesn't mean His influence had diminished, in fact it had increased. And that's because ten days after He left, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all His disciples.

And when this happened it was the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' earlier words from John 14. He said:

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.... And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:12-17)

And this promise began to be fulfilled at Pentecost, and has been true ever since. The Spirit of Jesus resides inside His followers empowering and inspiring us to participate with God in increasing His glory and expanding His kingdom to the four corners of the earth. And Acts is the account of this getting started.

So the book is full of incredible testimonies about God showing up in the lives of normal people. But probably the most exciting thing about Acts is the absence of any implication that God has or will stop doing this. The fact is God is still active in the lives of His children. Amen? And so we are still receiving power when His Holy Spirit comes on us, and we are still being transformed into His witnesses.

And so something we've been doing throughout this series is hearing testimonies from our people who have seen God show up in their lives recently. And this morning I want to call Gord Lincoln up to share with us how he has seen God provide for him over the last week.

[Gord]

How many of you know it isn't just cows God owns on a thousand hills? He has cars too. Thanks for sharing with us Gord.

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Now today we are in week two of a three part series looking at the death of a prominent Jesus-follower named Stephen. Steven was a man that Luke describes as full of the Spirit and wisdom. God worked through him to perform great wonders and signs. And He had the grace and power of Jesus all over him.

And because he was this kind of guy he had been chosen to oversee the distribution of aid to the needy in Jerusalem – he is one of the first deacons.

But the religious establishment grew increasingly jealous of Stephen and in chapter 6 conspired against him. Verse 11 says:

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.... This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."
(Acts 6:11-14)

Now offenses like these – blasphemy against God, Moses, the temple and the law – were punishable by death, and so Stephen is in a heap of trouble as we pick up the story in chapter 7. So look with me at verse 1.

[Read Acts 7:1]

Now the high priest is most likely still Caiaphas at this time. Caiaphas was in power until AD 36, and was the high priest who oversaw Jesus' execution. So he was well informed about what these crazy Jesus followers were all about. And very unsympathetic to their cause.

Caiaphas' passion was the preservation of tradition. He loved the temple and the rules. And he loved the position this tradition had elevated him to. And so he had no time for those who sought to bring changes to the way things had been done.

And so, with the odds stacked against him, Stephen is given the opportunity to defend himself in court.

Now I don't know about you, but I love a good courtroom drama. Think "To Kill a Mockingbird" or "A Few Good Men" or "The Lincoln Lawyer." There is just something brilliant about justice being served when everything appears to be going awry.

Now in these shows there are generally two ways that the defense presents their position. Either they plead guilty in an attempt to get a lighter sentence, or more likely, they plead innocent and attempt to deny the accusations that are being leveled against them. But Stephen employs a different tactic all together.

So Stephen has been accused of speaking against God, Moses, the temple, and the law. And his defense is that it isn't him who is guilty of these crimes, rather it is the stiff-necked, Holy Spirit resisting, prophet killing, uncircumcised heart having accusers themselves who are guilty. Caiaphas, you are guilty. I love it!

Look down at verse 51. I considered having this section of text read earlier in the service but decided not to. This is how Stephen finishes his sermon:

Read Acts 7:51-53]

Now I've never had to stand before a judge, but I imagine that few judges would be sympathetic to receiving a good moral lambasting like this one. So it isn't surprising to me that things don't turn out well for Stephen. At least not on an earthly level.

But Stephen isn't being foolish or losing his cool with his defense. Rather he is wisely investing in his future, and prophetically speaking the words of Jesus. But more on that next week.

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Today we are going to look at the sermon Stephen preached which brilliantly demonstrated that Jesus' story is in fact the culmination of the Old Testament salvation story. Stephen says there is one plot that ties the scriptures together. The big verse is 37 which says Moses told Israel "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people." And Stephen's point is that this prophet is Jesus, but Israel has missed this and so gotten their own salvation story wrong.

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So the accusation is turned on it's head. You guys are the blasphemers not me. Just like your ancestors killed the prophets, now you've killed God's Son. Way to go! That's the essence of his sermon.

So let me unpack a few of the details here, but as we do this I don't want to get lost in the details. We need to know why this matters to us.

And this story does matter for two reasons. First, Stephen's retelling of history confirms that God is incredibly merciful and gracious with sinners. He extends Himself to us, and forgives us, and then forgives us again. This is the good news of the gospel. And this is the message Stephen preaches to his accusers: Repent, even you can be forgiven. And I think we need to be encouraged by this again today. There is no one here who has sinned too much to be forgiven.

But second, there is a warning in this text. And the warning is that well intentioned, church attending, religious people can become the enemies of God. And we don't want this to happen to us. So there is grace for us, and there is a warning for us in this text.

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So let's get into this. Stephen starts out in verses 2-8, by talking about how God chose Abraham and called him to Himself. This is where Israel's story starts.

Now Scripture is clear Abraham wasn't chosen because he was a particularly amazing guy. Really he was just like any other Mesopotamian young man and not so different from young people today. He was living at home in his father's basement when God called him.

And God told him, it's time to move out. But don't just move out of the basement. Move out of the country. In fact just start walking, I'm going to show you where to go, but it's going to be a long walk.

Now by telling this story Stephen is making two very specific points. The first is that God was gracious in calling Abraham. Abraham wasn't a superhero. He wasn't godlier than everyone else. He wasn't smarter or richer or better looking. He was just a normal guy. But God, in His mercy, chose to reveal Himself to him and call him into relationship with Himself.

But God's mercy didn't end here. Look at verse 4.

[Read Acts 7:4]

If you don't know the story you might miss this, but when God told Abraham to move he went to Haran, but that's not where God called him to go. Haran was half way. So here is what had happened. God had revealed Himself to Abraham, demonstrated that He was God and that Abraham should do what He says. And Abraham sets out in obedience, but then gets distracted.

Isn't this classic humanity? Let me ask you, have you ever found yourself knowing what it means to obey God – perhaps some sin God wants you to give up or some act of kindness He wants you to do – and instead of going all the way you stopped short? Anybody?

This is the human story. We all hear God calling. Romans 1 tells us “what may be known about God is plain.” And that is because God has made it plain to us. So we all know what He wants from us. He wants obedience. He wants us to make Him God in our lives like He deserves. But we have suppressed this truth in favor of putting ourselves at the center.¹

This is true for all of us, and it was true of Abraham too. And so instead of going where God called him to go he went half way – he went to Haran.

¹ Romans 1:18-20

But then we get the mercy of God. Verse 4 says after Abraham's father died God moved him or sent him to the Promised Land where Israel is now located.

The point is that God was faithful to Abraham in spite of Abraham. And this is the good news of the Bible. So, has God been faithful to you when you lacked the faithfulness to fully obey?

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This is good news, but it isn't the only news of the Bible. There is warning in this text as well. But before we get to that let me take you a text that clearly gives us both sides of this picture. Paul told Timothy:

Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with [Jesus],
we will also live with Him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with Him.

If we disown Him,
He will also disown us;
if we are faithless,
He remains faithful,

for He cannot disown Himself. (2 Timothy 2:11-13)

This is a text of grace and warning. Notice first that the faithfulness God extends to us is not dependent upon ourselves. God is faithful to us because He can't disown Himself. This means that we are the beneficiaries of God's mercy because of God's character not because of our righteousness. We are saved by grace alone, not merit. How many of you know this is good news?

But at the same time there is an incredibly haunting warning in this text that I think all of us wish wasn't there. It's only if we endure that we will reign with Him. And if we disown Jesus, He will also disown us. This is not my favorite passage of Scripture. This means it is possible to find the gracious and merciful Savior to be an enemy rather than a friend. And this is the two-pronged point of Stephen's sermon. Jesus is merciful, but if Jesus isn't at the center of your story, God isn't part of your story at all.

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Last week we talked about how all of our stories are about giving our lives to our lord. We all live for and are controlled by the lord of our lives, whatever or whoever that might be.² But the only story that is connected with salvation is the story lived with Jesus at the center.

² Adapted from Rebecca Pippert "Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World"

So, whatever it is you do, whoever it is you are, is Jesus at the center of your story? If you are a student, is Jesus at the center of your studies? This won't happen by default in the institutions that are prevalent in our land. Everything in the system is designed to make Christ look foolish. But are you fighting back against this? Sure you believe the right things about Jesus, but have you made Him your lord?

If you are married, do you treat your spouse the way Jesus would because He is the lord who controls your life? If you are single does Jesus dominate the storyline of your singleness? Are your relationships first and foremost Jesus-honouring relationships?

If you are a stay-at-home mom, is Jesus at the center of your daily routine? This is where my wife is at these days, and it isn't easy. Our house is full of little sinners. And bringing Jesus to the centre doesn't happen by default. It takes intentional effort.

If you work, is Jesus at the center of your time in the office or on the site? Is your first boss Jesus?

If you are an empty nester, has Jesus filled the noise-void that you are now experiencing, or have you filled it with something else?

If you are retired, what does it mean for Jesus to be at the center of your retirement plan?

Friends, have you made Jesus the center of your story? Is He Lord in your life? If not, then no matter how religious your story is, it is broken just like Caiaphas the high priest. Caiaphas was an incredibly religious man who, because he would not put Jesus in the centre, found himself to be an enemy of God.

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Stephen goes on now to talk about Joseph and then Moses and then Solomon, and his two points in all the stories are the same: God is rich in mercy, yet those who refuse to make Him lord in their lives find Him to have become their enemy.

So Joseph's story is about God's grace to a messed up family. Measure your own family by this standard. Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him, but then they consented to just toss him into a well and sell him to slave traders. How does your family compare with that? Not bad? And yet God poured His grace into this broken family.

Now when I used to read the Joseph story I thought he was the hero of the story. This young man who manages to live a pure life and rises to the top in spite of starting at the bottom. A man able to forgive when he was wronged so much so that when famine strikes he takes care of his family with the wealth of Egypt. You know that story right?

But that isn't the main way we are supposed to read Joseph. Really this story is about YHWH. God is the gracious one who is working here. And it is a mind job when you realize what He is doing. It isn't primarily Joseph that God saves. What is actually happening is YHWH is using Joseph to save a family full of messed up sinners.

This family was full of people who are drawn like magnets to murder, and adultery, and prostitution, and faithless cowardice. And yet YHWH forgave them and saved them and provided miraculous food for them in the midst of a famine, though they didn't deserve it. Crazy right?

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But is this such an outlandish story? Hasn't God been faithful to you? Haven't you seen Him provide for you and sustain you and lead you and protect you? And yet haven't you found yourself drawn back into temptation and selfish sin over and over again? This is my story. And yet when I have been faithless Jesus has been faithful. Is this your story? Isn't it good that God saves sinners?

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But Stephen's sermon makes it clear that we can't end there. It's a mistake to focus on the longsuffering, patient forgiveness of God without realizing that while God's grace is totally unconnected with our merit – there is nothing we can do to deserve it – His forgiveness and salvation is not unconditional.

And this isn't something that gets emphasized often these days, but it is a core tenant of Christianity. And that is that God will not save those who refuse to make Him God in their lives.

And so Stephen moves next to talk about Moses the law giver. And here the warning gets stark. God proved Himself to His people through Moses in probably the most powerful ways ever – think the plagues of Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea – and yet look at verse 39:

[Read Acts 7:39-42a]

Stephen says when Israel had tasted the best God had to offer they decided to make other things lord in their lives instead of Him. And when this happened God turned away from them and gave them over to their new gods. This is the harshest punishment God can give us. It's mercy when He holds us back from doing what we want, but it's judgment when He let's us worship what we want. And this is judgment because we end up with small, pathetic gods who can not save. And this is what happened to Israel.

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Finally Stephen concludes by talking about Solomon the temple builder, and his punch line is verse 48:

[Read Acts 7:48-49a]

Stephen says this temple you are standing in is so glorious and important to you, but it isn't God's house anymore than this church is God's house. The brutal point here is that even high priests who served in God's temple, and the most religious people among us here today aren't immune from worshipping the wrong God. And that's because God doesn't live in things we build, He lives in things He builds.

And so the opposite of verse 51 and following implies God is looking for people who don't have stiff necks; that means He loves people who are able to repent. He doesn't care if your body is circumcised, He wants your heart to be circumcised – that means He wants you to dedicate your life to living for His glory. He wants people who will embrace the Holy Spirit even though they can't control Him; He wants people who will heed the words of the prophets even when they are challenging to accept. Stephen says it is people who live for God's glory that God lives inside. And these are the ones who receive His mercy and grace. This is the double edged gospel.

So friends, who or what is the lord of your life? Sure you believe in Jesus, but are you living your life for Him, or have you been asking Him to share the God-spot in your heart with something else?

The double edged gospel Stephen preached – the one he was killed for – was that those who give themselves to putting Jesus at the centre are those who have received God's unconditional mercy and grace. But the God of the universe has no patience for those who have tasted and seen His glory and yet ask Him to share space in their hearts with lesser gods.

Brothers and sisters, put Jesus at the centre of whatever it is you are going through right now. Get rid of the other passions that are competing for your heart. And enjoy the life God created you to live, as His temple.

I love you.