

TITLE: STEPHENS SERMON**INTRODUCTION:**

Following the Sunday morning service, a pastor stood at the back of the church, shaking hands with the worshipers as they left.

As one man shook hands, he looked intently at the pastor and said, "Powerful sermon, Pastor. Thoughtful, well researched. I can always see myself in them...and I want you to knock it off."

Today, we are going to look at Stephen's sermon Acts 7:1-53

The religious leaders Stephen preached to apparently saw themselves in this sermon

For they got so upset that they stoned the preacher to death.

Unfortunately, I believe all of us will see ourselves a little bit in this sermon and we too will have a choice,

We can stone the messenger or we can open our hearts and minds to what God wants us to hear.

The text is too long to read all at once

But I invite you to turn there

I will try to guide us through it, reading key verses and trying to understand

Why Stephen said what he said.

PRAYER...

A. Stephen was a brilliant man (no pun intended) and spiritual man.

Acts 6:5 says he was "full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

Acts 6:8 says he was "full of grace and power".

Acts 6:10 says his opponents "could not resist the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke."

And even after he was arrested,

Acts 6:15 says that "his face was like the face of an angel" as he was accused in the court.

In spite of all this (or maybe because of all this) the response to him was vicious.

B. The Charges against Steven are given in Acts 6:14:

1. "We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and
2. will change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

So we come to Acts 7

The high priest gives Stephen a chance to defend himself,

Acts 7:1 says

Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

And Stephen does a very unexpected thing.

He Begins a sermon

C. His sermon reads like a condensed version of the history of Israel but in fact it is a well crafted response to their charges

Verses 1-8 **he talks about Abraham**

Verses 9-16 **he focuses on Joseph and how the Israelites came to Egypt.**

Verses 17- 44 **he spends a long time discussing Moses**

Verses 45-50 **he closes with a brief reference to Joshua, David and Solomon**

Finally in Acts 7:51-53 **he draws his conclusion.**

"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."

Every time God comes to you, you kill him, reject him, rebel against him or send him away

D. So what was Stephen's defense?

He had been charged with speaking against Moses and against the temple.

His defense is that history proves the opposite:

It is Israel
As a people
That have stiffened their neck against God
and resisted the Holy Spirit.
And persecuted the prophets of God,
and killed Jesus the Son of God,

And Now they are about to kill a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit."

His defense is

They are the ones who need to give an account,

NOT STEPHEN.

E. How did they respond to this defense?

We will look at their response next week.

F. What we need to see today is how Stephen's message

Stephen Says that Israel "Always resists the Holy Spirit."

God had been working for Israel again and again with repeated acts of mercy
and patience
and long-suffering throughout their history.

And they had repeatedly
hardened their hearts and
stiffened their necks and
stopped their ears to the work of God.

So I think God wants to speak to us about two things today:

1) He wants us to be encouraged by the story of his patience and long-suffering with a rebellious people –

He wants us to know that he is
...compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love
and faithfulness, [7] maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving
wickedness, rebellion and sin. ...

He is not eager to punish.

He is eager to forgive repentant and humble people.

2) He also wants us to be warned that there is an end to his patience.

**There is a resistance to the Holy Spirit that goes just so long and so far
and then God hands a person over into the power of sin.**

You see this in the words of Acts 7:42

But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the
heavenly bodies.

Here is the point

You can resist God for so long
by wanting things more than you want him,

That he will finally turn away,
He will Stop convicting,

And will hand us over entirely to our sin

Romans 1:24

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

Romans 1:28

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

The promises of God's patience
The warnings of his judgment

They are both words of grace for us today

This is Stevens message that arises out of Israel's History

In their History we see both their rebellion and His mercy.

I. ABRAHAM

Acts 7:2

...The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

According to verse 4, Abraham makes it half way to the promised land and stops in Haran.

Where is he supposed to Go.....???

The promised land...

Where did he go...Haran

So God shows mercy to Abraham

He doesn't merely tell Abraham to get going to the promised land;

he actually moves him -- exerts some special power on Abraham.

Acts 7:4

... **God sent him** to this land where you are now living.

We see God's mercy in choosing Abraham out of all the peoples on the earth to inherit the promised land;

We see God's patience by giving Abraham an extra push to get all the way to the promised land when he had settled for half way.

II. JOSEPH

Joseph is Abraham's great grandsons

He Is forced out of the Promised Land and into Egypt

Acts 7:9

"These sons of Jacob were very jealous of their brother Joseph, and they sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But God was with him

Joseph's brothers resisted God

God had been speaking to them through Joseph

They did not like what they heard

And they were jealous

Acts 7:9-10

"But God was with him [10] and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

Though Josephs Brothers were jealous and resisted God

God was patient and merciful with them , and kept on working for their deliverance.

Instead of judging them,
 He used their sin to bring rescue to them
 When they ran out of food
 and had to come begging to Egypt
 Who did they come begging to?
 Their brother Joseph...

Then there is

III. MOSES

From His Birth God was raising up Moses to be a deliverer for his people in Egypt,

But when Moses makes his first appearance to help his people they resist him,

Acts 7:26

... Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

Acts 7:27

"But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?'

So they reject their deliverer

As they did with Joseph

And as they did with Jesus,

And he flees into exile in the land of Midian.

But then we see God's patience and mercy

As He sends Moses back.

Acts 7:34

I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

So in verse 36 we see Moses,

The rejected ruler
The rejected deliverer,

Saving the people: Acts 7:36

He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

But again, in spite of all this patience

Acts 7:39-41 says,

"But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. [40] They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt--we don't know what has happened to him!' [41] That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made.

For many of them,

God's patience came to an end

Acts 7:42

But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies.

In other words,

Since they reject the true worship of God and wanted idols

God gave them up to the reality behind all idols,

What is the reality behind all Idols?

DEMONS.

Acts 7:43

You have lifted up the shrine of Molech
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.
Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

But even then God did not cease to show mercy to all of them.

Acts 7:45

Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it
with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out
before them. It remained in the land until the time of David,

So even after the idolatry in the wilderness,

God fought for Israel and gave them the promised land.

Finally, Stephen gets to the point of the temple –

and the accusation against him.

IV. SOLOMON

In verse 47 Stephen points out that Solomon built God a house

(v. 47) -- the temple they prize so dearly and that Jesus said he would
destroy and build again in three days –

- and he says in Acts 7:48

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

And right here we get to the heart of Stephen's warning for us in this message.

What was the root evil in all this resistance to God's will?

Why did they resist the Holy Spirit (v. 51)?

The key To why they are such stiff necked people

Is seen in a parallel phrase in verse 41 and verse 48.

In verse 41 Stephen says that they offered sacrifices to the idol and **"rejoiced in the works of their hands."**

And in verse 48 he says, **"The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands."**

The root evil in many in Israel was that they derived their joy –
their fulfillment,
their meaning,
their sense of significance –
from what they could achieve with their own hands.

Verse 41: "They rejoiced in the works of their hands."

They wanted
a kind of god and
a kind of worship in which they could demonstrate

their own power and
their own wisdom and
their own righteousness and
their own morality and
their own religious zeal.

They got their joy from what they could achieve and not from God.

Especially not from a God
so free and
so great and

so sovereign
and
so self-sufficient

that he gets all the credit for everything good,
and won't let himself be limited
or controlled by anybody's man-made temple.

The temple in Jerusalem had become for many in Israel a symbol of
what they could achieve –

THE WORK OF THEIR HANDS.

And therefore the worship there had become a subtle form of self-
worship –
all very religious,
using all the right language,
but coming from uncircumcised hearts
and stiff,
unsubmissive,
self-exalting **NECKS**.

When Jesus said he would destroy the temple and build another in
three days "**not made with hands**" (Mark 14:58),

HE MEANT HE WOULD DESTROY THIS KIND OF RELIGION.

Stephen saw it as clearly as the noon day sun,

because he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

He did not look to the achievements of his own hands or to the
performances of his own power.

He looked to God in faith and relied on the Holy Spirit for power, so
that "the God of glory" (v. 2) would get his glory.

CONCLUSION

This morning God wants you to hear Stephens message:

God is a God "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love showing faithfulness to thousands and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

He does not turn from us
or stop pursuing us
because we have sinned once or twice or ten times or seventy times or seventy times seven times.

IF YOU CAN STILL REPENT HE IS STILL PURSUING YOU.

The other part of this message this morning is a merciful warning:

Don't get your fulfillment from the works of your hands or from the achievements of your own strength.

God Says,

Acts 7:49-51

" '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?

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

Rather, may the work of our hands lead us ever to rejoice in "the God of glory" –

Romans 11:36

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.