

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Stephen

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Acts 6:8 – 8:1a

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Introduction:

Good morning! If you haven't already, I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 6. We read the text earlier in the service because our passage this morning is just about as big a bite as we will ever take. In these verses – Acts 6:8 all the way to Acts 8:1 – we find the longest sermon in the book of Acts, and we meet the first martyr of the New Testament church. With the time that we have this morning, we're going to dive into both the sermon and the story so that we can – with the help of the Spirit – see what Luke means for us to see. We have a lot of ground to cover, so let's jump right in with our first question:

What Should We Learn From The Longest Sermon?

Stephen's sermon runs from Acts 7:1 all the way to verse 56. Standing at 1014 words in the Greek text, it is the longest sermon in the book of Acts.¹ Before even reading the sermon, the sheer LENGTH of it should alert you to its significance. Think about how many sermons in this book are summarized in a sentence, or a paragraph. Think about the fact that Luke has given more word count to this sermon than he did to Peter's sermon at Pentecost!

Why is THIS sermon given so much attention?

¹ I did not count the Greek words. Credit to Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 355.

In order to answer that question, we need to reorient ourselves with where we are in the story of the book of Acts. Beginning here with the martyrdom of Stephen, the church is about to branch out and away from Jerusalem and into the surrounding world.

That's a big deal! For God's people, Jerusalem had long been the centre of their life and worship. But when Jesus came, HE became the centre. HE is the place where we meet with God. All true worship runs to and through HIM. We take that for granted, but for these earliest believers who had spent their lives worshiping in the Jerusalem temple this was an enormous paradigm shift.

Now, in spite of its length, Stephen's sermon is focused, and his argument is simple. He is laying the theological groundwork for the MASSIVE change that has taken place.

Being the Baptist that I am, I'm going to summarize Stephen's sermon into three points. First, we learn in this sermon that:

1. Our story is a story of idolatry

I'm using the language of "Our story" because, Israel's history really IS our story! Did you know that? In Galatians, Paul teaches us that all who have placed their faith in Jesus are the true children of Abraham. In Romans 11 we learn that we have been "engrafted" into God's family. Therefore, the Old Testament IS our story!

And unfortunately, our story is a story of idolatry.

At the root of their argument, Stephen's opponents understood themselves to be defending the law and – in particular – the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish worship, and it had been ever since the days of Solomon. Standing in the capital city of the promised land, the temple held a place of honor and reverence in the hearts of God's people.

But Stephen's opponents had gone too far in their reverence of the temple. They had forgotten that God is not limited to the temple! They had forgotten that God was present with them long BEFORE it was constructed and that He would be present with them long AFTER it was destroyed. As one commentator summarizes:

Stephen's assertion is that neither the tabernacle nor the temple was meant to be such an institutionalized feature in Israel's religion as to prohibit God's further redemptive activity or to halt the advance of God's plan for his people.²

Stephen's opponents had made an IDOL of the temple, and this idolatry was pulling their hearts backwards. But the plan of God was moving forward. And Stephen reminds us in his sermon that our fathers did the EXACT SAME THING! Look at verses 39-41. Stephen says:

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and **in their hearts they turned to Egypt**,⁴⁰ 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.'⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. (Acts 7:39-41 ESV)

We are idol makers. We are back sliders. That's our story. Stephen's opponents were falling into the same pattern. God was SO OBVIOUSLY moving forward, but these religious men refused to see it.

So Stephen reminded them that God is bigger than the stone box in Jerusalem. The temple is good, but it only represents one chapter in our story! SO MUCH of our history – so many of the stories of God's presence and power with His people – took place OUT THERE in the world!

In the very first verse of his sermon, Stephen notes:

Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham **when he was in Mesopotamia**, before he lived in Haran (Acts 7:2 ESV)

God was THERE in Mesopotamia!

Stephen then turned to the story of Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt. He wasn't in the promised land. He certainly wasn't in the temple! It didn't even exist! Yet we read in verse 9:

but **God was with him** (Acts 7:9b ESV)

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 346.

God was with Joseph in Egypt!

Moses was born in Egypt. Stephen tells the story of how Moses fled from Egypt to the land of Midian. And guess what? God was THERE too!

Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. (Acts 7:30 ESV)

And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, **for the place where you are standing is holy ground.** (Acts 7:32b-33 ESV)

When God said this, where was Moses standing? It wasn’t in the temple. Long before the temple, in the land of Midian on Mount Sinai, there was HOLY GROUND!

Stephen goes on to describe the Tabernacle – the portable temple that was carried by the Israelites while they wandered in the wilderness. God was there too.

And finally, having taken possession of the promised land, David’s son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. And God was there! Yes! But, contrary to what Stephen’s opponents believed, God did not limit Himself to the temple. He wasn’t suddenly bound by those four walls! No, God spoke clearly through the prophet Isaiah and declared:

“‘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?
⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?’ (Acts 7:49-50 ESV)

God is bigger than the temple! His presence stretches farther than the temple! And if we attempt to limit Him to the temple – if we make an IDOL of the temple – then we will miss out on what God is doing in our midst.

That’s what Stephen is saying here. Our story is a story of idolatry. We can even make idols of our religious structures. God is bigger than your church. He was working in the world before your

denomination was formed. He's used people with different theology than yours to bring about national revivals. In the same way that God was not contained in a stone box in Jerusalem, neither will He be restrained to the boxes that you and I will be tempted to put Him in. Our story is a story of idolatry. So, let's learn from the mistakes of the past and resolve not to repeat them.

Second, and much quicker now:

2. Our story is a story of rebellion

As Stephen recounts our history, he highlights the redeemers, the prophets, and the leaders that God sent to move us forward out of our captivity. Yet, as Stephen recounts those familiar stories, he subtly and masterfully weaves in the reminder that we HATED those deliverers when they were with us! Our fathers consistently opposed the leaders that God sent.

God sent Joseph to save His people from famine. And Stephen reminds us in verse 9:

And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, **sold him into Egypt** (Acts 7:9a ESV)

Then God rose up Moses to lead us out of slavery in Egypt, but we rejected HIM too! We read in verse 25:

He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, **but they did not understand.** (Acts 7:25 ESV)

Stephen goes on in verse 35:

“This Moses, **whom they rejected**, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. (Acts 7:35 ESV)

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt (Acts 7:39 ESV)

“You love Moses now,” Stephen says, “but remember that our fathers opposed him at every turn! THAT is our story! As God’s plan advanced, time and time again we dug in our heels and resisted. We killed the prophets. We fought to preserve the world that we had grown comfortable in.”

Do you see what he’s doing? He’s establishing a pattern, and he’s setting the stage for his conclusion. Our story is a story of rebellion! We always rejected the redeemers that God sent. And in the same way that our fathers rejected Moses, we have rejected the one who Moses prophesied would come. In verse 37, Stephen reminds us:

This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you **a prophet like me** from your brothers.’ (Acts 7:37 ESV)

This leads to the concluding point of Stephen’s sermon. He declares:

3. Our story is the story of Jesus!

The conclusion begins at verse 51. Look there with me:

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:51-56 ESV)

“Jesus is the prophet like Moses, and anyone who rejects him is no different than our fathers who rejected Moses in the wilderness.

God is moving us forward, and anyone who refuses to follow because they have made an idol of the temple is no different than those who made a golden calf and sought to return to Egypt.

You pretend that you are defending Moses and the law, but you are actually aligning yourself with those who opposed Moses and broke the law.

Jesus is the one that Moses said would come. I see him now in the heavens! The Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God!”

Stephen’s listeners would have immediately recognized the significance of this vision. Long ago, Daniel saw a vision of God, and he describes his vision in Daniel 7:13-14:

I saw in the night visions,

and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
**¹⁴ And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;**
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14 ESV)

Stephen could not have been any clearer. Jesus is the Son of Man. Jesus is God. Jesus reigns. Jesus stands vindicated in heaven. Anyone who has rejected Jesus has rejected God Himself.

His opponents understood his message loud and clear. And they had heard enough. We read in verse 57:

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. (Acts 7:57-58a ESV)

They cast him outside of the city. History indicates that they likely would have thrown him headfirst over the Rock of Execution – a rock that was supposedly twice the height of a man – with the intention of breaking his neck.³ But Stephen was not incapacitated by the fall. He stood up, but the unrelenting mob began to hurl stones at him. We read in verse 59:

³ I am drawing from the scene depicted by John Pollock, *The Apostle – A Life of Paul*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 15-16, 27-28.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60 ESV)

And so, the longest sermon in the book of Acts concludes with the martyrdom of Stephen – the first martyr of the Christian church. This leads us to our final question:

What Should We Learn From The First Martyr?

I see three lessons here. We will deal with two this morning, and we’ll save the third for next Sunday. First, we learn in this story that:

1. If we live like Jesus, we will suffer like Jesus

Luke has been hammering home this lesson and he continues to reenforce it here. Clearly, Luke understands that this message – the cost of discipleship – is one that we are slow to learn and quick to forget.

In this passage, we have the privilege of meeting Stephen. Technically speaking, we met him last Sunday. He was one of the seven that was chosen to oversee the ministry to the Jerusalem widows, but in our text today we really come to KNOW Stephen.

He was a man who was “full of grace and power.” In addition to his administrative skills, we see here that he was also a passionate preacher, and his ministry was accompanied with signs and wonders. He was a man who was so gentle that the congregation set him apart to care for their grandmothers, but who was so courageous that he would stand and declare the truth even before an intimidating mob.

In short, Stephen was a man who looked like Jesus.

But the devil hates men and women who look like Jesus.

Pause. Let’s take of this before we move on. Growing in holiness – developing godly character – making progress in obedience – is NOT simply a test of discipline. The reason why you struggle

to read your Bible, and feel distracted in prayer, and get pulled back into sin, is not simply because you're undisciplined. Holiness is SPIRITUAL WARFARE. The devil does not want you to look like Jesus!

And so, opposition against Stephen arose in the city.

We read that Stephen's opponents frequently tried to trap and undermine him in debates, but they always lost the argument. And that's quite remarkable, because one of Stephen's opponents would likely have been Saul of Tarsus – the man we know now as the Apostle Paul – one of the brightest minds of the ancient world! Yet, Saul and his contemporaries could not withstand the “wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking.”

And so, they turned to underhanded tactics to accomplish their goal. They stirred up a mob. They brought in false witnesses. They held a mock trial. They used all the same tricks against Stephen that they used against Jesus.

Luke means for us to see that Stephen was simply following in the steps of his Saviour. Which is exactly what Jesus said we would do. In John 15:20, we read:

Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. (John 15:20a ESV)

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. 11 of the 12 Apostles were killed, and the twelfth was left to die in prison. Since those early days, millions have since followed in Stephen's footsteps.

We've been torches in Nero's garden. We've been fodder for the lions in the coliseum. And the persecution continues to this day. Just this week, I received an e-mail update from Pastor Paul – our partner in South Asia. He wrote:

In September and October, our churches endured an increased season of persecution. Mobs attacked several churches, services were disrupted, and pastors were threatened.

If we live like Jesus, we will suffer like Jesus. But we also see in this story that:

2. As we suffer for Jesus, he stands with us

From the beginning of this story to the end, Luke demonstrates that Stephen was never alone. As his opponents debated him, God filled him with His Spirit and with wisdom. As he prepared to preach to the council, we read:

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that **his face was like the face of an angel.** (Acts 6:15 ESV)

It's hard to know in what way Luke's face was angelic. Was he exuding an other-worldly peace? Was he glowing like Moses? Luke doesn't elaborate, so I'll keep myself from speculating. However, if nothing else, we can say for certain that God was visibly aligning Himself with and giving His blessing to His servant.

As Stephen was about to suffer the horrific death of stoning, he looked up and saw Jesus standing and looking onward.

Then, as he was being stoned and knew that his life was coming to an end, he prayed:

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (Acts 7:59b ESV)

Luke reminds us that when we suffer for Jesus, we do not suffer alone. He stands with us.

Jesus knows what it is to suffer alone. When he bore our sins on the cross, he was despised and rejected and even cried out:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46b ESV)

Jesus suffered and died alone, but because of what he accomplished, we will never have to experience what that's like. We will share with him in the suffering, but as we suffer, he will stand with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. When the earthly jury is crying out for our heads, Jesus is standing as our advocate in the only court that matters. Therefore, he taught us:

So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. (Matthew 10:26 ESV)

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33 ESV)

These passages are always so difficult to land living as we do in peacetime. We don't face these challenges today, and it can be hard to know how to apply these lessons to our lives. G. Campbell Morgan made this helpful observation:

No hurricane of persecution ever creates martyrs; it reveals them.⁴

The storm didn't make Stephen. The storm simply exposed what was already there.

A martyr is not a rare, Christian hero. A martyr is simple a Christian who meant what they said when they went through the waters of baptism. They meant what they said when they took up their cross to follow Jesus. The hurricane of persecution didn't make them. It simply exposed what was already there.

So, if we're wondering what the hurricane will reveal in our lives, let's consider what has already been exposed by the small breeze that has wafted over us.

Do you hide your faith from your neighbors and your coworkers? Are you embarrassed of Jesus? Are you embarrassed of his word? Do you distance yourself from him when the world around you becomes hostile? Are you more concerned with pleasing the crowd then pleasing him?

By way of application, I think this passage brings us to a place of decision.

Our story is a story of idolatry and rebellion, but God has sent His Son to redeem us from sin and to lead us into glory. Will we align with the crowd? Will we repeat the sins of our fathers? Or will we align with Jesus?

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 177.