

The Foundation of True Religion: Responding to God's Call

Acts 7:1-8

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Introduction

Last week in Acts 6, we saw how Stephen,

- who was full of the things of God—filled with faith, filled with grace, filled with wisdom, filled with the Holy Spirit,
- was accused by his fellow Hellenistic Jews of blasphemy against God.
 - They charged him with speaking against the temple and the law,
 - claiming that Jesus of Nazareth was going to destroy the temple and change the customs which Moses had given to the Jews!
- As is usually the case with false charges, there was truth in what they said.
 - Stephen probably did indeed claim that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs which Moses had delivered to the Jews.
 - This is what Jesus had taught.
 - The temple and the ceremonial law were never meant to be permanent.
 - They were provided until the coming of the Messiah.
- The falseness of the charges did not lie so much in what they claimed Stephen to have said,
 - but in the way that they interpreted it...
 - in saying that he was speaking against the temple and against the law and even against God!
- He was doing nothing of the kind!
 - He was setting forth to them Christ as the glorious fulfillment of the temple and the ceremonies that God had given to Israel!
 - Stephen had a greater respect for the law and the temple than any of his detractors had!
 - Because Stephen had seen the glorious end to which these pointed!
 - He knew Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
 - He had heard His voice and had come to Him and had obtained salvation in Him.
 - In Him all the shadows and ceremonies of the Old Testament had come to rich fulfillment!
 - He had a fuller appreciation for them than he had ever had before!

The Jews, you see, were in a very sorry state when Jesus came.

- They were blind and did not understand the time of their visitation.
- They had done what so many Christians have done...
 - They had made their religion to consist in forms alone—the very forms that God had given to them to connect them to His promises.
 - But instead of connecting them to the promises and to God, they were only connected to the ceremonies.
 - They had fixed on two features of God’s dealings with them that were only meant to be temporary...the law of ceremonies and the temple.
 - They had fixed on these as if they contained the very essence of religion...
- It was for this reason that they had accused Stephen of blasphemy when he dared to speak of the advent of a new age that had risen in the outworking of God’s redemptive plan.
 - And here in chapter 7, you see how, having brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin—the highest court of the Jews,
 - the High Priest, probably Caiaphas, asks Stephen if the charges against him are true...
 - And what we have in chapter 7 is Stephen’s answer.
 - It can readily be seen that Stephen does not answer directly, but in the indirect manner often used by the Hebrews.
 - He presents what he believes about the law and the temple from Israel’s history.
 - He does so in way that shows that these were indeed given by God, but yet, never to be the essence of religion.
 - First, he reminds them what the true foundation of their religion is in verses 1-8:
 - It consists in responding to God’s call as Abraham did.
 - We will look at this today.
 - Second, in verses 9-36, he reminds them what false religion in Israel has always done:
 - It has rejected the Servant that God sends to save His people.
 - “Which of the prophets did your fathers not stone?”
 - We will plan to look at this next week.
 - Third, in verses 37-50, he shows them that the allegiance of true religion is not to forms, but to God.
 - Forms are meant to draw us to the unseen God, not keep us from Him.
 - We will plan to look at this in the third sermon.

And so not let us turn to our topic for today...from verses 1-8...

- that the foundation of true religion consists in responding to God's call.
 - In treating of this subject, Stephen goes straight to the one that who is the father of faith and whom the Jews all considered to be their father—to Abraham—
 - And he focuses on how Abraham was called by God and how he responded to God's call in faith.
 - We will look at this under two divisions...
 - First, simply that true religion responds to God's call...
 - Second, that true religion responds to God's call with faith in God's promise that remains unseen or unfulfilled.

So let's get on with it...

I. First, see here that true religion responds to God's call.

A. True religion always begins with the call of God.

- That is how it began with Abraham and that is how it begins with each person.
 - What our confession calls the "effectual call."
- 1. Stephen reminds us that this is how it all began with Abraham.
 - In verse 2 he says:
 - **Acts 7:2: "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia,"**
 - a. Abraham (or Abram as he then was) was simply of one of the idolatrous families that was scattered at the tower of Babel.
 - Mesopotamia is where this rebellion had occurred—it is "the land between the rivers" where Babylon was later built.
 - Seventy families are mentioned in Genesis 10 and Abram's family is among them.
 - Please turn to Genesis 10 and you can see this...
 - See, there are seventy families identified and in verse 21, you have the line of Shem and you can trace down the generations to Peleg who was Abram's great great great grandfather.
 - The seventy families were all together after the flood in Shinar.
 - You can see this in Gen 11:1-2:
 - **Gen 11:1-2: Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there.**
 - Abram's family had been part of the idolatrous rebellion that the Lord had broken up because they had said

- **Gen 11:4: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *is* in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”**
 - From this you see what they were trying to do by their own works...
 - to build a city
 - to make a name for themselves
 - to make themselves secure (lest we be scattered).
 - The problem with this enterprise was that they were attempting to find greatness and security independently of the true and living God.
- b. When God calls Abram, he deliberately picks up on this same theme about making a great city (or nation), a great name, and providing security.
- Look at Gen 12:1-2 and you can see this in the call:
 - **Gen 12:1-2: Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing.”**
 - You see how the Lord promises to do for Abram what the idolaters had attempted to do for themselves at Babel.
 - God would make him a great nation.
 - God would bless him and make his name great.
 - God would unite him together with the families of the earth.
 - Abraham was promised a city built by God!
 - This was the kingdom of righteousness that God would establish by His grace.
 - Abraham was given this promise to be believed!
 - It was not something that would be achieved by human effort, but something that would be given by the Lord God Himself.
 - Not a city built by man, but a city whose builder and maker was God.

TRANS> Note well that this all came about at God’s initiative.

- We are not told that Abram came to God, but that the God came to Abram!
2. True religion begins with God’s call, and Stephen is reminding us of this.
- a. Because of the fall, we are naturally disposed to try to get by without God—
- to make our way through the world without His help... without consciously looking to Him for help.
 - This is a great illusion because we are sinners under His curse and we cannot possibly succeed unless we are reconciled to Him.

- We may well turn to false and idolatrous gods for our help,
 - but we do not turn to the God who has cursed us—we deny Him.
 - That is why man, seeking to survive without God’s grace, is so offensive...
 - He acts as though He can succeed despite God’s curse!
- We can only live in such lies because sin has ruined us.
 - The Bible teaches that in our fallen estate, we are:
 - dead in our sins (Eph 2),
 - blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4),
 - unable to discern the things of God (1 Cor 2:14),
 - and unwilling and unable to submit to His law (Rom 8:7).

b. The only thing that can change us is God’s call.

- It breaks into our death:
 - **Eph 2:1: “You He has made alive who were dead in your trespasses and sins.”**
- God’s call breaks into our blindness>
 - **2 Cor 4:4: “God who commanded light to shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”**
- God’s call breaks into our non-discernment>
 - **1 Cor 2:14: “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God... but God has revealed them to us by His Spirit!”**
- And God’s call breaks into our stubbornness with transforming grace>
 - **Ezekiel 36:26-28: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”**
- As Jesus says, we hear His voice and we come to Him!
 - He calls and we respond because His call is powerful and effective.

B. Stephen shows how God calls us away from everything to follow Him.

1. Abram had to leave the city of his birth, the very prosperous city of Ur.
 - He had to leave his relations and the security that was found in them.
 - He had to leave the idolatry.
 - Stephen reminds us how radical the call is in verse 3... that God said to Him.
 - **Acts 7:3: ‘Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.’**
 - He had to leave what he was and enter into life with God.
 - Nothing could ever be the same—all things were to be made new.

2. So it is with us—

- Jesus calls us to leave everything for Him,
 - **Luke 9:23-25: Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?"**
 - He calls us to break off all ties with those that would try to keep us from following Him...
 - **Luke 14:26-27: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."**
 - This does not mean that we are to turn upon them in malice.
 - It means that we are no longer to follow what pleases them—to unite with them in their idolatry that suppresses God.
 - Inasmuch we come to an impasse where we must either do what pleased the Lord or what pleases them, we must follow the Lord.
 - True religion is not about dabbling...
 - It is a complete break with your idolatrous past to enter into fellowship with the living God so that your whole life is taken up with Him.

C. This is exactly what we do when God's call breaks into our lives...

- Stephen shows us how Abraham did indeed leave all to follow the LORD.
 - Look at Acts 7:4:
 - **Acts 7:4: "Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell."**
- 1. When God's call comes, we die to what we were...
 - We are crucified with Christ, nevertheless we live...
 - We are buried with Him in baptism and we are raised with Him to walk in newness of life.
 - We become a new creation in Jesus Christ, old things are passed away, behold, all things become new.
 - We were slaves to sin, but now we are slaves to righteousness.
 - In true religion the call of God comes to us and it carries us away from everything that we were that we may come to Him.
- 2. This is what happens to you when the God of glory appears to you...

- a. Like Abram, you see His majesty and glory and you cannot say *no* to Him.
 - He gives you the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
 - In Christ, you see the holiness of God and the grace of God and power of God and you are compelled to obey the call.
 - You see that even though He is so glorious and pure,
 - He has come to you with His grace to bless you—to do what you could never do for yourself though you tried for a million years!
 - He is calling you to enter into His kingdom of forgiveness and peace and security.
 - He will make you great, He will make you secure, He will destroy your enemies if only you are reconciled to Him.
 - You cannot do anything else but come because the God of glory has revealed Himself to you.
 - You realise that if you remain un-reconciled to Him, you will come to a dreadful eternity.
 - Coming to Him is the only option.
 - His grace constrains you, His promise draws you.
 - You see that there is no other way of forgiveness and you see that you must come to Him.
 - The call of God grabs hold of you and you are never the same.
 - His seed remains in you and you cannot turn away.
 - b. Like Abram, you were just going along in your own way and then the call of God takes you out of your own way and brings you to Jesus.
 - It interrupts you and reconciles you to the living God from whom you had been estranged.
 - For Abram, it was Jesus and His kingdom promised...
 - For us, it is Jesus revealed as crucified and raised again for our justification as the first fruits of the kingdom which kingdom is promised to us.
 - In both cases, we believe the promise of God and we come to Him, looking for a city whose builder and maker is God.
3. I must ask each of you—
- a. Has God's call broken into your life?
 - Have you given up on your own way and come to Jesus to find all that God promises in Him?
 - That is the foundation of true religion!

- It begins when you respond to God's call!
- b. What was wrong with these Jews was just this...
- God had come in the person of Jesus Christ and He had called His people to come and receive life from Him.
 - But they were not like Abraham.
 - They were not prepared to leave the security of the old way.
 - They were clinging to the temple and they were clinging to the law which were given to point them to Jesus who had now come...
 - But now that He had come, they were blinded and could not hear the call of God as Abram had.
 - They insisted upon going on in their old way and refused to venture out in obedience to God's call.
- c. You must always be ready to respond to the call of God—whatever His call is in every age.
- This is the foundation of true religion.
 - It means that you listen to the voice of Jesus who speaks to you through His word and as you learn His will, you do it!
 - You put off the old and put on the new.
 - You are not stuck where you are the way the Jews were.
 - Not that we are revolutionaries who are always looking for change...
 - You know how our age is—we are not traditionalists like the Jews who want to cling to the old—we are always looking for the new and improved...
 - That is well and good provided that we realise that God does not change His call to His people now that Jesus had come...
 - He only deepens it as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus who is already fully revealed in the word.
 - In other words, we are renewed day by day as we follow our Saviour.
 - We comprehend the depth and height and breadth of His love as we never have before as we go with Him...
 - It is not new revelation—it is a more complete embracing and understanding of the revelation that God has already given to us.

TRANS> But just what do we obtain from God when we obey His call?

- That brings us to Stephen's second point with regard to the foundation of true religion...

II. Second, see here that true religion responds to God's call with faith in God's promise that is yet unseen—yet to be fulfilled.

A. The amazing thing is that Abram obeyed God's call despite the fact that the promise was elusive... not something he could point to and say "here it is!"

- Verses 5-7 lay out the details of just how little of God's promise Abram received!

1. First it says that...

- **Acts 7:5: And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on.**

- Now just consider what this is saying!

- God told Abram to leave everything he had—

- his family and his security—

- And He told him that He would give him a new country!

- But now Abram is hundreds of miles from home and he doesn't even have a piece of ground that is big enough to set his foot on to call his own!

- He left all to obtain the promised blessing of God, but where has it gotten him?

- Is this an empty promise or what?

TRANS> But that is not all...

2. God had promised to make him a great nation—but he doesn't even have a child!

- Verse 5 goes on to say:

- **Acts 7:5: But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.**

- What kind of great nation is it when Abraham doesn't even have a child?

- Who is to receive this inheritance of the land that Abram doesn't even possess?

- God changed his name to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude,"

- but he was not even the father of one and his wife had always been barren and now she was too old to have children.

- What kind of great nation is this anyway?

- How Abraham's neighbours must have laughed at him...

- "The father of a multitude, eh?"

3. And that is still not the end of what might have discouraged this man...

- 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.**
- Now that Abram has ventured out and has waited so long, the LORD tells him that He will not give the land to him or his descendents for 400 years!
 - He seems to mock him!
 - He tells him that they will be oppressed in Egypt for 400 years.
 - 400 years!!!
- Ah but there is some consolation in verse 7!
 - God goes on to say:
 - **Acts 7:7: '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.'**
 - Yes, He will bring them out after that and will judge Egypt—but after 400 years!
 - How would you like to be promised a great inheritance from someone and then find out that it would not be transferred to you and your family (when you had no children anyway) for 400 years?
 - What kind of great nation and great inheritance is this?
 - What good is it to Abraham?
 - Why does He go on following the LORD?

B. Do you ever feel that way?

1. Jesus' disciples certainly did—

- They were anticipating a glorious kingdom where they would be elevated on thrones next to Jesus, but none of it ever seemed to come to fruition.
- No, it seemed more and more elusive as Jesus ministry went on.
 - It seems to end with Jesus being rejected and crucified.
 - Where is all the glory that was promised?
 - Where is the city whose builder and maker is God?

2. You have come to Jesus, but look at you...

- He promises that you will inherit the earth, but it is hard to pay the bills.
- He promises you new life, but you are still struggling with selfishness and pride and lust and covetousness.
- He promises you resurrection but you are weak and tired and your body seems to be falling apart.
 - Where is the inheritance?

3. Let me warn you dear brothers and sisters,
 - a. Do not suppose that the kingdom consists only in what you have in this life!
 - God truly does bless us as His people in this life, but like Abraham, we are seeking the city whose builder and maker is God.
 - The fullness of the blessing is yet future.
 - We must recognise that what we have now is only a foretaste of the glory to come.
 - Jesus told us that in this world we would have tribulation, but to be of good cheer because He has overcome the world.
 - The Apostle Paul said that if we only have hope in this life, then we are of all men most pitiable.
 - b. Stephen is teaching us that the true religion waits for the promise of God in faith.
 - True religion does not serve God for what we receive in this life.
 - We presently groan as we wait for the resurrection.
 - We do not expect to see the full glory of the kingdom in this life.
 - Yes, we expect to see the church increase—and we do—but the glory will not come until Jesus returns in glory.
 - We get up and we follow and we obey God’s call because we cannot do otherwise...
 - The God of glory has appeared to us and He has called us and we can’t go back.
 - We see our own life and we see the condition of the church and we often lament...
 - but we rejoice because we know that God will make His promise good—that He is our shepherd and that we shall not lack.
 - c. We live by faith in God’s promise, not by sight in what we obtain in this world.
 - 1) That is Abraham did but that is not what the Jews before Stephen were doing.
 - They did not want Christ crucified—they did not want to take up their cross in this world—they wanted glory now!
 - They wanted the kingdom of God to appear immediately without the cross.
 - But this is not the true religion of Abraham.
 - The true religion is a religion of faith in the promise of God.

- We look for a city whose builder and maker is God.
 - It is the city that God is preparing for us and will bring down to us when Jesus returns and when we are raised to immortality!
 - It is a city where righteousness dwells.
- 2) The nature of God's promise as a forward-looking promise still remains.
- a) Those Jews who thought they had obtained everything once they entered Canaan and had peace in the land,
- They were not connected with the true and living God.
 - David was only a type and shadow of the glory to come—and David certainly knew that!
 - He latched onto to what God had promised even in the glory days of Israel on earth in which he lived.
 - The promise of God was still a future promise.
 - Yes, there was a measure of fulfillment, but the promise was not fulfilled by obtaining Palestine.
 - Those who had true faith did not settle for that alone!
 - They continued to look to God for the city He had promised, for the security, for the great name!
- b) And even now that Jesus has come...
- Indeed, glorious promises have been fulfilled!
 - A new age has come because now our sins have been paid in full and Jesus is reigning at the right of God!
 - Indeed, the King is perfectly secure and the reconciliation is complete.
 - This gives us a greater assurance than ever before!
 - We see to what lengths God has gone to secure the promised city for us and we see our King exalted on His throne.
 - How great must that promised city be if God went to such lengths to secure it for us!
 - We also have greater blessing than ever before because now that Jesus has come, the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all who believe
 - But it is only a deposit of what is to come!
 - We must not settle down into what we have now as if this is all that God has for us!

- That is to be short-sighted unto blindness!
- That is to be set up for disappointment.

- c) If you only have hope in this present age, then you are like the Jews who accused Stephen.
- Stephen told them that the temple and the ceremonies of the law were not their permanent inheritance...
 - Something greater had now come and it was for them to hear the call of God and embrace it—embrace Him—Jesus!
 - They must respond to the call of God in their day as Abraham had done in His day...
 - Not because there was glory for them now that they could see...
 - But because there was glory promised in Jesus if they would leave all and follow Him as Abraham had done.

C. Stephen concludes this section showing us that despite the elusive nature of the promises, Abraham embraced them receiving circumcision!

1. He took the sign of circumcision that God gave to him as a pledge of His promise.
 - **Acts 7:8: Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.**
 - Abraham received circumcision as a seal of the promise because he believed what God had promised...
 - He received it even before his son Isaac was born because he believed that God would do what He had spoken.
 - That is the way of the true religion—it ventures on God.
 - Circumcision represents the consecration that comes to God's people when the God of glory calls them...and they believe...
 - when their eyes are opened and their hearts are turned to Him as the Lord.
 - When they embrace His promise to give them a great name and to make them a great nation and to deliver them from all their enemies.
 - And they follow God in view of that promise through trials and tribulations that seem to contradict the promise.
 - They follow because God has called them and they believe.
2. Now that Jesus has come, and secured for us the complete forgiveness of sins through the cross,

- The sign of baptism is given to those who believe in place of the sign of circumcision.
 - It is also a seal of the promise, but for those who believe in Jesus and who recognise that the promise of God is obtained only in Him...
 - that it is only through cleansing by His blood that we our sins are washed away so that we can obtain the promised inheritance...
 - and that we must be crucified with Him through faith in His cross,
 - and be raised with Him to obtain the new life that causes us to follow Him and cling to Him until we receive the complete inheritance.
 - With this sign upon us, we go through trials and tribulations that seem to contradict God's promised inheritance with faith in Jesus,
 - believing that through Him we will obtain the promised blessing.
 - God has not washed us for no reason!
3. There were many who received the sign of circumcision without the consecration that meant to go with it...
- The consecration that was driven by faith in God's promise...
 - And in the same way there are many who receive baptism but without the consecration that goes with it.
 - They receive it with faith in Jesus that clings to God's promise through trials and tribulations.
 - They receive it even though they are not looking for the city whose builder and maker is God that Stephen and Abraham looked for.
 - It is not the city of man that we build...
 - It is the city of God that He builds and gives to us by grace.

Conclusion:

And now I must ask you—

- Have you indeed responded to God's call?
 - Has the God of glory called you so that you have left all to obtain the city that He has promised?
 - The city that is yet future and that often seems elusive, but that we continue to seek because we believe?
 - That is the faith of Abraham.
 - That is the faith of Stephen.
 - That is the faith of the true religion.
 - The foundation of true religion is response to God's call.
 - Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart!