

5. Non-Conversions at Stephen's Sermon--Acts 7

In Acts 7:1-8:1, Luke records a sermon by Stephen and the adverse way that the Jews received it. In the previous chapters of Acts, thousand of Jews had received the gospel and obeyed it. Stephen was one of the seven servants selected in the sixth chapter to serve the Grecian widows. From this brief, encounter with Stephen, we learned several things. A review of Acts 6 illustrated Stephens character and faithfulness. Verse 5 describes Stephen: "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." Verse 8 tells us more: "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." Stephen by name was a Grecian Jew, and it was from among these Jews that his opposition came in Acts 6:8-10: "Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)-Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke." They worked secretly against him, accusing him of speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God. Acts 6:11. By the end of Acts 6, they had seized Stephen, falsely charged him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin, presenting false witnesses. Even before Stephen's sermon, he appeared to them as an angel, "15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

Stephen Shows the Fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in the Death and Resurrection of Christ.

The false witnesses said, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 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 6:13-14. The crux of the argument against Stephen was that he allegedly spoke against the temple and the law. In the trumped up charges, they alleged that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs handed down by Moses. In the narrative that follows, Stephen shows that the fulfillment of the law and the prophets was in Christ and that God does not live in houses made by men.

God fulfilled the law and the prophets in Christ. The first point reviews the history of the Jews from God's promise to Abraham, to Egyptian captivity, to their deliverance by the hand of God under Moses, their leader and prophet. Verses 2-36. The Jewish listeners would accept this early part of a historical argument. Their anger increased dramatically with the conclusions that Stephen drew. The first of these was that their prophet Moses had foretold the coming of the Lord: "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' 38 He [Christ] was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him [Moses] on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us." Stephen placed Christ, the Lord, in the very midst of the happenings of their forefather with one important addition: "He received living words to pass on to us." Their fathers had rejected Christ and refused to obey him. They exchanged him for idols like the golden calf, heavenly bodies (verses 39-42), shrines to Molech, and the star of Rephan.

God does not live in houses made by men. From verses 44-47, Stephen rehearses the history from the tabernacle to the temple made by Solomon. Stephen concluded, quoting from the prophets:

48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

49 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?"

From this historical narrative, Stephen brings his defense, which is in reality an accusation against the Jews, in the strongest possible terms:

51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 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— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.

Stephen's conclusion emphasizes the death of the Righteous One at their hands, thus placing the gospel of the great commission in context across the dispensations of the Patriarchs and the Law of Moses. Stephen also carried forward the facts of Luke's account of the great commission. Indeed, the Lord had made the same argument to the disciples that Stephen made to these Jews:

25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. Luke 24:25-27

The difference is that the disciples accepted the teaching; these Jews rejected it.

The Jews Responded by Rejecting the Gospel, Failing to Believe, Repent, and Be Baptized.

Rather than respond to the gospel as the Lord commanded, the Jews become violent in their disbelief. The Lord had said in giving his commission in Mark 16:16, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned." Actions followed their disbelief. They rejected God and murdered his prophet:

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

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

In contrast to the disbelief and murder of the maddening crowd, Stephen manifest his Christ-like spirit to the very end of his life: "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." Stephen saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, thus forever refuting those who look for some future, fuller glory for Christ. Christ had fulfilled the law and the prophets, and Stephen saw that it was so.

The scriptures are silent as to whether or not any of these ever did obey the Lord, except for Saul. The statement, "The witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." implies that Saul was a ringleader. His authority in the matter is clear in Acts 8:1: "And Saul was there, giving approval to his death." Yet this young man later saw his error and obeyed the gospel, becoming an apostle of the Lord, and writing most of the letters in the New Testament. It is never too late to obey the gospel of the Lord.

Conclusion

The Jewish history was one of rejecting God, worshipping idols, and killing the prophets, in whom Christ was then speaking. Now, they continue in their ways refusing to believe, repent, confess, and be baptized, as the Lord now commands; plus they stoned the prophet of Christ, Stephen, who fulfilled the great commission by preaching the gospel to them. By not repenting and turning again, they forfeit the forgiveness of sins, the presence of the Lord, and salvation. In contrast, they carry the guilt of their sins, even murder (Revelation 21:8).

Study Questions

1. How had the Jews historically dealt with God's prophets? _____
2. What are some modern day examples parallel to the Jews worshipping idols? _____
3. Who and what was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies? _____
4. Where does God dwell? _____
5. What was Saul's role in the stoning of Stephen? _____
6. Describe Stephen's attitude toward his murderers. _____ Where did he see Jesus? _____