

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

09.06.2026 | Our Only Hope | Acts 7 | Dr. Ben Day, Senior Pastor

Well, thanks to Philip for reading Acts, chapter 7. I didn't want to have to read all of that, so I asked him to. Um, there's a number of long speeches throughout the book of Acts that Luke records, and this is the longest one of them all. It's a long speech, and sometimes it can be kind of hard to follow. I think one of the keys, though, into understanding the whole point of the speech is to recognize where Stephen was going with the speech. You know, as long as this speech was, there's a good chance Stephen might have had more to say. He kind of got interrupted. I don't know if you noticed that, but he was like in the middle of speaking, and the people stopped him from speaking and killed him.

You kind of have to wonder if there was more that Stephen was going to tell them, but the whole point he seemed to be driving at was Jesus Christ. That their whole point that this person, this man that they had rejected and that they were making false accusations about was the one in whom they were supposed to put their hope. I think Stephen is trying to help the people to see that they were putting their hope in all these other things, but really they should have only been putting their hope in God and in Jesus. And in fact, I think Stephen's not just saying that with his message, but he is proclaiming that with his life. That he is saying to the point of death that Jesus is his only hope.

Now, if you hear those words, you know, that Jesus is our only hope, maybe you think of Princess Leia's message that she sends to Obi-Wan Kenobi through R2-D2. Either if you're a Star Wars fan or just you see memes and stuff like that, that you're our only hope. If you think of that, I get it. But that's not what I have in mind when I think of saying Jesus is our only hope. What I kind of had in mind when I gave that title to the sermon, I just think about Jesus being our only hope, I think of the first question and answer in the New City Catechism. The New City Catechism is just a series of questions and answers that helps us just think about our faith. And the first question is, what is our only hope in life and death? And the answer is, our only hope in life and death is that we belong both body and soul to God and to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our only hope in this world, in this life, and our only hope in death is not within ourselves, the things that we can do. Our only hope is that we would belong body and soul to God and to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

I think that's Steven's whole kind of point of this long message that he gives. Is he's trying to help the people to see that they should not put their hope in other things, but only in Jesus Christ. Now again, this speech can be kind of hard to follow. Steven is giving us a brief overview of the Old Testament and he is picking out particular parts of the Old Testament. He's not just kind of going over, you know, Genesis through Malachi in a chronological way or touching on each part equally. He is kind of trying to draw out some specific themes. And I think one of the things to keep in mind is that this wasn't a sermon that Steven got up to speak after a great time of musical worship. Steven, as you might remember at the end of Acts chapter 6, was on trial before a council and false witnesses were coming against him. And what they were accusing him of is blaspheming Moses and God. And they said specifically, "Here's how we accuse you of blaspheming Moses and God. You are saying that Jesus is going to destroy this temple that is built here in Jerusalem and that he is going to abolish the law of Moses."

If I remember, Jesus was accused of very similar things, saying that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, that he was people accused him of moving away or watering down the law that had been given to them as the people of God. Steven is now accused of this. And I think these ideas of the temple and the law are on the forefront of Steven's speech. But Steven seems to be saying, you know, long before there was a temple, God was present with his people. Even as his people were not even in the city of Jerusalem or even in this promised land, as they were in the wilderness or in other places, God was with his people. The point was never the temple. And God has been faithful to his people, even when they did not follow the law. That long before God gave the law, he had created a covenant relationship with his people, that even the people have rejected the law and the messengers who delivered that law, that he has been faithful to save and to forgive his people.

God has sustained his people all through this time to now, and all of that is pointing us to our one hope, which is Jesus Christ. I think Steven's basic argument is you're looking to the temple and to the law and ultimately to yourselves for hope, but you need to be looking to God, a God who is present with his people, a God who saves his people, a God who sustains his people, and all of that is fulfilled in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. So let me just try to help us see that through this kind of long and somewhat difficult speech to follow. We're not going to look at every part, but I just kind of

want to pull out those themes that I think Steven touches upon throughout this whole message. So the first kind of theme is this idea of God's presence with his people as he's thinking about the idea of the temple. And I think one of the things that Steven wants to get across the people is that we have a hope that is fulfilled in Jesus, that Jesus is our hope because God is with his pilgrim people.

If you'd like to take notes, there's your first blank to fill in. This is the kind of the first theme of Steven's speech that I want to pull out, this thread that I want you to notice as we look at what Steven told the people on this day. That Jesus is our hope because God is with his pilgrim people. So one of the things that's kind of clear in the Bible, becomes especially clear I think in the book of Jeremiah, is that the people of Israel around this time, throughout the end of the Old Testament and even today, they had begun to view the temple as an idol. That really the people of Jeremiah's day, they thought that God would never send them into exile, that Jerusalem would never be destroyed because the temple was there and God's presence was there. And even the people of Steven's day and Jesus's days tended to think the same way it seems. That their hope was not really in God, but in God's presence with them in this building. That they thought as long as the temple stood, then we would be secure. Their focus wasn't really on worshiping God or having a relationship with him, their focus was on this building that they thought contained God's presence. And so what Steven's trying to help them to see is the temple was never the point. The temple was built to point to a greater hope and that is that God is present with his people.

So Steven begins long before the temple was built, he begins with Abraham in Mesopotamia. He says God came to him and he was with Abraham there. And even as God led him into the Promised Land, he did not give him that Promised Land right away. Look at what Steven says towards the beginning of his speech in verse five. He says that God gave Abraham no inheritance in this Promised Land, not even a foot's length. But he promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. That later on they would receive this Promised Land. And God spoke to this effect that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others who would enslave them and afflict them for 400 years.

He uses this language of being sojourners. This is why I would say that God's pilgrim people, that throughout the story of the Old Testament, God's people were never really kind of settled in one place, but yet God was always there with them. Though he had not given the Promised Land, he had entered into this covenant relationship with Abraham. And in fact, Steven goes on to say that he entered into this with a physical sign of circumcision. That before they ever got to Jerusalem, before they ever built a temple, there was this covenant relationship that God was going to be with his people. And he speaks about how Isaac came and then Jacob and the fathers. And then he says this in verse nine. "The patriarchs, the sons of Jacob, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, but," catch this, "but God was with them."

That even whenever sin brought Joseph to be a pilgrim or a sojourner down to Egypt, become enslaved to the people of Egypt, God was with him and rescued him out of all of his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Steven saying, "No matter where God's people have been, no matter what brought them there, God was present with his people." Speaks about how God used Joseph in his favor with Pharaoh to save Jacob and the family during the time of famine. Speaks about how God was with Moses when he was first in Egypt and then when he was out in the wilderness by himself. Then God was with his people as Moses led them out of Egypt into the wilderness. But even when they were wandering around as pilgrims, as sojourners in the wilderness, God's presence with them. Look what he says in verse 44, "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers."

So it was until the days of David who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. For all this time God's people as they wandered around the wilderness, as they came into the promised land, not in a building but in a tent in the Ark of the Covenant. Even under great King David there was no temple as David had asked to build a building and then Solomon is able to build the temple." Stephen continues in verse 47, "It was Solomon who built a house for him, but yet even that wasn't the point." Verse 48, "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands as the prophet says. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me says the Lord? Or what is this place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?"

See Stephen is tracing this theme throughout the Old Testament that God's presence was never about a building or a place, but rather God's presence was always with his people as they were pilgrims in this land. You say, "Pastor Ben, what does all this have to do with me and my hope?" Well, here's the way I would try to relate it and I think maybe if you were at the nine o'clock class with, Pastor Clark was teaching on the story of scripture, some of this might sound kind of familiar. What Stephen's doing in a certain way is kind of giving us an overview of the Old Testament with this theme of God's presence with his people. And what the Bible says is that we were all made to dwell with God. That God created us to be in communion with him, but in sin we have all left God in his presence. That we now, all people dwell in death and in darkness because we have separated ourselves from the light and the life that is in God. We were made to be with God. God is our home and we are now exiles.

And the story of the Old Testament is that God was not just be exiles. That though we were straying from God, he was constantly pursuing us. His presence was always coming near to his people and what Stephen is helping us to see is all of that, including the temple, was pointing to our greatest hope which is Jesus Christ. Because in Jesus Christ, all of this hope about God's presence is fulfilled. Think about when Jesus was incarnated he's given the name Emmanuel, which means God with us. God's presence here in the form of a person who is taken on flesh and dwelt among us. Then as Jesus dies, the veil of the temple is torn. Why? To show that there is now an opportunity for us to be reconciled to God. That in Jesus's death, he was saving us from that land of death and darkness. He was bringing us home out of exile. And then as Jesus ascends to heaven, what does he do? He sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within his people so that God's presence might be with them wherever they go.

And as Pastor Clark mentioned earlier in the service, one day Jesus will return and when he does, what will happen? We will dwell with God as we see him face to face. This story of the Bible is all about how we have separated ourselves from God's presence and how he is constantly pursuing us and bringing us home to himself. And all of this, this hope is all found in Jesus Christ. Stephen says don't look to the temple, don't look to a place, don't look to a particular situation to find God's presence. Know that your hope for being in God's presence is in Jesus. And I would just say this is where it connects to us. Do you know the rest of being at home with God because Jesus has brought you home? Do you know the rest? Do you know the comfort of God's presence because you experience it through Jesus Christ? Through the Spirit whom he has sent who now indwells you? Jesus promises his disciples that wherever they go to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth that he is with them. Do you know that truth? Do you know that reality in your life that no matter what season you're in, no matter where you go, God's presence is with you because of the hope that is in Jesus. Jesus is our hope because God is with his pilgrim people as we are sojourners in this world.

But even as that idea is there that we have separated ourselves from God, there's this other idea that comes about of the law. The argument was not just that Jesus was going to do away the temple, but he's doing away with the temple of Moses. He's blaspheming Moses and what was given through Moses. What Stephen is trying to help the people to see is you don't need to place your hope in the law and your ability to follow the law because nobody has done that well. What you need to do is have your hope in the fact that God saves sinful people. So here's our second kind of truth to pull out of this speech from Stephen that Jesus is our hope because God saves his sinful people. So as we have separated ourselves from God, God is pursuing us. His presence is near to us. And now, as we just mentioned, Jesus is bringing us back as God is saving us from our sins.

So one of the things you see throughout Stephen's speech is the way that the people of God were continually rejecting God and his messengers. The Joseph brothers were jealous of him and sent him off to Egypt to be enslaved. That Moses, when he was there in Egypt, he was trying to do something good and the people did not recognize him as being from God. Though God was constantly pursuing his people, people were constantly rejecting him, his messengers. They rejected Moses in Egypt. They rejected Moses when God gave the law through Moses. So look at verse 39 and just try to see what Stephen is saying here. He says, "Our fathers refused to obey him," talking about Moses, "but thrust him aside and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to the idol and rejoicing in the works of their hands.'"

So he says, "You think Jesus is abolishing the law? Don't you see that from the very beginning our people have abandoned the law? That like as soon as Moses came down from the mountain with those tablets, the people were

already turned away from God and his design and his commands for them. They were already building idols and turning their hearts back to Egypt." He says, "You think that Jesus is moving us away from the law, but don't you see we've always been away from the law. We've never been able to follow it. We've never been able to look to our own goodness because we're not good. Each one of us is turning away. You think Jesus is blaspheming Moses? Actually you're the one who's blaspheming Moses." Moses spoke of Jesus. He specifically says this in verse 37. He says, "This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers." He says, "Jesus is actually fulfilling Moses's words, but you are the one who is rejecting Moses's words." And he gets to this point really clearly towards the end of his speech. Again, I don't know if he was planning on this being his conclusion, but it's a pretty powerful conclusion. Verses 51 through 53, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in your heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one, whom you now have betrayed and murdered. You who received the laws delivered by angels and did not keep it."

He says, "Don't you see this pattern that all throughout our history we have not been able to law that God has given us. We've not been able to be good enough as the people of God. We've rejected God's Word, reject the Holy Spirit, we reject the messengers that God sends, and now you rejected the one in whom they spoke about, this Messiah, this Savior who has come." And don't you know when we read the Bible, we're supposed to read it, allowing it to be like a mirror showing us ourselves? That when you read about the people of Israel, you're not supposed to judge them for their own sin, for their own blind spots, the way that they have turned from God. We're supposed to allow this to teach us about ourselves.

The Bible says that what Stephen is saying about the people of Israel, what's being said of the people of Stephen's day that are rejecting him, is true of each one of us. That each one of us on our own, we stray from God, as I just mentioned earlier, each one of us on our own. We resist the Holy Spirit. When he brings conviction over sin, we harden our hearts to him. When he tries to guide us in the right direction, we refuse to listen to him. We take the Word of God and we don't obey it. Stephen's helping us to see ourselves, and he is helping us to see that God is still faithful to save sinful people. But time and time again, even though the people rejected the Word of God, rejected the messengers of God, God did not give them over to their sin forever. At times he did. They experienced the consequences of their sin, but he kept pursuing them, even to Jesus who came down to pay the debt of our sin.

This is how we can even relate to what Stephen says here, because I know we look at this and we would say, "Well, I didn't betray Jesus and kill him. I wasn't there shouting, "Crucify" with the other people like maybe some of these people were. But yet, isn't it for our sin that Jesus laid down his life? I mean, Jesus says, "Nobody takes my life from me." No person shouting, "Crucify." Pilate who had the power to release him. Judas who betrayed him. None of them ultimately took Jesus' life. Jesus laid down his life. Why? To save us from our sins. What we could say is that it is our sin that cost Jesus his life. Though we did not betray him or murder him, it is our sin for which he died. And while this should bring conviction over us, it should also bring comfort to us. God does not leave his people in their sin, but saves his sinful people. But our hope is not in our ability to make up for all those wrong things that we do.

We should not put our hope in our own kind of religious efforts. How faithful are you to be here on Sunday mornings? How much can you read your Bible? How much do you give away to those who are in need? All these things we could be tempted to kind of justify our own sins or compare ourselves to other people. And Stephen's whole point is that is not where we should look for our hope. Our hope should be in God that he saves sinful people. Our hope should be in the fact that Jesus has died to save us from our sins. Stephen's saying, "Don't put your hope in these other things or ultimately in yourself. Hope in God. Hope in Jesus." And Stephen not only says this with his words, but he displays this with his actions. And as Stephen is in the midst of this opposition and this persecution, even to the point of death, Stephen's confessing that his only hope is Jesus. And he can do that even in this hard moment because he recognizes that God not only goes out and finds people and brings them back and saves them from their sin, but he keeps them. He holds them fast. He sustains his people.

And so here's our last truth just to take away from both Stephen's words, but especially from his life. That Jesus is our hope because God sustains his suffering people. Jesus is our hope because God sustains his suffering people. Throughout this whole story of the Old Testament, there's not only the sin of the people, but there are people who are sinned

against. People like Joseph who are, is betrayed by his brothers. People like Moses who are rejected by the people. Stephen says they've rejected all the other prophets before. They've rejected Jesus. So we should not be surprised when they reject Stephen. What is happening to him is this pattern that is seen throughout the Old Testament. And they reject him in a harsh way. Verse 54, "When they heard these things, they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him." It's always just striking to me the way that the anger just takes over the people. How their pride is just so offended by Stephen's recount of the Old Testament history and the calling out of their sin. But in their anger, they become like animals almost. Like they are grinding their teeth and then it says that they cover their ears. It says in verses 57, "They cried out with a loud voice and they stopped their ears and rushed together at him, like yelling and covering their ears so they don't have to hear his words anymore. They cast him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul." I'd like to call that foreshadowing. The people, they reject Stephen just as they've always rejected the Holy Spirit and the messengers whom he sent.

The reality is it will probably not look the same, but we should expect the same. If the pattern is that people in their sin reject the Word of God, then if we are a people who seek to go out and share the Word of God, we should expect some rejection. Yes, I think our opposition will look different than it did for Stephen. I don't think the persecution will look the same, at least as long as you live in San Francisco in the United States. But we should expect rejection and therefore we should learn from Stephen how do we have hope even in the midst of suffering. Sometimes our suffering will come because of people doing wrong against us. Sometimes our suffering might just happen because we live in a broken world. How do we have hope that God sustains us in our suffering? The same way that Stephen did, by keeping our eyes on him. Verse 55, "But he," Stephen, this is while they are grinding their teeth at him, "he is full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

So I want you to notice here that what Stephen has just been talking about in his message, he is now living out in his life. Stephen's hope in this moment is that God's presence is near to him. That even though he is surrounded by enemies, the Holy Spirit is within him. He can look up to heaven and he sees God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son and he knows that even in this moment, God is near to him. His hope is in the fact that God's presence is with his people at all times. Not only that, but he has a hope that his sins have already been forgiven because he sees his Savior standing and sitting at the right hand of the Father. Meaning, his Savior has accomplished the work. Stephen doesn't have to hope that this great act of courage will save him from his sins. His sins have already been forgiven. His hope is in God's presence with his people. His hope is in the fact that Jesus has saved him from his sins and this is what sustains him through his suffering.

And if Jesus is your hope, then God will sustain you through your suffering. Now notice, sustaining doesn't always mean we have quote unquote victory over our suffering. It doesn't mean we always win the battle. Stephen, he's sustained by coming to the point of death. By saying God sustains his people through suffering, we don't mean it always turns out the way that we would like. What it means is that God holds us close to him. That God strengthens our faith. That God keeps us fast if we will keep looking to Jesus. Even in the midst of our suffering, if we would turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face. Won't the things of this earth grow strangely dim? And well, it will give us peace. It will give us the ability to do some things we wouldn't be able to do on our own. We'll just close with where the passage closes.

It says, "As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Following to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. When he had said this, he fell asleep." When our hope is in Jesus, even in times of suffering, we have the ability to do two things I want to draw your attention to that we couldn't do on our own. This is where we'll close. One, we have the ability to have peace with those who wrong us. Notice that Stephen, as he is being killed by these people, says words that are very similar to Jesus's words on the cross. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Stephen says, "God, forgive these people of their sins." Now based on what Stephen just said, I don't think he is telling God to just not look at it or totally excuse it. I think what he is saying is, it is my prayer that these people would find the forgiveness that is in Jesus. And guess what? We know at least one of them, a young man named Saul, does. Stephen's prayer is answered, at least in part.

But what is his heart posture there? He has such a peace that he does not hold these things against the people and that he is asking God to not either. That seems almost like Stephen has already come to a place of forgiveness of those who are killing him. So much so that it would be his prayer that God would be able to forgive, God would forgive them as well. That only comes from a man who has known the grace of God in his own life. I think Stephen recognized that without the grace of God, he would have been just like his forefathers and just like the people that are stoning him at that moment. That if it wasn't for the grace of God, he would be right there with them. But yet the Holy Spirit has changed him and he wants to see that grace intercede in their lives as well.

When you know the grace of God and how much you've been forgiven, it gives you the ability to have a peace and to forgive others who wrong you. Is there someone that you need to extend forgiveness to? Someone that you need to show grace to? Your only hope to be able to do that is not to muster it up within, but to look to Jesus and the grace that he has given. When our hope is in Jesus, even in times of suffering, we have the ability to be at peace with those who cause suffering and we have the ability to be at peace in the hardest moments of suffering. As Stephen comes to the point of death, he says, "My spirit." This isn't some wishful cry as if he's just hoping Jesus will receive his spirit. This is an expression of faith that he knows where his soul is going. He knows that his only hope in life and death is that he already belongs to his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Stephen knows that even the hardest things in life, even death, is only like falling asleep.

When Jesus is your hope, you really truly have nothing to fear because nothing can separate you from God's presence. No height, no depth, no thing in this world, nothing can separate us from the love that is towards us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Stephen knows this. Stephen knows that nothing can take away the salvation that he has experienced in Jesus. That his sins have been forgiven and his eternity is cured. And so in this moment that even as he comes to the point of death, death for the Christian is only like falling asleep. For the Christian, even the hardest things in life like death, the sting has been removed. Death is now just like going home to be with the God who created you to be with him. Stephen's enemies could take his life but they could not take his hope. I pray the same thing would be true about us. That our hope would be so fully in Jesus that no matter what comes in this life, we would know God's presence is near to us. We would know the salvation that is secure in Jesus Christ. We would trust that God sustains us to the end.