

The Possible Product

Upside Down

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Acts 7. We're actually going to begin toward the latter part of chapter 7 in just a moment but just as a reminder, you might want to keep something to Mark 6 because I'm going to be alluding back to chapter 6 several times because the individual that we're going to discuss this morning, his story begins in chapter 6 but as we're about to see, it does end in chapter 7. In fact, at the end of chapter 7, it's the famous story of the first Christian martyr ever recorded in history and in scripture. It's a man by the name of Stephen, a man who according to chapter 6 was full of faith, living his life in a supernatural means. When you get to the end of chapter 7, though, there are those who are so frustrated, so upset, so despondent with his message that they actually pick up stones and they end his physical life.

Today as we come to Acts 7, we continue a study through the book of Acts headed toward chapter 17 where it says there that they turned the world upside down. How is it that this group of believers that was so small in number, so lacking in resources, huddled up in an Upper Room in chapter 1, all of a sudden we discover that 3,000 are saved, then there are 5,000 being saved. We see that eventually when we get to chapter 17, that the world is going to be turned upside down. We look at our lives today, we look at the struggles, the difficulties and whatever it may be, and to be quite honest we say, "You know, there's just, I don't see that happening in my life." That's okay because today when we come to chapter 7, it's not just the possibility of what may befall us for being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ but toward the end of the message we're going to see what is the possibility in each and every one of our lives if we live a life of faithfulness, if we live a life of trust, what is it that God might possibly do through us even if it doesn't happen primarily to us.

In chapter 7 of the book of Acts, we're going to pick up the story in verse 51. Now it's going to sound a little harsh but I want you to imagine that for several moments whom we know as Stephen has been recounting the biblical record. He started that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, he's been telling these men who are Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, these who should know better that the Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ whom they had crucified was actually the answer to all the prophecies of the Old Testament. Now if you've ever done any kind of public speaking or if you've had an interpersonal conversation with

somebody who is not pleased with what you're saying, they don't have to verbally respond, you can read the body language, can you not? That being said, beginning in verse 51, we gather that they're not a fan of his message. He says,

51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. 52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. 54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, 58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

It's the account of the first Christian martyr, but more than that it shows us what is the possibility or what are the possibilities of how the Lord may in fact move in our lives if we're willing to remain faithful to him.

Before we get to that ultimate possibility, though, I want to deal with some of the matters of this text that I think are very critical to understand. The first thing is this. What were the reasons that these guys were so upset? Why would they get so, I mean, you think about it, these were the professionals of Stephen's day, these were the power brokers, these were the businessmen of the day. In our culture today, these were the extreme white collar professionals. Why would they get so upset that they would yell and scream and holler and stone him to death?

I think there are several reasons and the first of which is this, it's kind of the presence or the countenance by which he portrayed. Now I alluded to chapter 6 earlier, if you'll go back to chapter 6, I want you to look at the very last verse. Here they're in this discussion about eternal matters of faith, notice what they say about him: he had the appearance of an angel. Now there's a whole lot avenues we could walk down kind of dissecting what that may or may not mean, but can we all agree with this, it wasn't an angry countenance. It wasn't a frustrated countenance. In fact, I would say that it was a countenance that for lack of better terms was glowing, a disposition that was appealing and mesmerizing.

Why is this important? Because you've seen it in your life when people are frustrated at you, upset with you about matters and there's an extreme disagreement, the one thing they want to do is pull you in the gutter with them. They wanted him to get down and

dirty. They wanted him to get ugly. Do you know what frustrates people more than anything when you're in a discussion or debate with them is when you just keep it all calm and cool, when you just say, "Hey, here is what it is." And the thing I want you to notice, they got so upset because he wasn't yelling, he wasn't screaming, he was just keeping his composure.

But it's really more than that. In fact, when you go into chapter 7, they basically serve it up and say, "Okay, why are you standing on such a firm foundation? What is it that is so important to you?" And beginning in verse 2 up until what we read, here is what Stephen does. He just simply says and recounts and quotes the record according to the Bible. Now my friends, in our culture today not far removed from 2,000 years ago, if you want to get somebody upset, just tell them what the Bible says. If you want to get somebody, I mean, just they are incensed at your response, just tell them, "Well, according to such and such book, chapter and verse, this is what God said." Do you know how people typically respond to that? "Don't throw that book at me!" Why? This is why it's so critical. He did not succumb to a new philosophy, a new strategy. He didn't say, "You know, I've heard according to the latest means of communication." Here's what he did, he just simply recited what the Bible said and what you and I need to learn today is that the Bible is enough. He didn't have to have some scheme, some plan, some forthright strategy. They're upset, number 1, because he kept his cool, number two, because all he kept doing was quoting God.

Now I've said this numerous conversations when people get upset with me, I say don't get upset with me, get upset with God. He's the one that made that statement about who you are. He's the one that made that statement about the family. He's the one that made that statement about eternity. I didn't say it, he did.

That's essentially what's happening here but then it escalates. You know, there's this interesting passage we just read where it says that he sees Jesus standing on the right hand of the Father. Now that's interesting because in the New Testament biblical record post-resurrection, post-ascension of Jesus Christ, this is the only time, this is the only time you see Jesus standing. Now allow me to recount some passages. We know that he ascends up on high in Acts 2, the famous Pentecost event. When Pentecost takes place not only does the Holy Spirit pour out but Peter begins to preach. He begins to communicate the truth of God's word fulfilled in Jesus Christ. One of the things he says in Acts 2 is that after he ascended Jesus Christ sat down at the right hand of the Father. You get to Hebrews 1 where there is this comparison throughout the entire book of Hebrews that Jesus is better than fill-in-the-blank. There in chapter 1 it says that he lived, he died, he was buried, he rose from the grave, he ascended and he sat down at the right hand of the Father. In fact, you get to Revelation 5, that famous event where that book is sealed with seven seals, that strong angel cries out, "Who is worthy to release the seals? Who is worthy to bring an end of all things?" And there in that passage it is Jesus Christ who raises from his seat and he takes the book thereof.

Now I find it interesting that this is the only time in the New Testament record after Jesus has ascended before he returns that we actually see him standing, but it's more than that

because go back to chapter 6 and I want you to see what happens in verse 14. This is what they recount that he said, "For we have heard him say," that's Stephen, "that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, shall change the customs which Moses delivered to us." Why is that important? Because when Stephen was in the council, when Stephen was having a conversation with them, before he even began in Genesis and went all the way through what we know as the gospels, he told them there's a day coming that the Messiah, whom we know as Jesus Christ, is going to return and he is going to judge the sins of humanity. You want to know why they got so upset? Anytime somebody keeps their composure, anytime somebody says this is what the Bible says, and anytime somebody says, "Well, you're free to do what you want to do but you will face God and give an account of it one day when he shows up," people typically don't respond real well.

So here in Acts 7, they began to scream and they began to yell and they began to literally end his physical life. I want to look at their response. What is it that they actually did not only to Stephen but here in Acts 7 that might give us a little insight in our faithfulness to the Lord today? The first thing I want you to notice is in verse 54 of chapter 7, "they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." Now there's a lot of imagery there. There's a verbal accosting, and even opens up the door to a physical response, but here's what I want you to notice: these men who were highly educated, well-funded, leaders in their community, can we all just agree that this is completely irrational behavior? Why would they respond in such a manner? Why would they be so incensed? Why would they lose all composure?

Do you know what it reminds me of, and this is important to the story, it reminds me in Mark 5. Remember Mark 5 there's a man in the Gadarenes who we call the demoniac who had at least 2,000 demons with him. Do you remember what the Bible says about him? He could not be controlled. He was yelling. He was screaming. People were scared of him. He was cutting. He was slashing. But when Jesus delivered him, this is what's important, he was seated, clothed and in his right mind. Let me ask you a question: who is clothed in their right mind in this story? Stephen is. Who is flailing and screaming and yelling? It's these other guys, is it not?

And so when we as believers live a life of faithfulness, when we say this is what the Bible says, Jesus is coming back, we will all have to face an account of our lives to him, when the world loses its mind, what else did we expect? Because they're operating in the power and in the authority of the evil one, and if you've ever had a conversation, listen, you can see this any day on any news program or in your own personal life, just in any means, social media, God forbid you do it, here you go, put a post out there that defends what the Bible says as truth and see people lose their minds. Why will they lose their minds? Because you have to think about what is the spirit that is within them, what is that which gives them the direction of their life. You don't have to be a demoniac in the garden of the Gadarenes to be irrational. You can be one of the highest officials in the community propagating all kinds of sin and debauchery, but you start hearing the truth of God's word and you will lose your mind.

Not only were they irrational, what they did was illegal. You're saying, "Well, how could it be illegal? I mean, there were laws in the book of Deuteronomy that if somebody did something that they were accused of, that they went to trial and if things didn't go well they actually stoned them to death. Go back to chapter 6 and look at verse 13. They did the same thing to Stephen that they did to Jesus. It said they brought false witnesses. They could not even bring to him an actual factual verification that he had done anything wrong. So here's what's important to the story: these men who wrote and upheld the law broke their own law because they could not stand the message of the believer in Jesus Christ.

Does this not sound like the world you and I are walking in today? You know, today, and by the way, I understand and I'm here for you, there is a significant, I don't want to say response but maybe a significant push in our culture particularly as believers, that we need to make sure that the things of God are somehow canonized or formalized in our culture, legislated in our culture, even more so as we need to make sure that there are proper means to protect us as believers so that we do not face ill repute for standing and living our faith. There's a great cultural battle, is there not? And I'm all for it and, by the way, I think the best law to live by is the law that God gave us.

I do believe that according to the book of Deuteronomy, those that are false prophets should find themselves marginalized, those that are true should be promoted. I agree with you, but work with me just for a moment. Whom we know as the antichrist one day who will show up, do you know one of his descriptions is the lawless one? How do you expect someone who's possessed or operating under the authority of the devil, why would you expect them to operate according to the law? And we get so frustrated today because we say, "I cannot believe they did that. It's against the law." Do you know what I want to say? "What else did you expect?" The very people who were writing the laws were the ones that broke it without consequence. Now if that doesn't sound culturally relevant, I don't know what does, church, but that's exactly what they did to Stephen. It didn't matter, can I put it in our vernacular? It doesn't matter if they give you the freedom to worship. It doesn't matter if it's in the Bill of Rights. It doesn't matter if we voted on it with a majority 2/3 of the states. If those who are in authority don't like what God says, they'll break the law to punish those who are faithful to God. It happened 2,000 years ago, why would we expect something different today.

But another thing that you need to understand here in chapter 7 is they are very inconsistent. You say, "What do you mean they're inconsistent?" You see, these are the same individuals in John 7 when Jesus was before them and they began to question him and wonder about all the things he was teaching. They got upset kind of like we see here. They got incensed and Nicodemus, who according to John 3, was a master of Israel, probably one of the leaders within this group, says, "Guys, do not condemn this man before we've heard him out." Do you remember what the response was? "Are you one of his followers as well?" These are the same men who brought a woman to Jesus in John 8 and said the law said to stone her for her indiscretion but they didn't bring the man with her. Do you see the inconsistencies there? Of course they're inconsistent. They're inconsistent because it doesn't matter what the rule book says, their agenda is purely to

eliminate anything and anybody that promotes the person of Jesus Christ. And here we have in Acts 7 a story 2,000 years ago that sounds like we could have heard it on the news last night. In fact, we do not only in other places but even in our own context where people make a stand in their business, in their home, in their school for whatever the word of God says and all of a sudden they're out of business, they're fined, they're protested against, whatever it may be. Interesting that we find ourselves in eerily parallel universe 2,000 years later.

So what's the result? What happens? Now I know the end of this story does not seem appealing at all. Stephen is there, he sees the Lord lifted up, he declares his love for the Lord and his desire for him to absolve those who are stoning him, much like Jesus on the cross, and that's part of the story that we're familiar with. But I want you to go to verse 58. It says they "cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." Now here's where the story takes an interesting twist. Two chapters later, chapter 9, this Saul is going to be on the road to Damascus, this Saul is going to be blinded by the light, this Saul is going to have a face-to-face confrontation with the risen Jesus Christ, and there on his way to eliminate and do to other Christians what was done to Stephen, he meets Jesus, he is saved, he is converted and his whole life takes a different turn. And it's not just Saul. I mean, don't get me wrong, the Lord desires that all come to repentance but can we agree that this is like the key conversion in all of the New Testament? I mean, was there anybody else in your New Testament that made a greater impact for the gospel than this guy? Was there anybody else whom the Lord used to give us the New Testament more than this guy? Was there anybody who preached more, who taught more, who was used more? And here's what I want you to hear: there is no reference that Stephen took him to lunch and shared the gospel with him, there is no reference that an evangelism strategy was implemented in his life. What did Stephen do? Stephen just stayed calm and collected in the Lord, he accounted and recounted what the word of God said, made it very clear that we one day are going to give an account to God for our sins and our transgressions. The world around him lost their minds but he just stayed faithful. I don't think Stephen could have ever imagined Acts 9. I don't think Stephen could have ever imagined by him breathing his last breath that the one the Lord would use probably more than any other person would be where his clothes would lie and he would lead the greatest missionary charge of all time.

Why is that important? Because when you talk about the possibilities, I think oftentimes we talk about going into the office or going to school or living our 9 to 5 life or whatever it may be, or enduring whatever it may be and we think it's not that impactful, it's not that significant, what if it's not about you? What if it's about those who are watching you? What if it's about those who are wondering, "Are they going to cave on this one?" What if it's about those saying, "You know what, he stood strong for years but I bet this one they get him." What if it may be that person we've never met, it may be that person we have a nominal relationship with, it may be that person who continually is contrary to us, what if they're the Saul soon to be Paul in the world that is around us? You see, the possibility in this passage isn't just physical death for faithfulness, the possibility is because of our faithfulness and some of the negativity that may come, the Lord may, in fact, do more

with somebody else who is impacted by our faith than he ever was going to do in our own. By the way, can I remind you in John 4, he who sows and he who reaps will one day rejoice together.

You know, today is one of those days as a culture that we take a step back and we celebrate the father figures in our life. We talk about making an impact, we talk about the possibility, but I think sometimes we forget how much others are watching, they're listening and they're observing. I'm going to share with you a statistic, a graph that you may or may not be familiar with. It's several years old. The way that this statistic comes is based on if you were to go into a home, just take a typical home, mom, dad and a couple of kids, nobody is a believer in Jesus Christ. Nobody. What happens in that home if the first person to get saved is a child? What happens? Well, according to the research there's a 3.5% chance that the siblings, mom and dad will get saved. That's the statistic. What about mom? I mean, we joke on this day mom ain't happy, nobody's happy. I mean, come on, what about mom? Do you realize statistically, let's say that mom's at a women's event, let's say mom's at a Bible study, let's say mom's at a Mother's Day out, whatever she may be, and there's other ladies that come alongside of her and share with her the gospel of Jesus Christ and she is saved and she goes back home. Obviously, she's got children, she's got a husband. She goes back home and she shares the good news. Do you know that according to statistics only 17% of the time the whole family gets saved. Now don't get me wrong, I can tell you stories of people even in this room that have seen that happen where mom was the first to get saved, a kid was the first to get saved, but what if, what's the possibility if dad is the one? What if the husband, maybe he's at a men's event, maybe he's seated in a church like this, maybe he's out with a guy and having a casual conversation and that man comes to a saving knowledge, understanding of faith in Jesus Christ? You may be shocked to find out that 93% of the time, the kids and mom, his wife, get saved.

Now folks, when we start talking about possibility, do you now understand why the world has lost its mind when we talk about how the home ought to be ordered according to God's word? Now do you understand why the world loses its mind when we say there is a distinct male and there's a distinct female? The enemy knows those statistics. The enemy knows that if we can create confusion and if we can create some type of misunderstanding, he knows. And so what has happened? What has happened is we need more Stephen's. We need more individuals to say, "You know what? I know I'm getting all kinds of chatter, I know it's not appealing, I know there's folks that are hitting me from all sides," but you don't know who that Saul may be who's watching. You don't know who that student in your classroom, you don't know who that patient that you're treating, you don't know that neighbor who's five down just watching from a distance.

You see, the possibility of this story isn't just physical demise, the possibility is when we see that everything is closing in and falling apart, the Lord may just be using that to change the world with somebody who's observing or listening. You see, Acts 7 isn't just about the first Christian martyr, it's an encouragement to us of what's the possibility if we don't give in, don't give up, and don't quit. God may just use your faithfulness to change the world through somebody who's watching or listening.