

Acts 6:8-8:1a: Witnesses In Jerusalem IV

Preface & Prayer:

Friends!

I'm excited about this part of our service, and this part of our walk through Acts, too. Let's pray for this moment, if we can.

...

Last week we saw as the early church decided to appoint seven of its Hellenistic, Greek-speaking, Greek-cultured believers to run the day-to-day organization of the Church. The Church is a mega-church at this point, thousands of people, and made up of this smaller group of Greek Jewish Christians, and a majority of Israelite Jewish Christians. This appointment was a radical and important move, though. The Church had become split, divided, between the Greek and Israelite factions, and the Greek Jewish Christian widows were being skipped during the daily food disbursement the Church gave out to widows. So the Church put these seven Greek Jewish Christians in charge to oversee everything, and

make sure it didn't happen again.

The Apostles asked the Church to look for two things: people who were full of the Spirit, and people who were wise.

And that passage, Acts 6:1-7, was full of really important things. I love it; love it even more after talking about it in life groups with you all. But in terms of the narrative Luke is weaving for us, what was most important in that passage is that it introduced Stephen. He's the only one whose character is discussed at all.

On Stephen:

Stephen was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian. Luke describes him in last week's passage as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." Everyone approves of Stephen as a leader; he's trusted by the Church to make sure that it runs itself in a way that the minority aren't oppressed or abused or experience bias, because they were.

He's one of those who are put in charge of "serving tables," which we talked about as an idiom that means something like "managing the business" of the

Church.

So Stephen is an exemplary outsider, who was one of the first ordained leaders of the early Church after the Apostles. He's incredibly important. But he's incredibly important inside the Church; outside it, he's not only a Greek Jew, which makes him second class in the eyes of many, especially Jerusalem's elite, but he's also a part of the Church. So inside the Church he's incredibly important; outside it, he's doubly-dismissible, doubly-irrelevant, not worth the attention of anyone important. At least, the important ones would feel that way.

This is what we know of Stephen before today's passage.

And now we read this:

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

Just in case we weren't sure, just in case we missed it in the first few verses of Chapter Six, Luke wants us to be really clear: Stephen was awesome. Stephen's way

of life checked all the boxes: evident grace and power, acts of wonder and proofs of God's, and implied, the esteem of everyone, at least whoever was open enough to joy and wonder to hear him. Luke returns us to Stephen, now, and wants us to fix in our minds who he is: a person full of God's grace and power.

Conflict!

But, as we might expect by now, when you're truly full of God's grace and power, there's always someone who thinks you're just full of it, and wants to prove how small you are compared to them. We read,

9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

People have always liked being around those they think of as like themselves. The Hellenistic Jews have even created a, oh, a special-interest synagogue, a culturally Greek synagogue for themselves. Stephen was likely still a part of it, because for many years

Jewish Christians would still attend synagogue, and they even used it as a place to hide from persecution, because Rome allowed synagogues; it didn't allow churches, congregations. But, but, but...Stephen's new commitments, as a follower of Christ, are starting to upset things. He's convincing people that what he believes now is right. And that's disastrously difficult.

This community of Greek Jews, who had banded together as a small minority against Rome's paganism, they've discovered that one of their own is splitting them apart. The Holy Spirit is giving Stephen such a convincing argument, that it can't be overcome. And the Greek Jews he's arguing with don't want to be persuaded, don't care about what's true; they just want him to shut up.

So, they decide to set him up, have him tried for blasphemy

11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

12 So they stirred up the people and the elders

and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Let me just point out how informed this set-up is. They clearly know enough about Jesus and what he said, to interpret what Jesus said against him. Jesus did declare that the Temple would be thrown down; in 40 years, Rome does come in and knock everything what we know of as the "wailing wall" to the ground. Jesus uses his own death and resurrection as a metaphor for the fall of the Temple, too, pointing out that the sacrificial system will end in his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus clearly believes his interpretation of Torah is more faithful than the one the Temple and Synagogues are invested in. And yet: These accusers twist what Jesus says in order to double-down on the blasphemy charge they want Stephen convicted of. Because if he's convicted, he'll be killed, and if he's killed, the problem goes away.

Sometimes the Bible can feel like one like story of people trying to kill their problems away, but never being able to.

Before the Sanhedrin:

And Stephen is there, before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. And his face seems to glow, just like Moses' face seemed glow after Moses talked with God. This double-outsiders, as far as the Sanhedrin are concerned: Greek, and now a follower of Jesus, whose been charged with blaspheming God and negating Moses' law, his face is the one glowing like Moses' did. He's the one the Spirit is confirming is on the side of truth:

15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

And Stephen responds. He speaks, this double-outsider, confirmed by God and witnesses, to and against the Sanhedrin. He quotes a passage from Amos that condemned the priests way back when, and he tells the story of what God has done in a way that fits the situation he's in.

And what I'm going to do for the rest of our time now is just read this. Read his entire defense to the Sanhedrin.

But, listen:

But, listen: it's not a defense at all. He doesn't defend himself, protect himself against these twisted charges he's facing. He simply presents the story of God in a way that forces those who hear it to choose for or against God. His rebuttal, his defense, is truth. It's truth filled with warnings that the Sanhedrin choose carefully how they'll respond, align themselves with God instead of against God.

So as I read, notice Stephen's cleverness. But before I read, I'd ask this: Could you do what Stephen does here? Do you know the history that's shaped you? We are characters in a story whose plot reaches far past the moment we were born. We have inherited the promises of God, promises to Abraham, to Isaac, Jacob, Israel and through us all to the world. We all believe a story, tell ourselves and each other a story of what God has done in Jesus, but that story begins thousands of years before Jesus was born.

We'll move forward from this moment into Palm

Sunday and Easter Sunday, taking a break from Acts and all the action that followed the first Easter. But as we prepare for that, don't forget: We came from someplace, for some reason. If we forget our beginnings, we can forget our ends, our purposes.

We can communicate truth in a way that condemns, and maybe that is called for now and then. Stephen, at least, was led this way. He was also killed for it. The Sanhedrin poured down from their bleachers, dragged him outside the city, and threw rocks at him until he died.

But his last words begged for their forgiveness, because even tortured to death he had nothing to prove, had moved passed the retaliation and fear that led to his death. Stephen knew where he had come from and where he was going. We honor his death when we mimic his life.

So listen. Do whatever you have to do to really hear Stephen's words. His face is "like that of an angel." He stands, the center of the room, on trial. Everyone staring at him.

Stephen's Last Words:

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”

2 To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 3 ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’[a]

4 “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6 God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’[b] 8 Then he gave Abraham the

covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

9 “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

11 “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16 Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that

Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

17 “As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. 18 Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’[c] 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

20 “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child.[d] For three months he was cared for by his family. 21 When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

23 “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. 24 He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. 25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using

him to rescue them, but they did not. 26 The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

27 "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28 Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'[e] 29 When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

30 "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'[f] Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

33 "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have indeed seen the

oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’[g]

35 “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’[h] 38 He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

39 “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know

what has happened to him!’[i] 41 That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. 42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

43 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile’[j] beyond Babylon.

44 “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might

***provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.[k]
47 But it was Solomon who built a house for
him.***

***48 “However, the Most High does not live in
houses made by human hands. As the prophet
says:***

***49 ““Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.***

***Or where will my resting place be?
50 Has not my hand made all these things?’[l]***

***51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and
ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like
your ancestors: You always resist the Holy
Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your
ancestors did not persecute? They even killed
those who predicted the coming of the
Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and
murdered him— 53 you who have received the
law that was given through angels but have not
obeyed it.”***

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.