

I. Intro

A. Text: **Acts 6:8-15**

*<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. <sup>13</sup> They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." <sup>15</sup> And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. (Acts 6:8-15)*

B. Recap

C. Background: Peaks and Valleys

1. Valley
  - a. Crucifixion (Passover)
2. Peak
  - a. Resurrection (3 Days)
3. Valley
  - a. Ascension (40 Days)
  - b. Drop from 500 disciples to 120 disciples
4. Peak:
  - a. Pentecost (50 Days)
  - b. 120 + 3,000

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- c. Lame Man Healed (**Acts 3:1-10**)
  - 5. Valley
    - a. Peter and John's 1<sup>st</sup> Arrest (**4:3**)
      - i. 5,000 disciples anyway (**4:4**)
    - b. Threatened: Never speak in that Name again. (**4:18**)
      - i. Released (**5:21**)

6. Peak:

<sup>14</sup> And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, <sup>15</sup> so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. <sup>16</sup> Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed. (**5:14-16**)

- a. All healed
- 7. Valley
  - a. Arrested Again - 2<sup>nd</sup> time (**5:17**)
- 8. Peak
  - a. Rescued by an angel (**5:19**)
    - i. At night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors.
  - b. Stuck around for trial. (**5:22-39**)
    - i. We found the prison shut up securely and guards standing outside the doors (**5:23**)
    - ii. And we are his witnesses (**5:32**)
  - c. From Addition to Multiplication (**6:1**)
  - d. Good Administrative Crisis (**6:2-6**)
    - i. 7 Men Chosen (Stephen among them)

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ii. More Multiplication (6:7)

II. The Set Up

A. False Accusation

1. A False Accusation; But A True Man of God

*<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. (Acts 6:11-14)*

2. They Opposed, But Could Not Resist

*<sup>10</sup> And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. (Acts 6:10)*

a. Full of faith and power

B. The Bold Proclamation

1. Abraham's Call

a. God of Glory Appeared to Abraham

i. Land of the Chaldeans to Haran

ii. Gave no inheritance, but gave a promise

b. Prophesied that bondage (Egypt) would precede breakthrough (the promised land)

i. Patriarchs

2. Jacob's Family (72) went into Egypt with Joseph as the governor of the land.

3. A king arose who did not know Joseph (v. 18)

a. Red Sea Deliverance (v. 19-36)

4. Israel Still Rebelled (v. 37-43)

a. Golden Calf

b. And still rebelling...

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c. You stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart.

C. The Dramatic Culmination... of Events

1. The valley was prepared for God to swoop in and save the day like he'd done so many times before.
  - a. He's always on time.
2. This time when tragedy knocked at the door, God didn't react like we thought He would.

<sup>57</sup> Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; <sup>58</sup> and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (**Acts 7:57-60**)

- a. Stephen, inexplicably died!
3. If we're honest, this passage can ruin our theology.
  - a. We see God as a god who ALWAYS swoops in and saves the day

III. Conclusion: Where is God in the Midst of Such Calamity?

A. If we look closely, we'll see that God was right in the middle of this church tragedy: Even Stephen's tragic murder.

1. If we don't see God in the middle of tragedy, it's because our focus is off.

*<sup>55</sup> But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, <sup>56</sup> and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"* (**Acts 7:55-56**)

- a. Open Heaven in the Middle of the Crisis
- b. See Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. (**v. 55-56**)

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2. He's there and He's still in control. Even in calamity, His number one passion is to be glorified.

- a. By our accounts, Stephen's ministry was an absolute failure.

B. Things got a lot worse before they got better.

*<sup>1</sup> Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. (Acts 8:1-3)*

1. Not only did God NOT swoop in to save the day in the way that most would expect, but He also allowed immediate and fierce persecution to rise against the church.

2. And it got worse

- a. When the disciples fled as fugitives, they were being hunted down by a ruthless, merciless man named Saul.
    - i. Saul was merciless, but God is all merciful.

C. Mercy (Trent Williams): "God will use judgment to get people's attention. Mercy is ~~a plea for~~ God ~~to use~~ using the least severe means (in judgment) to reach the greatest number of people in love. Judgement is an expression of God's love."

1. God's passion was for the gospel to be sent out to the outer parts of the earth.
  - a. He allowed persecution in Jerusalem with the foreknowledge that scattering people would scatter the gospel.
2. God was also passionate about a man named Saul.
  - a. Coupled with persecution in Jerusalem, Paul would be key to bringing the gospel to the Gentile world.
    - i. God was right there.
  - b. It didn't surprise God that Saul was a part of the posse who murdered Stephen.

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- i. He allowed Saul to be there approving the murder of Stephen.
  - ii. God knew His plan for Saul despite Saul's sin; and the corresponding catastrophe.
  - c. Something happened to Saul the day that Stephen was openly murdered.
    - i. The memory of Stephen's face and his love for his oppressors was probably etched in Saul's memory.

*"Then [Stephen] knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin'. And when he had said this he fell asleep." (Acts 7:60)*

- 3. Just days later, on a road heading north to Damascus, God confronted Saul with the truth of who He was.
  - a. Certainly, God revealed that He was right there in the middle when Stephen was martyred.
  - b. Certainly, God revealed that He was there as Saul was running down believers and dragging them into prison.
  - c. Certainly, God revealed that Saul wasn't hurting the church as much as he was declaring war on God.
    - i. *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me"?*
- D. God, in his infinite wisdom, chose not to step in and save the day (as he'd done every other time for the disciples).
  - 1. Instead, He stayed right there in the middle of it all.
  - 2. And the gospel spread... and the church age was birthed.