

**Acts 7: 6 and 7; “The God of Great Purposes”, Sermon # 25 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on February 15th, 2015, in the Morning Worship Service.**

In the gift of salvation Christ comes into your heart and your mind, to set up His residence there, to show you that He has a wonderful plan for your life, which is to change the direction of your life away from yourself so that you can follow Christ by faith. He teaches you that salvation is not of yourself; it is of the Lord. After you have been saved by faith in Christ, God then begins to lead you into all the truth which you will need, in order to change to become righteous and holy. When He leads you in this way, you will begin to learn some very important lessons about faith. God Himself will begin to show you in your experience, how you can bring glory to Him in the way that you live. It is exercising your faith in God which truly honors Him. This was God’s purpose in Stephen’s preaching to the Jewish Sanhedrim that day. He wanted to bring them to saving faith. God was declaring through Stephen His purpose for the nation of Israel. But they did not want Christ, and so they rejected God’s purpose for their nation and their lives. They resisted the Holy Spirit-anointed teaching which would have lead them to repentance and faith in Christ, had they received it and believed it. This, I pray, will not be the case with any of you. For those who are trusting in Christ, I hope that you will more carefully consider the words of 2nd Timothy 1: 9 – “God has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” This is what I want to speak to you about this morning; the God of great purposes. We will look 1st of all at the fact that God’s purpose for Israel was based upon His foreknowledge of what others would do to them. 2nd – We will look at the fact that God’s purpose for Israel was based upon His intention to bring them out of bondage so that they could serve Him.

1st of all – God’s purpose for Israel was based upon His foreknowledge of what others would do to them as a nation and as a people.

Verse 6 says: “But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years.” You can see here very clearly that God foresaw what would take place with Abraham’s descendants. They would come and dwell in Egypt and the Egyptians would bring them into bondage after Joseph’s time. A cruel Pharaoh would come into power who did not know Joseph, and he would oppress the children of Israel greatly. Now we must ask ourselves whether our great God could have prevented this from taking place? Is our God a God who simply created the world, and then stood back and let everything run its course? No, we are told in many places that He wisely preserves and governs all of His creatures and all of their actions. I think that if we are careful readers of the Bible we will have to conclude that God ordains all things after the counsel of His own will. (Ephesians 1: 11) So, yes, He could have prevented Israel from coming into this state of bondage in the first place. But this was not His decretive will for that time period. What we must therefore conclude is that God not only allowed this to happen to Israel, but He ordained that this would take place for the good of all of His elect people; that Israel would be in an oppressed state for 400 years. And God said to Pharaoh, through Moses in Exodus 9: 16 – “But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and the My name may be declared in all the earth.” I think that we need to seek to understand this sovereignty of God in history, a little better.

So turn back with me to Genesis 15, verse 7. Here is found the prophetic incident that Stephen was referring to in the passage that we are studying. Here in verses 1-6 we find God strengthening Abram’s faith by taking him outside in a vision that he was giving to him, where He would there show him the stars of the sky and say to him in verse 5 – “Look now toward

heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” “So shall your descendants be.” And, it says here in verse 6, that “He believed in the Lord, and God accounted it to him for righteousness.” So now Abraham is now a formally justified man. The Scriptures declare him to be so. But here in verse 7, even though we know that Abraham believed, we find him wanting assurance for the exercise of his faith, that God would do this great thing for him and give him a child through whom He would multiply his descendants as the stars of the sky. It says in verse 7 – “Then God said to him, ‘I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.’” “And he said, ‘Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?’” “So He said to him, Bring Me a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, a three year old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” “Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.” “And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.” “Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.” “Then He said to Abram: ‘Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.’” “And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.” “Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.” “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

Now this is a very interesting portion of Scripture. God is saying to Abram that in not too many generations, his descendants would become a large and numerous people. They would go down to Egypt, we now know, seeking grain, and Joseph, Jacob’s son would give it to them. Why? Because God had raised him up out of slavery and brought him out of prison and made him the 2nd man in all the land of Egypt. Joseph would also persuade Jacob and all the family to move down there into Egypt where the whole nation would reside, after Joseph’s death. From the time of Isaac’s sojournings until the nation left Egypt would be 400 years. The reason that Stephen goes into all these things with the Sanhedrim is to show them what God’s great purpose was for the nation of Israel, Abraham’s descendants. It was that they would learn the lessons of what it meant to be His people; His possession, and His inheritance. This they had not done. God had intended, from the standpoint of their responsibility, that they would be a separate and distinct people unto Himself; that they would be strangers and sojourners and pilgrims on the earth, and that they would be wholly devoted to Him. He Himself would provide for all of their earthly needs, and He would also take them to be His very own spiritual people forever, as they exercised faith in His ability to perfectly keep His covenant with them, and their obeying His word. Their continuing on in the covenant which God made with them in Abraham, depended upon their continuing to believe in His promises.

There is instruction here for us. We, too, must believe in the promises of God and continue to believe in them as time goes on, and we fall into various trials and difficulties. I hope that you can see here that God ordains the length of time that He will strive with a particular person, or even a nation of people, over their sins. The iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete until the time in which Israel left Egypt. But when God would bring Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, He would bring them into the Promised Land, the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then He would command them to utterly destroy the peoples of the land. God would bring judgments upon these heathen peoples for their many unrepented-of sins. Let us understand that our God is a God of plans and purposes which He most surely will fulfill in the history of nations. God chose Abraham out of all the people on the face of the earth and made a nation out of him, for Himself. He chose no other nation on the face of the earth to set His love upon. Let us understand that God most certainly will judge the world righteously; both now, and on the Day of Judgment when Christ returns. Every sin which a person commits is noted by

God and written down in His book. God is good and kind and gives common grace to people. Day after day He shows undeserving people His kindness and goodness. But no person by nature improves upon it so as to meet God's righteous standard found in His holy law. Men are not saved by common grace, but they are saved by special grace which is conveyed to them on the basis of Christ's work in righteousness and sufferings for sins. Sometimes men put other men into bondage, because of their sinful desires to control others, as our text has it. The Egyptians would put the children of Israel in bondage to themselves. Sometimes both people and nations have the selfish interest of controlling each other; forcing them to submit to them and work for them, or forcing them to do things which they do not want to do. God sees all of these sinful and controlling thoughts and actions of men and knows that they are of the flesh and sometimes of the Devil. The Pharaoh is a type of the Devil. Egypt is a type of the world.

The attitude of all men and women before they come to Christ for salvation is fleshly, and sometimes it is even demonic. It is God alone who saves men from becoming like Pharaoh, a harsh and dictatorial man who hardened His heart and would not listen to God's Word or to reason. It is grace alone which changes a person's heart so that they are tender-hearted toward God and able to lovingly care for the welfare of their family and others around them. God was very patient with the Amorites; His patience was kept waiting 400 years. They had sinned against Him in an almost infinite number of ways and never sought Him for grace or help. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and those who were righteous in the nation of Israel after them, bore a witness to them of God's grace, but they, for the most part, ignored it. And neither did God ordain that any of them would come to know Him or inherit eternal life. He let all these nations go their own way, and at the end of the 400 years He judged them all. The iniquity of the Amorite was complete. They had filled up the measure of their sins.

Let this verse be an instruction and a warning for all of us here today. The kindness and patience of God are meant to lead you to repentance, whether you are an unbeliever, or a believer. I pray that none of us here will abuse God's patience. Look at your heart and see if it is filled with the love of God and Christ. And if it is not, you must repent! Look and see if you love your neighbor as yourself; and if you do not, if you are full of force and severity, you must repent! For God will not let you continue on forever in these sins. If a person does not repent, they will perish, no matter whether they call themselves a Christian or not. And it needs to be understood that the blame will not be placed at God's doorstep that you perished because there was a lack of grace. If you have received grace you will repent. In Christ there is grace which is abundant and free. There is grace for the asking. Even many Christians need to come to a better understanding of repentance. Repentance of sinful attitudes and thoughts should be the everyday activity of the Christian. If you truly believe in Christ you will truly repent, and live in love in relation to the people around you.

Now 2nd – We want to look at the fact that God's purpose for Israel was based upon His intention to bring them out of bondage so that they could serve Him.

Verse 7 of Acts 7 says: "And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge, said, God, and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place." Israel's being in bondage in Egypt had a purpose in the history of redemption, and that purpose was to speak to all oppressed believers in all times since then, that He will most certainly deliver their lives from all distress and bondage in His time and His way. I would like you to turn back to Genesis 15, verse 7 with me once again. "Then He said to him, 'I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.'" "And he said, 'Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?'" "So He said to him, 'Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.'" "Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two." How did Abram know that God would give him this lasting inheritance? He would know

because God would make a covenant with him. Abraham did as God told him to do. He brought the sacrificial heifer,(the sin offering) the goat,(the daily sin offering), the ram,(a peace offering) and the turtle dove and the pigeon to the place of sacrifice. He cut the heifer, the goat, and the ram down the middle, placing the pieces opposite each other, but the birds he did not cut in two.

The sacrifice of the lamb, the goat, and the ram were all representative of what God would do for him and for all of his true believing descendants in the nation of Israel; male and female, and all of their children, down through the 400 years of affliction and oppression. God would deliver them from all of their sins. Their promised "Seed" the Lord Jesus Christ would be the sacrificial substitute for all of their sins. Yes, they would go through a great trial of affliction in their bondage in Egypt. And yet, for those who believed, God would be with them. God would be their Savior. God would be their helper in all the things of blessing and difficulty. All of God's help to them in their afflictions would be based on the future Incarnation of Christ and His sufferings. They, like Abraham, would bring various kinds of offerings and sacrifices which would be typical of the kinds of sufferings which the Lord Jesus would have to undergo in order to cleanse them from their sin and to purchase the blessings of grace and mercy, strength and peace, so that they would be applied to the heart of the believer during those days.

He would save them from their sins, He would be with them in all their trials and bring them to the Promised Land; not only the land of Canaan, but to heaven itself. There were other sacrifices which Abraham was commanded to bring; sacrifices which Abraham did not cut in pieces. There were birds; the turtle-dove and young pigeon. These represented true believers offering themselves as living sacrifices even as believers are commanded to do in Romans Chapter 12, verses 1. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." And this tremendous covenant of promise and purpose was made with Abraham at God's initiative and at His direction. Abraham would trust entirely in what God would do for him in terms of the sacrifice necessary to be made for sin through Christ, and his part would be to believe and offer himself a living sacrifice to serve God in righteousness based upon the grace which God would convey to him both to be justified and to be sanctified; grace to be saved and grace to serve God.

Notice here what it says in verse 11 about what Abraham did in relation to the sacrifices. "And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away." Abraham would not let the vultures which came settle down on the carcasses of the sacrifices. What should this tell us? It should tell us that sometimes we who believe may have thoughts which are like these vultures which Abraham had to drive away; thoughts which come which either disturb our view of God's faithfulness, or our view of what we have offered to God as a result of His grace working in our lives. Listen to Charles Spurgeon on this: "Here is a lesson for us. Perhaps you have some of these unclean birds coming down upon your sacrifice just now. That raven that you did not lock up well at home, has come here after you." "Eagles and vultures, and all kinds of kites in the form of carking cares, and sad memories, and fears, and doubts, come hovering over the sacred feast." "Drive them away; God give you grace to drive them away by the power of his gracious Spirit!" (End of quote) See also in verse 12 the kinds of troubles that believers will experience at times in relation to the future and what it will hold. "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him." This was the experience of a dear saint of God as God let him see what would befall his descendants; a horror and a great darkness. Sometimes even a Christian person can have an experience of horror and great darkness as they think of what they are presently going through, or what they may yet go through in the future. But because of God's having made a covenant with Jesus Christ His Son, a covenant which is an everlasting covenant, a covenant made in His blood, you may trust in Him and know the blessing of God being with you in the fiery furnace of your experience.

Look at verse 17 of Genesis chapter 15 - "And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces." "On that same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites." Now, as we close this sermon, I want you to see what Stephen was doing as he was preaching to the Sanhedrim. He was trying to show them the absolute importance of exercising faith in God's word, so that they would be saved. Stephen said to them in verse 7 of our text - "The nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge, and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place." In Genesis 15: 14 God says to Abraham - "And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions." If you think about both of these passages together you can see what the Lord would do for His people. He was trying to show them that He understood what He was intending to do for His oppressed people in the times of their greatest difficulties, and oppression of spirit. He would judge their enemies, and He would deliver them from their bondage, and He would bring them out of it to serve Him. He was giving to Abraham the picture of His covenant faithfulness by declaring to him the promises of what He would do for them. It was for them to believe that God would perform that which He had promised. Similarly it is for you to believe that God will accomplish everything concerning you.

Let me read to you from John Calvin's sermon on Genesis 15: 8-10: "But we have to note that believers, upon receiving God's word, will grant it the authority it deserves, and yet they will grumble inwardly because they do not have the requisite perfection of faith, and they will always experience some qualm and remorse, for in truth those who have profited most from God's word still have not stripped themselves of their natural propensities." "It is true faith which will dominate their hearts; and that is the source of the peace Paul speaks of in Philippians 4: 7, (the peace which passes understanding) the faith which receives the palm branch, that is, the victory." "But even that is not beyond struggle." "Faith will always win in the hearts of believers, but it will often experience sever assaults and seem to be shaken to the point of collapsing." "Sometimes it will be suffocated, as in the sea." "There will be horrendous waves and gigantic waterspouts, such as would swallow up ships and drag them to the depths of the sea." "So through such ordeals the faith of God's children will indeed always be certain and assured, but not without many alarms, as we have said." "Thus, the saints, even as they believe, become angry and fret and fume about themselves when they see that their faith is unenthusiastic and burdensome and that there is some weakness and always some residue of their nature in them which keeps them from fully adhering to God." "At that point, after recognizing what is wrong with them, they look for the cure." "And in that cure, nothing is lacking." "That was Abraham's situation: 'Lord God, how will I know?' he says, as if he were saying, 'It is true your word ought to be enough for me of itself.'" "And in fact he gives it that reverence: 'I know that you cannot fail me in what you have promised; however, because I know my weakness, well, Lord, grant me even more help so that your word may possess me completely and there will be no flaw in my feelings to hold me back so that I may always walk as you have commanded and be lifted above everything that might attach me to this world.'"

This is also what He will do for any Christian in our day as well. It was God who gave you the faith which you now exercise in Christ. It is He who has shown you such mercy. And now He expects you to trust in Him at all times. He has delivered you from sin in order that you might serve Him by faith. But sometimes your faith is not so strong in respect to trusting in God's promises or in relation to loving people around you. Faith is to work by means of love. (Galatians 5: 6) Sometimes indeed it is weak, and you may need assurance that God will build your faith and strengthen your faith, and be with you in the times of your greatest need. Let this

picture of verse 17 of Genesis 15 speak to you today – “And it came to pass when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.” The smoking oven was the picture to Abraham of his descendants being in affliction; of their being in bondage in Egypt, and their being oppressed in spirit. The burning torch was the light of the Holy Spirit upon God’s Word of promise, bringing him assurance that God would be with his descendants to help them as they trusted in Him. It was God who was passing between the pieces of the sacrifice, making a covenant with Abraham. It was He who would deliver them from this great affliction at the right time. Even though he, Abraham, would not be with them, he had the pictorial promise that God would be with them, and help them and deliver them from their strongest enemies. Do you have this kind of assurance today for yourself, and for your loved ones? You can, if you will live by the promises of God. Isaiah 43: 1 – “But now thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.’ “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.” “When you walk through the fire , you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.” “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”