

Sermons in Acts: History's Purpose

Jealousy is a powerful force. If a person allows it, envy of another person's gifts or talents can make that person do almost anything. Today we'll look at the story, and the sermon, of the first Christian martyr, a man who was killed because some people couldn't handle losing a debate to him. His name was Stephen.

We first meet Stephen in Acts 6, in a situation where the apostles were getting bogged down in administration of a food program and felt frustrated that they didn't have more time to pray and to preach and teach. They asked the believers to appoint seven men who were well respected, and full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom. The first man listed was Stephen and he is described in Acts 6:5 as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

We see him again in verse 8, and might be surprised to find an administrator described as being a man "full of God's grace and power, performing amazing miracles and signs among the people." In response to these miracles, a group of Jews who called themselves the "Synagogue of Freed Slaves" started to debate with him. They kept losing the debates, as the text tells us, "None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke." (v. 10)

We know from the Gospels that Jesus spoke with authority and that the religious leaders couldn't reply effectively to either His actions or His words. Jesus moved in the power of the Holy Spirit and people were either drawn to Him or repelled by Him -- the same thing is true today. Yesterday I was part of a celebration of life for Phil's brother Mike. Mike gave his life to Jesus just a few months before his death, which made Phil and Sharon and me and a few others, very happy -- but it made some other people, not just sad, but violently angry. They couldn't accept that Mike was a Christian and they had no place for the name of Jesus.

And, if you engage the people around you on issues of faith, you'll find that this same principle is generally true. Most people are somewhat comfortable talking about "God", but are much less open to hearing you talk about Jesus. His Name is a kind of dividing line; His person is someone people will love or hate; His demands are something people will humbly submit to, or run from as far and fast as they can.

Like Jesus, Stephen was filled with the Spirit and he spoke and acted with confidence and conviction, lifting up the name of Jesus and proclaiming His resurrection. Not everyone was happy, including the Synagogue of Freed Slaves and they were so annoyed at losing their debates with Stephen that they hatched a plot against him. They found some people without a strong ethical base and persuaded them to lie publicly about things Stephen had said:

'We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God.' Naturally this roused the crowds, the elders and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and

change the customs Moses handed down to us.” At this point everyone in the Council stared at Stephen because his face became as bright as an angel’s.
(Acts 6:11-15)

At that point the high priest asked Stephen if the charges that these men were making against him were true and Stephen began to speak, not seeming to answer these charges directly, but going back through Israel’s history in a way that does give his perspective on the two charges of speaking against Moses and speaking against the temple. He begins by describing God’s call to Abraham to move to the land of Canaan. In this first section of the speech, Stephen establishes God’s promises to Abraham and His ability to foresee the future that his descendants would endure - both as slaves in Egypt and as occupiers of the land of Canaan. He quickly moves then to Joseph and his role in bringing his family to live in Egypt, followed by the rapid growth of the Hebrew population and the rise of a Pharaoh who would enslave them and force them to abandon their newborn babies.

At this point you would have to say that Stephen has spoken in ways that no one on the Council would object to. He has honored God’s role in the history of Israel and has summarized some of the key events in that history. Now he gets to Moses ... and I’ll read for a bit:

At that time Moses was born - a beautiful child in God’s eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months. When at last they had to abandon him, Pharaoh’s daughter found him and raised him as her own son. Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he became mighty in both speech and action.

One day when he was forty years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel. During his visit, he saw an Egyptian mistreating a man of Israel. So Moses came to his defense and avenged him, killing the Egyptian. Moses assumed his brothers would realize that God had sent him to rescue them, but they didn’t. The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting. He tried to be a peacemaker. ‘Men,’ he said, ‘you are brothers. Why are you hurting each other?’ But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside and told him to mind his own business. ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’ he asked. ‘Are you going to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?’ When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian, where his two sons were born.

Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. Moses saw it and wondered what it was. As he went to see, the voice of the Lord called out to him, ‘I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses shook with terror and dared not look. And the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. You can be sure that I have seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard their cries, so I have come to rescue them. Now go, for I will send you back to Egypt.’ And so God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected by demanding, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge

over us?’ Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, Moses was sent to be their ruler and savior. And by means of many miraculous signs and wonders, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and back and forth through the wilderness for forty years.

Moses himself told the people of Israel, ‘God will raise up a prophet like me from among your own people.’ Moses was with the assembly of God’s people in the wilderness. He was the mediator between the people of Israel and the angel who gave him life-giving words on Mount Sinai to pass on to us.

But our ancestors rejected Moses and wanted to return to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don’t know what has become of this Moses, who brought us out of Egypt. So they made an idol shaped like a calf, and they sacrificed to it and rejoiced in this thing they had made.

Then God turned away from them and gave them up to serve the sun, moon and stars as their gods! In the book of the prophets it is written: ‘Was it to Me you were bringing sacrifices during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel? No, your real interest was in your pagan gods - the shrine of Molech, the star god Rephan, and the images you made to worship them. So I will send you into captivity far away in Babylon.’ (Acts 7:20-43)

Remember that the accusation made against Stephen by the false witnesses was that he had blasphemed against Moses and had spoken against the law of Moses. Do you hear any of that in this long speech? No, but what you do hear is a lengthy exposition of Moses’ life and of how the people of Israel responded to him. Stephen speaks of Moses with great respect and honors him, but the same can’t be said of Stephen’s words about the people of Israel who lived in Moses’ day. Here’s what he says about them:

1. He describes in detail the incident where Moses was first rejected by his own people, the incident where he intervened on behalf of a Hebrew slave and killed his Egyptian oppressor. The key take away from Moses’ actions in that event was that he was rejected as both a ruler and a judge over Israel. That rejection surfaces again in v. 35 when God sends Moses back to Egypt, back to the place where he was asked, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?”
2. Again, in verse 39, after delivering the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, Moses again experiences rejection from his people while leading them in the wilderness. “But our ancestors rejected Moses and wanted to return to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us some gods who can lead us, for we don’t know what has become of this Moses who brought us out of Egypt.’”
3. Finally, in verses 42 and 43 he quotes the prophet Amos, who declared that Israel wasn’t interested in worshiping the God who had delivered them from Egypt, but was interested only in Molech and Rephan and the idols they had made to worship them with. Stephen is making the point, in three different ways, that the people of Israel had rejected God and had rejected the man God had appointed to lead them.

Now, right in the middle of this long dissertation on Moses and on his rejection by the Israelites, we read this curious sentence that we heard from Peter's sermon in Acts 3 after the healing of the lame man:

Moses himself told the people of Israel, "God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people." (7:37)

In Peter's sermon, the quote runs a bit longer:

"Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you." (3:22)

All of that is contained in the original verse that Peter and Stephen are quoting from, which is Deuteronomy 18:15. Both Peter and Stephen are convinced that the Prophet spoken of in Deuteronomy is none other than Jesus and that people need to pay careful attention to what Jesus has said.

But it's as if he's saying something else by where he places this in his longer talk. After rejection one and right before rejections 2 and 3, Stephen says that Moses predicted that God would raise up a prophet ... and the implication is that people who should be paying attention will reject that prophet, just as they had rejected Moses. So Stephen is not neutral in this part of his talk. He is very honoring and respectful towards Moses, but he is wagging a finger at the Council because he knows that they have, and will continue to, reject Jesus.

Now we come to the end of Stephen's speech. He has answered the accusation about opposing Moses, although not directly. Now he will address the issue raised by the false witnesses - "This man is always speaking against the Temple."

David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who actually built it. However, the Most High doesn't live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says: 'Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool.

Could you ever build Me a temple as good as that?' asks the Lord.

Could you build a dwelling place for Me?

Didn't I make everything in heaven and earth?

(7:46-50)

Stephen's tone has changed. If he was hoping to defend himself against the charge of opposing the Temple, this was not the way to go about it. Do you think God needs your temple, that He's impressed with it somehow? Heaven is His throne and the whole earth, the WHOLE earth, is just His footstool. Do you really believe that you are capable of building a place that the Creator of the universe might feel at home in?

So Stephen has challenged the Council on two points:

1. He has said that they are the descendants of the people who have repeatedly rejected God and the special messengers that He has sent to them.
2. He has said that the Temple, which represented the presence of God to these Jewish leaders, was totally inadequate as a dwelling for the God of heaven.

Now he gets right in their faces and confronts them over their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah.

You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? But your ancestors did, and so do you! Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One - the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered. You deliberately disobeyed God's law, though you received it from the hands of angels. (7:51-53)

Stephen's accusation is that the current generation of religious leaders are just as willful and stubborn and full of evil as any of their ancestors. Just as previous generations were responsible for killing God's prophets, so the current generation is responsible for the death of the Messiah that the prophets had spoken about.

Now, let's look at the reaction that Stephen's speech gets from those same religious leaders, the Jewish high Council:

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists in rage. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily upward into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!" Then they put their hands over their ears, and drowning out his voice with their shouts, they rushed at him. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The official witnesses took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died. (7:54-60)

So this is what happens when power confronts persuasion. The just and righteous arguments of the person who knows the truth are often silenced by a ruthless display of oppression by those who are in the position of power. You might say that the ruling Council was not persuaded by Stephen's arguments, but the passage indicates that they were infuriated and I think they acted, not out of a calm sense of justice, but out of furious anger. This was made worse by Stephen's claim that he could see Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven - this was, to them, a blasphemous claim, and so they covered their ears as they rushed towards Stephen.

What do we learn from this story that is given a lot of space - the end of Acts 6 and the whole of chapter 7? I am thinking of three very broad applications that I think will help us in our thinking and help us in the way we talk about our faith with others.

1. Learn the lessons that history teaches us about ourselves. The Hebrew people demonstrated some specific patterns in their relationship with God. One was that they weren't able to love God for a long time - over several generations. They always seemed to go back to loving the gods of the nations that lived near them. That tells me that we need to keep alert to our own weakness, our tendency to drift into

unfaithfulness to our God. Yes, history has many heroes of faith, people like Stephen who were strong and courageous in the face of threats, but there are also many who have failed to stay the course and have abandoned their faith. People in power face temptations to use their position for selfish ends, to take advantage of those who are weak and to even find pleasure in being able to abuse people simply because of their position. I remember being struck by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's declaration that if he had been a prison guard or an interrogator instead of a mere prisoner, he would have been just as cruel and unfair as those who made life miserable for him. In any situation where you have power over others, be sure to use that power with kindness and wisdom and grace. Stephen's accusers were not able or willing to do that and they took his life.

2. The third very broad application is a more positive one - that people who are filled with the Holy Spirit can be a powerful force for speaking truth, for defending Jesus and for speaking conviction into the lives of others. At the end of Stephen's long recounting of Israel's history, he sums it up by saying, "You're no different than all those who went before you! You're just as likely to kill God's messengers as they were - in fact you already have killed the Messiah God sent to you." This was a bold accusation, and one that stirred up the anger of the members of Council, but it was true, and it has become a part of our Scripture, an example of courage in the face of danger. We won't have exactly the same opportunities, but we will have opportunities to tell people about Jesus, even if it's just to say that He's wonderful and that He has changed our lives. Let's trust the Spirit to lead us and be bold in our witness for Him.