

Explaining the Gospel

Acts 7:1-60

Rev. Brian Bill

February 22-23, 2020

Several months ago, I was quickly backing our Chevy Cobalt out of the garage, not really paying attention, when all of a sudden, I heard the sound of plastic shattering and glass breaking. As I slammed on the brakes, I looked to my right and saw pieces of red shrapnel darting through the air. I got out of the car and discovered I had pulverized the passenger side mirror.

I'm embarrassed to say I drove without a side mirror for many months. I meant to get it fixed but never got around to it. The longer I procrastinated, the more paranoid I became when I was driving because I knew I had a huge blind spot.

Finally I took it in to my friend Bruce Strader who runs a body shop. He ordered a mirror for me, painted it red and put it on my car. Now my stress has gone down...and so should yours if you pull up next to me.

Since I had gone so long without a mirror, I had forgotten that there's a warning etched into the bottom of it: "*Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.*"

Today we're tackling Acts 7. We're going to listen in as Stephen holds up a mirror to those who had charged him with blasphemy. He's going to use this mirror to point out their blind spots and to help them see their sins are closer than they appear.

Our practice at Edgewood is to go verse-by-verse through books of the Bible. I'm going to change that up a bit today and go section by section through Chapter 7 because it contains 60 verses! Martin Lloyd-Jones preached 38 sermons from this one chapter and I'm going to aim for 38 minutes in one sermon. I plan to talk fast so you'll need to listen fast.

Last weekend we were challenged in chapter 6 to follow Stephen's example by cultivating our character, choosing courage and considering our countenance. The religious leaders stirred up the crowd and secretly instigated false witnesses to testify against Stephen as they accused him of blasphemy against the Torah and the Temple.

The Israelites celebrated at least five privileges which set them apart from other nations. Unfortunately, these privileges led many to a spirit of pride, along with an attitude of spiritual elitism, especially among the Pharisees and Sadducees. We could summarize their privileges this way.

- **Land.** The Israelites received the promise of land from the Lord.
- **Leaders.** They looked up to the patriarchs and to Moses, David and Solomon and other leaders.
- **Location.** They worshipped God at one specific place, the Temple. Before this they worshipped at the tabernacle.
- **Lord.** They enjoyed a special covenant relationship with Yahweh.
- **Law.** They lifted up the law of Moses.

What Stephen does in Acts 7 is masterful as he retells the history of God's people, drawing a line from Abraham to the present day. He quotes extensively from the Old Testament to show how far they had fallen. This is the longest sermon in the Book of Acts and is saturated with Scripture. Every point he made was backed up in the Bible, which is an obvious application for each of us. He had so much Scripture memorized he was able to recite and retell it even while being in a stressful situation. I'm not sure I could do that, but I want to learn from his example.

This sermon proves Stephen is not a blasphemer – rather, the Jewish leaders have blasphemed God by their behavior. We'll see how the Christian message is fully consistent with, and is the fulfillment of, the Old Testament. We could say it like this: *The ground of the gospel is cultivated in the Old Testament.*

Let's lean in and watch how Stephen holds up a mirror so they can see what is right next to them. We'll unpack these five privileges and see how Stephen shatters them.

But first, let's look at verse 1: ***“And the high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’*** He's basically asking this question: *“How do you plead?”* Literally, he's giving Stephen a chance to defend himself, but it's a set-up. If he answers “yes,” he is obviously guilty. If he answers “no,” they'll accuse him of lying. Interestingly, Stephen doesn't really defend himself, but rather gives a detailed exposition of Scripture that will cause them to come unglued when he's finished.

In the first part of verse 2, we see how respectful and polite he is when he addresses them: ***“Brothers and fathers, hear me.”*** The word ***“brothers”*** would cover his peers and any spectators in the audience and ***“fathers”*** is a respectful way to address the members of the Sanhedrin.

The request for them to ***“hear”*** is the word for *“hearken.”* It’s as if he’s saying, *“Listen to me. Give me your attention.”* It’s fascinating that this is the word *“Shema”* in Hebrew which was the name given to the well-known passage of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 written by Moses that was recited morning and night: ***“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”***

The flow of the sermon moves from precise exposition to personal application to some powerful reactions. Let’s look at how Stephen deconstructs their first privilege.

Precise Exposition

1. God revealed Himself outside the land of Israel. We see this in verses 2-8. Notice verse 2: ***“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.”*** The ***“God of glory”*** is a title of great reverence, with glory indicating the sum total of all His attributes. It literally means, *“heavy, weighty and honorable.”* Note Stephen includes himself with his listeners with the use of ***“our father Abraham,”*** using the plural possessive pronoun nine times in eleven verses.

Abraham was an idol worshipper in a pagan land when God called him. Verse 6 says the offspring of Abraham were ***“sojourners in a land belonging to others.”*** God is not limited to one land but is at work in every land. As evidence, God made Himself real to Abraham in Mesopotamia and then again in Haran, located 500 miles away from there. Stephen is saying something like this: *“You take so much pride in your land but remember your father Abraham did not own even one foot of ground in Israel.”* Hebrews 11:9-10 says Abraham was ***“living in tents.”***

Joseph was an exile in Egypt. Moses lived in Egypt and then did laps in the wilderness. Esther resided in a palace in Persia. Daniel, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were deported to Babylon...and we’re in the QCA. God’s presence is never limited to just one zip code.

2. God's people have always rejected their leaders. This makes up the longest section of Stephen's sermon, covering verses 9-43. The brothers of Joseph, who became the patriarchs, rejected their sibling Joseph out of jealousy, selling him into Egypt. Stephen is saying, *"You take pride in the patriarchs but they're the ones who ambushed Joseph and sold him into slavery."* God used this evil deed to great purpose, protecting Joseph the prisoner and promoting him to be prime minister, saving the Israelites from certain starvation. In verse 17 we see the people ***"increased and multiplied in Egypt."***

Then Stephen explains how Moses was born and rescued. In verse 22 we see he ***"was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds."*** I find it fascinating how much space Stephen gives to Moses, perhaps in response to the charge that he blasphemed Moses. His name is used nine times in the sermon.

Stephen's summary divides the life of Moses into three 40-year segments. I like what D.L. Moody said about Moses: *"Moses spent 40 years thinking he was somebody; forty years learning he was nobody; and 40 years discovering what God can do with a nobody."*

After recounting the experience Moses had with the burning bush, Stephen points out how God sent Moses as a deliverer in verse 34. In verse 35 we see how the people responded when they rejected Moses: ***"This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'"***

In verse 37 Jesus links Moses with the promised coming of the Messiah: ***"God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers."*** This quote comes from Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses adds, ***"It is to him you shall listen."*** Stephen is reminding them Moses is not the final one because he pointed to a prophet that was to come in the future.

Jesus referenced this in John 5:45-47: ***"There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"*** Stephen is saying something like this: *"If you say you follow Moses, then believe what Moses said about Jesus and follow Him."*

God's people persistently rejected the deliverers God sent to them. In verse 39, Stephen shows how God's people turned their back on God's prophet: ***"Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned***

back to Egypt.” The phrase *“thrust aside”* has the idea of *“casting off and driving away.”* Their own forefathers were fickle and unfaithful.

On top of that, they turned to an idol according to verse 41: *“And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the work of their hands.”* No sooner had they received the law from Moses, when they disobeyed it, breaking the first two of the commandments. The story of God’s people is filled with them turning from worshipping the Creator to worshipping images they created.

Because they had turned from worship of the true God to idol worship, God turned away from them in verse 42: *“But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven...”* This same phrase is used three times in Romans 1 to show how God gives people over to their sinful choices.

While Stephen’s accusers hold up their allegiance to Moses, Stephen reminds them in verse 43 how their ancestors worshipped idols, even offering their own babies and children to Molech, the god of the Amorites. Because they had turned their backs on God and turned to idols, God sent them into exile in Babylon.

3. God is to be revered in all locations. The Jewish leaders were locked into the temple as the only place where God was to be worshipped. Stephen reminds them in verses 44-45 how God was worshipped outside Jerusalem in the tabernacle while they wandered in the wilderness. Solomon later had the privilege of constructing the Temple as a more permanent point for worship.

In verses 49-50, Stephen quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2 to show the Most High cannot be contained in one building, no matter how beautiful it was: *“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 the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?”* The whole universe is the dwelling of God. The sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent, Most High God who made the world and all that is in it, cannot be contained within the constraints of a building. No holy place can house His holiness because God can’t be put in a box.

Let’s pause and summarize Stephen’s sermon. After pulverizing their pride by showing how God revealed Himself in many lands, he proved how God’s people have always rejected their leaders and that He is to be revered in all locations, not just the temple.

Stephen moves from pointed exposition to personal application by switching from “our” to the second person plural “you” and “your.” He does this seven times in three verses.

Personal Application

The sermon begins with Stephen on trial before the Sanhedrin and it ends with the Sanhedrin on trial before Stephen. The prisoner has become the prosecutor.

1. You have always resisted the Lord. While they celebrated their special relationship with the Lord, Stephen points out how they are perpetually defiant and disobedient. Check out verse 51: “*You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.*” They were so stiff-necked they didn’t turn their heads to check their mirrors. The phrase “*stiff-necked*” referred to stubborn oxen who refused to surrender their necks to receive the yoke.

Moses records similar words in Exodus 33:3: “*I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.*” There are only two ways to deal with stubborn, stiff-necked people like us:

We bend our wills to Him.

-or-

God breaks our wills before Him.

I’m reminded of what Charles Spurgeon often said: “*Whenever God means to make a man great, He always breaks him in pieces first.*”

To call them “*uncircumcised in heart and ears*” was the ultimate insult because they took great pride in circumcision as the mark of their covenant relationship with God. They looked down on the uncircumcised Gentiles, even calling them dirty dogs. In essence, Stephen was saying they were like unclean dogs because they were not set apart in their unclean hearts. Outwardly they might have conformed to the requirements of the Lord, but inwardly their hearts were more like the heathen. That can happen to each of us when we settle for religious ritual at the expense of relational reality.

Stephen delivers another blow by saying, “*you always resist the Holy Spirit.*” The word “*always*” is emphatic, and “*resist*” has the idea of “*rushing against in active*

rebellion.” They had persisted in faithlessness, just like their fathers had done: **“As your fathers did, so do you.”**

Stephen still has more to say. In verse 52 he reminds them their fathers in the faith persecuted the prophets who were sent to them: **“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?”** They were following in their fathers’ footsteps when they persecuted Christ and they were doing it now by persecuting Christians.

He goes for the jugular in the last part of verse 52: **“And they killed those who announced the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.”** Their fathers killed the prophets who announced the coming of Christ and they murdered the Messiah when He came. The title **“Righteous One”** referred to Jesus as seen in Isaiah 53:11: **“By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”**

2. You have rebelled against the Law. If you go back to Acts 6:13, you’ll see the religious leaders had charged Stephen with speaking words against the law of Moses. Stephen wants them to know their sins are closer than they appear. Check out the last sentence of his sermon in verse 53: **“You who received the law as delivered by the angels and did not keep it.”** Literally this reads, **“and kept it not.”** They received the law, but they rebelled against it. They boasted about the law but broke it all the time. Paul puts it like this in Romans 2:23: **“You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.”**

Rather than allowing the Law to point them to their need for a Savior, they saw their lame law-keeping as good enough to please God.

After dismantling and destroying their false faith in land, leaders, and location during his pointed exposition, Stephen agitated them with personal application related to their relationship with the Lord and the Law. Now they are livid!

In verses 54-60 we see four powerful reactions – two from the Sanhedrin and two from Stephen.

Powerful Reactions

1. Rage. The leaders fly off the handle in verse 54: **“Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at them.”** The word

“enraged” means they were *“sawn asunder”* and sliced in their souls. They were convicted but instead of repenting, they reacted with rage.

They were furious and **“ground their teeth at him,”** a phrase that was used to describe the noise made when a pack of hungry, snarling wolves started tearing into their prey. Lamentations 2:16 says this about the enemies of God: **“they hiss, they gnash their teeth.”** In Matthew 13:42, Jesus vividly portrayed what people in Hell will do for eternity: **“And throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”**

2. Reverence. In stark contrast to their rage, verse 55 describes what Stephen did: **“But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”** We learned last weekend that Stephen was a “full” man – he was full of wisdom, grace, faith, power and the Holy Spirit. The word **“gazed”** means he *“strained and stretched as he steadfastly looked up.”* His sermon began with the God of glory in verse 2 and now he sees the **“glory of God.”**

He put all this into words in verse 56: **“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”** The word **“behold”** is used to get their attention. As he gazed at the glory of God, he described two amazing truths.

- **The heavens are standing open.** The word **“open”** is idea of unrolling. I’m reminded of what Jesus said about Himself in John 10:9: **“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.”** The tense here indicates the heavens are continuously open.
- **The Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God.** The title **“Son of Man”** is used to describe the Messiah in Daniel 7:13-14 and Jesus refers to Himself this way in Matthew 26:64: **“But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”**

In this and other passages like Ephesians 1:20 and Hebrews 1:3, Jesus is seen as seated at the right of God to indicate His work is finished. And yet Stephen describes seeing Jesus as standing. I thought of some reasons why He might be standing for Stephen.

- a) To receive Stephen’s testimony. (Revelation 20:4)

- b) To applaud and cheer for him. (Matthew 5:10)
- c) To usher him safely to Heaven. (2 Corinthians 5:8)
- d) To vindicate and honor him as we see in Psalm 116:15: ***“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”***
- e) To welcome him home with a ***“well done, good and faithful servant.”*** (Matthew 25:23)
- f) To advocate before the Father. Luke 12:8 says, ***“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.”***
- g) To give him the crown of life. Stephen’s name means, *“a victor’s crown.”* Revelation 2:10 says, ***“Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”***
- h) To judge those who were persecuting Stephen. Isaiah 3:13: ***“The Lord has taken his place to contend; He stands to judge peoples.”***

3. Removal. After hearing Stephen describe Jesus standing at the right hand of God, they rush to remove him in verse 57-58: ***“But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”*** The word for ***“cried”*** was used of the clamor of a crowd. They also covered their ears in an effort to avoid the truth of what Stephen was saying. Not wanting to bloody their sacred spot, they forced him outside the city and began throwing large boulders on him. In order to not impede their pitching arms, they took off their coats and dropped them at the feet of Saul, who eventually became known as the Apostle Paul.

4. Requests. While the boulders were bouncing off his chest and sharp rocks were slicing into his scalp, Stephen made two incredible prayer requests:

- ***“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*** This is similar to what Jesus prayed from the cross in Luke 23:46: ***“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”***
- ***“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”*** When Steven cried this out, he dropped to his knees in reverence. Jesus made a similar request in Luke 23:34: ***“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”***

After making these two requests, we read, ***“And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”*** There’s great Christian theology in these closing words. Because of the

resurrection, death is like sleep for a Christian. 1 Corinthians 15:20: ***“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”*** I’m reminded of what Jesus said about Lazarus after he had died in John 11:11: ***“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”***

This week I learned our word cemetery means, *“the place to lie down to sleep.”* In Greek it’s translated literally as, *“the sleeping place.”* If you know Jesus Christ through the new birth, you will fall asleep here and wake up in Heaven. Jesus made this promise in John 11:25-26: ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”***

Action Steps

- 1. Read the Old Testament...and heed its warnings.** Allow the mirror of Scripture to help you see your sins. 1 Corinthians 10:6: ***“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”***
- 2. Gaze at God’s glory...it will help you hang on.** 1 Corinthians 10:31: ***“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”*** Make this your life motto: *Soli Deo Gloria*, to the glory of God alone.
- 3. Heaven is open...enter now before it’s too late.** There is a Heaven and Jesus is the only way there. Don’t cover your ears or harden your heart. Surrender your stiff neck to Him right now. John 14:6: ***“I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”***
- 4. Forgive those who have wronged you...no matter what they’ve done to you.** If Stephen can forgive while stones were being flung into his flesh, you and I can do the same. Listen to Ephesians 4:32: ***“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”***
- 5. Live like you’re dying...because you are.** Live boldly for Christ and live each day as if it were your last. And when it’s your time, picture Jesus standing to welcome you home. Psalms 90:12 says, ***“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”***

Closing Prayer

Let's stand and prepare to sing our profession of faith. I invite you up front if you need to do business with God.

Closing Song: "This I Believe"

New Members Saturday at 5:00

Zach and Jessica Ulfers (Brian)
Shirley Phillips (Ed)
Stephanie and Alan Bergquist (Ed)
Greg and Lore Shelton (Ed)

New Members Sunday at 9:00

Eric and Charla Lundgren – Barrett and Brogdon (Brian)

New Members Sunday at 10:45

Leonard White (Ed)
Judy Melton (Ed)