

Acts 7

Today we're talking about "Leadership When it Costs"

Today we come to a sermon (in fact one of the lengthiest in all of scripture). And we'll not read every part of it today – we're going to do an ariel view and touch down a few places - but it was a sermon that was so strong, it got the speaker killed. His name was Stephen.

And nothing will get you in trouble, like a sermon. When I was 23 years old, I preached a sermon, and when the service was over, the elders called me in and had a talk with me, because I challenged the status quo.

It reminds me of the young man who got up to preach in the first church where he worked – preached his heart out – and afterwards he was standing at the back door greeting the members, and this one lady came out, shook his hand and said, "That was a warm sermon." He's never heard that, but he assumed that was a good thing,

Next week – same lady, same words – "That was a warm sermon." It got him to wondering. He asked her the next week, "Hey, I hear you, but can you tell me what that means?" She said, "Sure, that's easy. It means 'not so hot!'"

Well – the sermon today is a hot sermon – it's so hot, it also got Stephen called into the office. But ultimately it gets Stephen killed. But even though they murdered him, they couldn't kill the message.

Up until this time, the church had been localized in Jerusalem. But God is going to use a bad **moment**, to spread his people all over the world.

Because here's what God knew:

The church must scatter, to matter.

And you see - the church can't be a movement, if it never moves.

Let's pray

Acts is the story of the early church – and up to this point, we've seen incredible growth – thousands are coming to the Lord.

But last week, we saw this growth interrupted by a problem that revolved around care for the growing number of widows in the church. There were two groups of people – those who lived in Jerusalem – they were all like Savannah natives who lived their all their lives. And there was a second group of converts that had moved in from different places that had some different customs.

And the widows of the group – because there were no social programs – felt neglected in the distribution of food, they felt slighted. So the Apostles came up with a plan – they selected 7 men to attend to their needs. And here was the result - – unity. The people were satisfied.

The decision made pleased the people, and it created an environment of trust where everyone felt welcome and valued.

One man by the name of Stephen, was a powerful preacher who said, “Everybody’s welcome here.”

It was a great message.

But every time you have a movement of good, you can expect a countermovement for evil – especially when it challenges the status quo.

⁹Opposition 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—who began to argue with Stephen. (It was a bunch of people who had been released from other countries, and they had come to Jerusalem – places like Cilicia, which is important, because the capitol of Cilicia was Tarsus, and there’s this young zealous rabbi named Saul among others listening to Stephen preach).

Up to this point people thought Christianity was just a subset of Judaism, but they listened to Stephen and they started to realize – he’s much more inclusive than what we’re comfortable with.

He’s saying things that make us nervous.

¹⁰But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹Then they **secretly persuaded** some men to say, “**We have heard** Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” ¹²So they **stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers** of the law. (Somebody

started a FB thread about him, you know – and stirred everybody up).

They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. (They called him into the office). ¹³They **produced false witnesses**, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴For **we have heard him say** that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

They couldn’t deal with him in public, so they put a plot against him together in secret. But it didn’t change the fact that God’s hand was on him – because we read in verse 15.

¹⁵All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

They say he’s destroying the religious customs of Moses, but his face shines like Moses when he came down from Mt Sinan after receiving the 10 Commandments – why? Because he was filled with the spirit of God, just like Moses (Exodus 34:29).

Want you to see two things about Stephen:

1. **Stephen turned his TEST into a testimony.** (The test became an opportunity to preach the Gospel – and that message was – “God’s doing a new thing – the Holy Spirit is working - God’s hand is reaching out to all people, people that aren’t just like you, with the same history and the same experiences.” But they didn’t want to hear it).

So – chapter 7:1 - **Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”**

And so Stephen starts to preach. But it’s not an apology, and it’s not a defense to win an acquittal. Rather he proclaims to them from their misguided history – Jesus!

And here’s what I’ve learned – people love their history, just as long as you don’t tell the truth.

Well – Stephen preaches the history of the Jews – not the way they wanted to see it, but the way it really was.

And he has 3 points to his sermon related to the way they mis-understood their history and put their trust in the wrong thing.

Point #1 - You’ve always believed that God only works in this place, in this land. But God has always worked outside the land. In fact, he’s worked outside of Canaan with Abraham, with Moses, with Joseph.

Verse 2 - “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia . . .

God called Abraham to serve him while he was in Mesopotamia – 1200 miles away from Canaan, the promised land.



Or consider Moses – where was he raised? In Israel?

²⁰ “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. ²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

And where did he encounter God? (2 SLIDES)

³⁰ “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ³² ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

³³ “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Listen – God can work anywhere he wants to – so if you reduce God to a place, you’ll miss Him when he moves!

And Stephen says to those who are convinced of that, that God did some of his best work outside of Israel.

And so you see the point? You can’t put God in a box and tell him to stay there.

Point #2 – You put your hope in knowing the law, but you missed the most important part.

Still speaking of Moses (who was revered by them), he says:

³⁷“This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ (Now, who do you suppose that was? Moses was talking about Jesus).

³⁸. . . he received living words to pass on to us. ³⁹“But our ancestors refused to obey him.

In fact, Stephen says, we’ve never been good at keeping the law if you look at our history. We always rejected those God had chosen. His brothers rejected Joseph, the people rejected Moses – you killed all the prophets. You said Jesus couldn’t be Messiah though the scripture spoke of him – that’s what we always do when God chooses somebody – we reject them.

So you put your confidence in the land, you put your faith in law keeping (though you didn’t do it very well), and thirdly

Point #3 – you put your hope in your temple.

You thought, “Surely God is with us, because we’re worshipping in **the right place.**”

⁴⁸“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

⁴⁹“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

Listen – God can work anywhere he wants to; he doesn’t only move in your tradition.

And some of you grew up in church and denominations that said, “This is the way, it’s the only way, there are no

Christians any OTHER way – and you ran from that, because all you wanted to do was GET away!

And God says, “I’ll work anywhere, anyhow I choose.”

It’s like Wi-Fi – you don’t see it – but if you’re connected, it works anywhere in the house.

So you see – here was the problem - They had TEMPLE faith – and God was trying to give them TERRITORY faith!

(And I think it’s remarkable – that ordinary surroundings get lifted to extraordinary status when God is there. Sierra Leone – some of those poor buildings, went to 10 church plants in one day)

Stephen just told the truth! And they couldn’t stand it.

And just so they didn’t miss the point, he drives it home in verse 51-53. (Here, he’s not just telling history – he’s confronting hearts).

⁵¹“You stiff-necked people! . . . You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! (That’s strong! You’ve seen the obvious, but you wouldn’t accept it. Your heart is like that of a nonbelievers!)

⁵²Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Now I can tell you – a sermon like that’s not going to win you any friends. But Stephen was called to speak the RIGHT message at the RIGHT time.

And he’s a man that can be trusted – because he chose to do what was right over what was easy!

And how did it go over? We read verse 54 – 56

⁵⁴When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But 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.” (By the way – this is the only place in scripture where we see Jesus standing. But it says to me: when you stand for God, heaven will stand for you! And when you stand for Christ on heart, Christ will stand for you, in heaven).

It’s like a courtroom – when a key witness walks in, everybody stays seated. But when the judge stands, everything changes.

57-60

⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then 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 was the first man to die for this new move of God.

He got treated just like Jesus, and he died just like Jesus.

And in Acts the mission was unleashed because the first Christian were WILLING to get lashed.

They understood what all missionaries understand – **when you tell a story that people aren’t ready to hear, they will mistreat you. (HAS ANYBODY EXPERIENCED THAT WITH A FRIEND?)**

But even in that – God was fulfilling His mission (and he will do that with you).

Because when we get to chapter 8, we will see that persecution was the catalyst for spreading God’s people with God’s message, all OVER the WORLD.

And we need to realize as God’s people – we’re going to get pushback – (and that’s okay).

But the truth is: adversity has always provided our greatest opportunity.

It says – chapter 8 - **On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.**

⁴Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

The mission is unleashed when disciples are willing to go through anything, as long as the Gospel can keep going through them.

Adoniram Judson was the first missionary in Burma – he was treated horribly. He was imprisoned for 17 months, kept in chains that literally mangled his body for the rest of his life. And when he was let out of prison he asked a ruler if he could go to another part of Burma and the ruler said, “No you can’t.”

He said, “I’m not worried that people will listen to your words, I’m worried that they’ll be persuaded by your scars.”

And for 20 centuries our scars have been some of our best sermons.

Isn’t it true – that your testimony is the strongest, when your test was the hardest?

And so the mission is unleashed because

1. Stephen turned his tests into a testimony,

2. He let seeking the lost trump preserving the traditions of the past.

In Acts 7, you see past ideas about God getting challenged.

- Like, for instance, the idea that you could reduce God to one spot and put him in a box and say, “He’s got to stay in that room or that church house.”
- Or the idea that God is only gonna be concerned about one particular people - and not notice the rest.

- Or the idea that God can only operate one particular way – for example, in Acts 8, they go to Samaria, and a funny thing happens. They baptize people, but they don’t receive the Spirit like they did back in Jerusalem.

Peter and John come up, pray, put their hands on them, the Holy Spirit comes down.

(Well, that’s not how God did it in the past. That’s not how it’s supposed to work!)

Listen, God is God, and God is a missionary, and when missionaries go on the field they adapt to whatever they need to do for the mission.

And so you don’t tell God, “Well, that’s where you’ve got to stay, and that’s who you’ve got to love, and that’s how you’ve got to do it.”

BUT IT’S INCREDIBLE - what happens when you realize that God is bigger than what you thought about him or how you served him in the past.

You see – God is a missionary. He is always on the move, and the church has always struggled to keep up with Him.

Why does that happen? I think, partly because we get so devoted to how things were in the past we stop thinking about the lost.

We get our focus off finding the lost, and we start focusing on the past.

There's always a danger for churches to drift from thinking about the outsider, to thinking about the insider. And pretty soon - taking care of the GATHERED becomes the mission.

I get calls from church leaders – had one last week – most of them dying or stagnant and worried, “What can we do?” And when I begin to say, ‘Well, maybe you could consider this or try this new approach they say, ‘Oh no, no, that would upset people, and they would leave.’”

Okay – here is the **preeminent sign of a dying church.**

They are more concerned about who might leave, than they are about who might come.

Sports illustration: you've watched soccer games, they have a thing called the penalty kick. The ball is 12 yards from the net, these guys kick it 60-80 miles an hour. Professional soccer players make that kick 85% of the time.

But then, they did a very interesting study. **Have you ever seen at the end, a shootout with a tie score?**

So they have 5 players from each team do these kicks.

Suppose you're the last kicker - #5. And your team is behind by one – so you're not kicking to win the game, you're just trying to make it not to lose.

The success rate goes down to **62%**.

Suppose you're the 5th kicker and the score is tied – now you're not kicking not to lose, you're kicking to win!

The success rate goes up to **92%**. (A 30% difference).

Are you kicking not to lose, or are you kicking to win?

And a lot of churches are playing not to lose.

I was listening to preacher who works with a church plant in Chicago that baptizes 600-800 people a year, and he was asked, “How do you assess if you're staying on mission?”

Here's what he said: “I always try to find out if people are mad because I'm leaning too far in the direction of the prodigal. That's how I know. The elder brothers will always get mad if you're giving the prodigal too much attention.”

So here – we've been open to changes as we feel the Spirit and the Word lead. Has every church person out there been ok with that? Well, no.

But has God used us to save the prodigal? You bet He has!

You see – here is our agenda, and it's very simple – to win as many as possible, by all means possible, just as soon as possible, into the Kingdom of God.

And the mission will stall, when we let God get small – that He has to stay in one place, and love one people, and do things one way. BUT GOD – is a big God.

God's a missionary. And so we say, “God, can we join with you? Can we stay open to the new and fresh ways you're moving in the world?”

And so the mission is unleashed because

1. Stephen turned his tests into a testimony,
2. He let the lost trump the past.

Listen – when it comes to preaching the Gospel – we always want to stand with Stephen.

We never want TO RESIST THE HOLY SPIRIT!

We want to be open to taking the Gospel wherever it needs to go.

And if we're understood or mistreated – God willing, we'll always stand with Stephen.

So I'll close with this:

Robert Murray M'Cheyne - the great pastor from Scotland, only lived 29 years on this earth.

He died in 1843.

There was a time when McCheyne was with some other ministers in Edinburgh. And afterwards, one of the older ministers said:

"Well, well - I have never before seen one in whom I see Christ shine as He shines in the face of that young man."

McCheyne preached his last sermon of his life in a place called Broughty Ferry. His text was Isaiah 60:1,

Arise, shine . . .
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you."

That night, he went home to bed, sick from a fever. And sadly – in a few days, that fever took his life.

After his death they found this letter **under his pillow**. It had come from a man who had heard that sermon at Broughty Ferry. The letter read,

"Dear Mr. McCheyne, I heard you preach in Broughty Ferry last Sunday evening, and your sermon brought me to Christ.

It was not anything you said, but it was what you were as you preached. For as you preached, I thought I had never seen the beauty of holiness as I saw it in you.

You were talking about the glory of our God resting on the Savior, and I saw the Savior's glory rest on you. That brought me to Christ." (J. Douglas MacMillan in *The Lord Our Shepherd*. p.85-86)

When I heard that, I thought – that's the man I want to be.

I want to be like Stephen.

Because everybody can stand when it's comfortable.

Everybody can stand when it's popular.

But God is looking for some Stephens today.

1. Mothers and fathers who will do the right thing, even when it costs them.
2. **Leaders who will lead according to principle, instead of popularity.**

3. People who will speak without compromise, and who will do the right thing, even when it hurts.

And sometimes that WILL BE HARD – BUT HERE’S THE GOOD NEWS:

You may get knocked down on earth, but you’ll be stood up in heaven!

Stephen didn’t have earthly support, but heaven gave him a standing ovation!