

## Acts 7:1-60

“A Proven Pattern”

We closed in our last gathering together emphasizing the principle of the danger in being distracted from God’s call in our lives. In that God desires to use our lives to a certain end, and if we’re to be effective in our service to Him its imperative that we remain focused and faithful, regardless of how insignificant, or menial we may believe the task that we’ve been commissioned to is.

The bible teaches us that we’re not to despise the days of small things, because God honors faithfulness and will promote those who serve Him in humility, faithfully, contentedly. Jesus said, “*He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.*” Luke 16:10 The point there being that the one who *is faithful will be faithful* regardless of how *mundane* the task may seem, or how *magnanimous* it may be. But to the one who’s not faithful in something small, how can he be entrusted with something of critical importance? Remember Jesus said in the parable of the talents, “*Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.*” Matt 25:23 So often people think that when they’re apart of something that’s not so glamorous that they can kind of sluff that off, or do a .5 job, but “When I’m given something glorious to do, *then* I’ll shine.” But Jesus said it doesn’t work that way, because God knows our hearts, its like we spoke Wednesday evening. It’s easy for the flesh to get in there and do what we need to do before man to look spiritual, but when the “door is shut” behind me so that no one sees what’s going on, than its just between me and the Lord. and God is able to search my heart as to why I do what I do, so more often than not God begins our service to Him in a low profile manner.

Which brings us to Stephen, he was just serving tables, overseeing the daily distribution to the widows, and as he did what he did with his whole heart as unto the Lord, God began to raise him up. From being one who *served* tables, to being one who did great wonders and *signs among* the people, sharing the truth of the Word of God *with* the people, I don’t know if you noticed last week but the emphasis upon Stephen’s life is that of fullness. We noted that the apostles directed the disciples to select 7 men from among them that they might delegate them to serve the tables and meet the practical needs of the widows. But you recall the qualifications 1<sup>st</sup> off, outside of having a good reputation, they were to be *full* of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, Stephen qualified. In vs 5 he’s specifically noted as being *full* of faith, and the Holy Spirit, in vs 8 again he’s noted as being *full* of faith and power. and When you’re an individual who’s *filled* to the *full* with the Holy Spirit, you’re being led *by* Him, directed *of* Him, moving in wisdom and faith, God is going to raise you up and use your life. Be faithful, remain focused, don’t get distracted and God will be magnified *in* you and His Kingdom will be *multiplied* through you.

God began to use Stephen's life to confound those of a certain Synagogue who were constantly debating and disputing with him. He had a powerful working knowledge of the Word of God, and there was just no resisting the reality of the things he shared. But rather than repent, being so set in their religious traditions they reject the message, and place Stephen on trial on twisted and trumped up charges, notice vs11 of ch 6-vs 1 of Ch 7.

Vs1

Now this no doubt placed Stephen in a very awkward and difficult position. Because I have little to no doubt that there's an element of truth to these charges. But they're radically removed from their context. It's like a lawyer placing you on a stand, stating facts. and Though the facts are stated truthfully, the context of the facts are radically distorted, so in reality its *not* true in that way, but all you get is "Yes" or "No," "Are these the facts or not?"

Stephen probably did state the fact that the Law was never meant to be our righteousness, but that it was given to Moses to show us the absolute depravity of our own hearts and lack of righteousness. That the statutes of the law were to be as a tutor that led us to Christ and that Christ is the end of the Law for all who believe, how that all the ordinances, and sacrificial rites contained in the law were merely a foreshadowing of the sacrifice fulfilled in Christ. Now that Christ has sacrificed Himself upon the cross, there remains no more need for animal sacrifice.

He probably did state the fact that God wasn't limited to that temple made by hands, but that the temple of the Spirit of God is in the heart of man and that God didn't need a temple made by hands in order to meet with man. They thought that the temple in Jerusalem was the exclusive meeting place between man and God, they idolized their temple. and Stephen no doubt sought to explain to them that God created the heavens and the earth, what are we going to build that's capable of containing God, He made it all.

Remember when the disciples were leaving the temple with Jesus and they were all speaking about how awesome the temple construction was and showing Jesus the detail of it and all. and Jesus said, "*Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.*" Matt 24:2 and In his sharing with them the things that Jesus said, he may've quoted that to them and shared with them the fact that Jesus said all this will be destroyed one day, but he was in no way seeking to belittle Moses, or blaspheme the temple or anything else. He was simply seeking to point them to Jesus, it's in Christ that we have fellowship with God, it's in Christ that we find righteousness, that God wants to dwell, not in that temple of stone, but in your heart and in your life, He wants to be apart of your life not in a *legal* way, but in a loving way. But these guys have twisted his words and now here he is on trial, the high priest interrogating him.

He really doesn't ever seek to defend himself, he simply seeks to demonstrate to them by their own documented history according to the scriptures basically 3 things. #1 That God never limited His interaction with man to one place (be it the temple specifically or even the nation of Israel generally) #2 That Israel as a nation has a proven pattern of rejecting their God sent deliverers, and resisting His ordinances, and that #3 Nothing has changed. Now there's some nuances in their that add to those things implying and demonstrating other things, but that's the basic thrust.

For Stephen the 1<sup>st</sup> (what's become) 50 vs are all various observations, it's not really till we get to vs 51-53 that he makes the application whereby he as the *accused* becomes the *accuser* and charges them with worse sins than they ever though he was guilty of. and This is the longest discourse in the entire book of Acts, which shows again the emphasis that the Holy Spirit places upon it and the radical way with which God was using Stephen's life. He wasn't an apostle, just some guy who loved the Lord, studied His Word, and served His people, but God will use this testimony as a seed bed to send the gospel into all the world. Because this is the event that causes the floodgates of persecution to break wide open on the church dispersing them into Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth, so even though Stephen didn't know it God is here using his life in an instrumental kind of way as a pivot point whereby the gospel begins to be propelled (really) into all the world.

Vs2-8

Few things here quickly, 1<sup>st</sup> of all he begins to speak of how Israel's relationship with God has always been about grace through faith. When God called Ab from whom the nation of Israel was born, he was in a completely pagan land and had done nothing to cause God to look upon him in any favorable way. The God of glory appeared to Ab out of grace, and it was by faith that Ab responded, and though Ab would grow into the father of faith, he was in no way perfect even himself.

God told him to leave his land, leave his family, and follow Him exclusively. Now Ab left his land, but he took his dad with him and his nephew Lot. That wasn't what God said to do, (Vs3) "Get out of your country and from your relatives." The whole point in that was that he was to sever from his life anything that would detour his devotion to the Lord.

We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength, He is to be the primary priority of our lives over anything else, family included. Now when He's the central focus of our lives, we're able to be whom He's called us to be *for* our family. We're able to love them, serve them, and be there for them as He desires, but when He's not in the center, then everything else is out of balance. Jesus put it like this, "*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*" Luke 14:26

Now does that mean that you're to literally have hatred in your heart for your family? No, how can you love God whom you've not seen and hate your brother whom you have seen, this is the command that we have from Him, that he who loves God *must* love his brother also. So the idea there is that of proper priorities, that at all costs nothing is to take the place of your love for Jesus Christ. A couple of vs later Jesus rephrased it like this, "*...whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.*" Luke 14:33 When God calls you to Himself it's at the expense of any and everything else in your life will compete for your priority. Ab was to forsake all, and follow Him, and he grew to that point. But Stephen is driving home the point of that grace-based initiative by which God initiated a relationship with Ab and how it was by faith in God's Word that he was made righteous.

Because God told him that the land belonged to him, but he himself never truly inherited any of it, and it would be hundreds of years before he inherited it through his offspring. But I want to draw your attention here to the Omniscient (all knowing) power of God. God told Ab exactly what would happen to his offspring hundreds of years before it came to pass. The book of Romans speaks of, "*God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;*" Rom 4:17 We read in Isa 46:9-10 "*Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,'"*

There's no part of your life that takes God by surprise. He knows the end from the beginning, now that comforts me because it means what? That God is in control, my life is mapped out for me in Christ, there's nothing that comes into my life that God hasn't ordained or allowed for His purposes. Now I might not always *understand* those purposes, because His ways are not my ways. As far as the heavens are above the earth so far are His ways beyond my ways and past my finding out. The bible says, "*A man's steps are of the LORD; How then can a man understand his own way?*" Prov 20:24 But I don't have to get it all because I'm confident of the Love of God *for* me and the thoughts He thinks *towards* me, thoughts of peace and not evil, to give me a future and a hope. So that even when tough times visit me I know that God has a plan in it all and ultimately it's the best thing for me even when I can't see how on this side of eternity. But when I see Him face to face I know that I won't want to have traded 1 detail of the plan that He ordained for my life. God told Ab that the land would be his, but before his descendants inherited it, they would go through a period of bondage, then God would judge that nation that oppressed them.

It was after all of this that God gave to Ab the right of circumcision. Which to the Jew was a huge deal, the cornerstone of their righteousness in many ways. But Stephen is showing them how that God was dealing with and leading Ab long before the rite of circumcision ever came into the picture. It wasn't the root of his faith, it was the fruit of his faith, the relationship that Ab had with God was one of love, not legalism, it was of grace through faith.

How is it that we have a relationship with God today, by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ and He's trying to show them that God's heart towards man has always been this way, but that they've gotten derailed through religious tradition and legalism.

#### Vs9-16

Now these guys prided themselves on their heritage and the history of their forefathers. But Stephen is showing them that the facts are that they've been viewing their history through rose colored glasses. Their fathers that they're so proud of were notorious for rejecting those whom God sought to place over them and were in many ways cruel and vindictive being blind to God's giving them a deliverer in their time of need.

Exhibit A is Joseph, who is in no small # of ways a type of Christ, meaning that he mirrored in many ways the happenings of the life of Christ. God was going to set Joseph over his brothers but his brothers rejected him as their ruler, were envious of him and sought to destroy him. They sold him for 20 pieces of silver and Joseph suffered for sins he didn't commit. But God was with him nonetheless, raised him up and set him in power and used him to be the deliverer of the nation of Israel and really all who would come to him in that the famine was in all the lands (the bible says). and The 1<sup>st</sup> time that his brothers saw him there in Egypt, they didn't recognize him, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> time he was revealed to them. Joseph also took for himself a gentile bride in that interim period even as Jesus being rejected by the nation of Israel the 1<sup>st</sup> time, took for Himself a Gentile bride in the form of the church, but the next time they see Jesus, they'll recognize Him. Fall on their faces before Him and mourn for Him whom they've pierced. Zech 12:10 says, *“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.”* Jesus was rejected by His own the 1<sup>st</sup> time, but will be recognized the 2<sup>nd</sup> time, just like Joseph.

#### Vs17-29

Exhibit B in the case he's building regarding their rejection of their God sent deliverers, Moses. and Again the primary things he's demonstrating (outside of other things like the treacherous nature of killing babies there in vs 19) is that God was moving and blessing outside of Israel there in Egypt with Moses, just like He did with Joseph where there was no tabernacle or no temple. and That God raised up Moses to deliver them but they didn't get it. and Moses is another type of Christ in that he was miraculously preserved *at* his birth, divinely favored *from* his birth. Was mighty in words and in deeds, was sent to Israel to deliver them, yet the 1<sup>st</sup> time he was despised and rejected by his own, they didn't understand that God had sent him to them to bless them and deliver them from the bondage that they were in, so he went into “exile” for a season during which time he took a Gentile bride.

## Vs30-36

Moses life is pretty much summed up in 3, 40 yr periods. The 1<sup>st</sup> 40 years in Egypt becoming *something*, the next 40 yrs in the desert becoming *nothing*, and the next 40 yrs leading the children of Israel learning how God can take *nothing* and make *something* out of it. God made a great leader out of Moses, but 1<sup>st</sup> he had to be emptied of self. and God wants to do great things in your life and in mine, but 1<sup>st</sup> we have to be emptied of self, and if it takes 40 years to get you there, or me there, God is willing to wait. 3 Key phrases in vs 34, “I have seen,” “I have heard,” and “I have come.” God knows the heartaches, the heart breaks of your life, He sees the circumstances of each of our lives, He hears your cries, and He has perfect timing, and when the timing is perfect He will come and deliver you from your oppression whatever that may be. The psalmist said, “*The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.*” Ps 34:17-18 So take heart this morning, the details of your life have not escaped God’s attention, He’s aware, and He’s there for you, so cast your cares upon Him, because He cares for you. and In vs 35, the one whom *they* rejected, *God sent* to be a ruler and a deliverer.

## Vs37

Even Moses told them of another to come who would be like him whom they should be careful to take heed to. One who was God’s ordained deliverer, who was mighty in words and deeds, who would give to them the *word* of God express/demonstrate to them the *love* of God, and teach them the *ways* of God. and Stephen is making a very clear cut case that even as they rejected Moses, so to their rejecting Jesus, the greater than Moses of whom he spoke. Yet Jesus is the only One who God offers as a deliverer from the bondage of sin. That’s the message of the gospel, that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life *in Christ Jesus* our Lord. There’s no other option, to reject Jesus Christ is to accept bondage to sin and the wages thereof. Notice

## Vs38-43

You see when Moses was on the Mt receiving the law of God, the children of Israel were already breaking the Law and rejecting the 1 true living God and turning to idols. Rejoicing in the works of their own hands, Moloch was the idol who had his hands outstretched and they would heat them up red hot and then place their babies in his hands, in his arms to be burned and blistered alive, and they would dance and pound on drums to drown out the screams and all. God won’t force you to worship Him, you want to do your own thing, than you can do your own thing, but be not deceived God is not mocked. and Whatever you sow, you’re going to reap, if its to the flesh you sow, than you’ll of the flesh reap corruption, if you sow to the Spirit, than of the Spirit you’ll reap everlasting life, seems like an easy decision to me, but you have to decide for yourself.

When he mentions them rejoicing in the works of their hands, he's really seeking to show them that even as their fathers committed idolatry in the desert with the works of their hands. The details may differ but at its core their doing the same thing with regard to the temple which is nothing more than the work of man's hands that they're idolizing as something more.

But vs 39 is the warning we need to receive, they didn't obey the word of God, but rather they rejected it and turned back to Egypt (here's the key) in their hearts. As you know Egypt speaks of a type of the flesh life, a life lived in the world. You may be coming to church, going through the motions, but to what are you turning *in your heart*? The things of the flesh? Do you secretly long for those days when you were back in the world? Be careful, Paul said, "*God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" Gal 6:14 Jesus said when we grab a hold of the plow we're never to look back, why? Because it's a snare, we remember the good ol days and forget the bondage, the oppression/depression, how life was so empty and meaningless. Guard your heart from going back to Egypt, God loves you, set you free from that stuff, now serve Him with your whole heart.

#### Vs44-50

Notice the command/working knowledge of God's Word that Stephen has, he says, "Look, our father's had the tabernacle, Solomon built Him a Temple, even still that didn't keep them from rebelling against God and being given over to idolatry, and besides that there was never any intention of God dwelling exclusively in the temple. Heaven is His throne, the earth His footstool, His hands made everything, what are you going to build that's able to house the Living God?" Again they thought the only place people could meet up with God was there at the Temple. A lot of Christians think the only place they meet up with God is at church, but believe me God is not absent from the rest of your life, granted some people live like He is. They profess to know Him but in works they deny Him, but Stephen is saying, the divine design was never to think that God was going to meet with people exclusively in this Temple. All this has been the observation, that God was not limited to the Temple, that Israel has had a pattern of rejecting God's deliverers, and notice, nothing's changed.

#### Vs51-53

"You're accusing me of breaking the Law, you're the old wineskins unable to flex with the moving of the Holy Spirit being circumcised *in* the flesh and *of* the flesh in your heart, just like your fathers! Which of prophets did they not persecute, and you're even worse, they killed the one's who foretold of the coming of the Just One, and you rejected their message, and murdered the Messiah Himself, you're so proud to be the guardians of the Law yet you yourselves haven't kept it!" Stephen just takes the sword of the word of God and plunges it deep into their hearts and begins to twist it. He's was a phenomenal witness for the Lord Jesus Christ



## Vs54-56

Remember when the high priest asked Jesus if He was the Christ, Jesus said, *“I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”* Mark 14:62 Now this same high priests hears Stephen saying that he sees *“The Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”* and that’s all they can take.

## Vs57-60

We’ll comment just a bit more on this section next time, but what an incredible heart in Stephen, how many ways his trial and execution was like Jesus’? Falsely accused, murdered for no wrong of his own, asking the Lord to receive his spirit and even praying for those who were persecuting him. Of course by their killing him they only proved everything he said about them, they have a proven pattern of resisting God’s Word, and rejecting God’s deliverer, even killing those whom He sent to extend to them His grace and mercy. God help us that we don’t resist the Word of God, but rather that we be open to God, that He might fill us to the full, to the overflowing with His Spirit that He might be magnified and glorified in us, that He might use us to impact lives and change the hearts of people around us who yet need to know Him. This episode right here had a radical impact on this young man named Saul. and There’s little to no doubt in my mind that in no small part we have 2/3 of the NT because of, because as you know soon enough he’ll become Paul the apostle. Never underestimate what God may be doing with your life, you may never see it this side of eternity, but great was Stephens reward on that day. Stay focused, stay faithful.

Learn the lesson, if God is dealing with you today about your need to be delivered from the bondage of sin, don’t reject Jesus Christ God loves you with an everlasting love and He demonstrated that love for you upon the cross of Jesus Christ where Jesus shed His blood so that you might be forgiven. Becoming sin for you, that you might become the righteousness of God in Him, don’t resist the Holy Spirit’s wooing you, if He’s calling you to open your heart and receive Jesus Christ than do that now.