

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGHOUT HISTORY I

Acts 7:1-16

INTRODUCTION

I and a student friend approached a student sitting by himself in the crowded student union at the Univ. of Illinois and asked him if we could take a few minutes to share with him an outline of the Christian faith and see what he thought about it. He agreed and so we sat down with him and began to go through the Four Spiritual Laws, a summary of the gospel. As we were discussing sin he made the comment that since God is the one who made him and since he was a sinner then it must be God's fault that he committed acts of sin. As I began to answer his assertion, a professionally dressed woman with a nametag identifying her as an employee of the University, sitting at a table near us jumped up from her chair and in a very loud voice, looking directly at me said, "How dare you tell this young man that he is wrong. Who do you think you are to tell him that what you think is true and what he thinks is wrong?" She then stormed off, leaving us staring at each other in embarrassed silence. Her outburst ended our conversation and we parted ways. That was not the only time I've been accused in public of misleading people by what I have taught but it was definitely the most uncomfortable.

Being publicly accused of teaching or believing false things or of misleading people is never a very comfortable situation. It is especially uncomfortable if the people accusing you are people in authority with power to harm you if they don't like what you say. This is the situation of Stephen at the beginning of Acts 7. He has been seized by Greek speaking Jewish people and dragged before the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin. Remember, these are the same people who, just a couple of years earlier had condemned Jesus to death and had recently threatened and beaten the apostles for preaching in the name of Jesus. In this court he has been falsely accused of cursing God and Moses and of claiming that Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs handed down by Moses in the OT. In short he is being accused of undermining the Jewish faith and trying to lead Jewish people into an outright abandonment of Jewish religion. He is being accused of treason. So we have in Acts 7 Stephen's "defense", his answer against these charges. The problem with his response is that on the surface it doesn't really seem to answer the charge. Mostly it is a recounting of the history of Israel which every person to whom he is speaking knows and agrees. But this simple retelling of Israel's history is his answer to their accusations. He is not treating God or Moses or the people of Israel or the law with disrespect. He affirms and agrees with everything written in the OT, as his speech makes clear and thus he answers their false charges.

However, Stephen is doing something far greater than merely defending himself. Jesus told his disciples in Luke 21:12-15 that when they were taken to court because of their proclamation of his gospel that they would at that time be witnesses to those who were judging them. In fact, Jesus promised that he would give words and wisdom so that his publicly accused people could bear witness to the truth of his gospel. This is what Stephen is doing. He is selecting material from the OT under the tutelage of the HS to show the Jewish leadership that God's way of salvation is not through the temple, the sacrifices, circumcision or the keeping of the Law but rather through Jesus: his life, death and resurrection. He does this by means of the events and words that are recorded in the OT. He uses their law to prove they are wrong. In all of those actions God took in history he was showing that Jesus and his work are the only means of salvation. The Jewish leadership argues that God only saves those people who are or who become Jewish by submitting to circumcision, the temple practices and all the laws contained in the OT. Stephen argues that God has always and only saved people by grace through faith in the suffering Messiah.

Luke, the author of Acts, records this speech as his chief example of the way to read the OT in light of the coming of Christ. This history of Israel is referred to throughout the NT as bearing witness to Jesus and his salvation. So Luke shows here that this was the understanding of the church right from the beginning. Stephen to the Jewish authorities and Luke in recording his speech aim to prove that the people of God have never been identified by their Jewishness but by their relation to the Jewish Messiah, Jesus.

MAIN POINT

God's actions in history point to Jesus as the only one who can bring people to God because...

I. God has always acted according to his grace, not human worth (vv. 2, 4 & 9 with 13-14)

Notice that the history of Israel begins with God. Not just any God but the God of glory. This phrase appears only once in the OT in Psalm 29:3 which is a psalm of praise to Yahweh, the God of Israel. In Psalm 29 he is glorious because he speaks and things happen; creation, weather, earthquakes, salvation. What does Stephen say about this God of glory? He appeared to Abraham and he spoke to him. In the same way that God, out of no necessity in himself and not in response to anyone or anything, but simply according to his own pleasure and will spoke creation into existence so he spoke the nation Israel into existence by commanding Abraham to leave his country and go to the land he would show him. God's call to Abraham was a call of free grace. He did not see anything in Abraham or respond to anything in Abraham when he called him. He simply chose him and called him according to the pleasure of his own will. His call to Abram was hundreds of years prior to the giving of the law to Israel on Mt. Sinai and thousands of miles outside of the land of Canaan. It was hundreds of years prior to the construction of the temple and establishment of the priesthood and the founding of the nation of Israel. Stephen is posing this question: "If the temple and the law are so necessary to right standing with God then how do you explain God's calling Abraham while an idol worshipping pagan in Ur of the Chaldeans?"

The evidence of God's grace is not only seen in the calling of Abraham but also in the fact that what God told Abraham he would do, give him and his seed the land of Canaan, he has now done as evidenced by the fact that they, the descendants of Abraham, are standing in Jerusalem and have the temple (v. 4). The point Stephen is making to them is that you are living in this land because of this promise made before the law existed, not because you or anyone else ever did anything that earned the right for you to live in this land. They think they live in the land because they are so faithful. Stephen is pointing out that they live in the land because God is so gracious. This is the great blindness that afflicts all humanity. We all naturally assume that whatever good things we have in our lives, we deserve. We assume it makes perfect sense that we are alive and that we are healthy and that we have food to eat and a nice home to live in and friends who care about us. My friend, you do not deserve the clothes you wear, the home you live in, the family you are a part of. You did not earn the food you eat. We prove that we assume we deserve these things because when they are taken from us we get mad and sad. We complain that we are being treated unfairly. We don't naturally respond like Job when he lost all of his possessions and his seven children on the same day, "The Lord gave and the Lord took away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Job understood that everything was a gift of grace, not the reward for his obedience. The calling of Abraham and the existence of the Jewish people living in the land of Canaan with a temple and priests is not evidence of human worth but evidence of God's free, unearned, sovereign grace.

A further evidence of God's grace is to be seen in the story of Joseph and his wicked brothers. The 10 brothers of Joseph or as Stephen names them, "the patriarchs" of the Jewish nation, sold their brother into slavery because they were jealous of him. The Jewish people gloried in their patriarchs, the founders of their nation. Yet, as Stephen points out these men were cruel and wicked and cowardly men. According to the Law of Moses, which these Jewish leaders are so eager to embrace, those who do what the "patriarchs" did should be killed. They do not deserve to live. Yet, how are they treated by God through Joseph? When they come to Egypt to get food to preserve their lives they are given food for free from their betrayed brother. On the second journey, Joseph, the second in command in Egypt, reveals himself to them. Rather than using the power and authority he has to kill them, he tells them that God sent him ahead of them to save their lives. Who would have blamed God or Joseph for destroying these wicked men? The brothers themselves on several occasions expressed their knowledge that they deserved to be killed by Joseph, not helped by him. Yet, God graciously, contrary to what they deserve rescues them from the famine and provides them safety from the famine.

So Stephen's point is that these Jewish leaders have completely misunderstood God's word and misinterpreted the cause of their fortunate condition. All that they have is not due to anything that they or any of their ancestors ever did but it is all owing to God's decision to be kind to them contrary to what they deserve. They possess the land, have the temple, have received the law only because of God's grace, not because of their value or their obedience. The same is true of every one of us. There is nothing you have, no pleasure you enjoy, no ability you possess, nothing that is yours because of you. It is all a gift, given to you by the God of glory who delights to give undeserving sinners gifts they do not deserve. But not only are all the creation pleasures you experience on a daily basis gifts of his grace but supremely, God has provided salvation for his people as an act of his free grace. If you are destined for heaven because of the finished work of Jesus it is only because God has chosen to be gracious to you in the same way he chose to be gracious to Abraham and the ten corrupt brothers of Joseph.

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II. God has always required faith in his promises (vv. 3-8)

Next to the emphasis on God's grace in the establishment of Israel as a nation is the emphasis on the faith of Abraham in particular. God made grand and glorious promises to Abraham but Abraham did not receive what was promised. He never possessed any portion of the land of Canaan. The promises God made were to Abraham and his descendants even though he did not have a descendant for 25 years. The end of v. 5 and all of vv. 6-7 are referring to the 15th chapter of Genesis which contains the verse which Paul makes great use of in Romans and Galatians. Genesis 15:6 records that after God told Abram that he was going to have as many descendants as stars in the heaven, Abram "believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham was treated as if he was perfectly righteous, not because he always obeyed God but because he trusted in God's promise. The fact that Abraham left Ur and went to Canaan and that he trusted God's promise to provide a child whom he circumcised on the 8th day as God commanded all bear witness to the fact that he was right with God by faith in God's promise alone, not because of anything he did or did not do. He did not receive what was promised during his lifetime and yet he trusted God to do what he promised and acted in accord with that faith by living as a nomad in Canaan and by circumcising all the males in his household.

While Stephen does not mention the word faith, he is using these facts from Abraham's life to show the Jewish leaders that the message of the OT is not that God loves and accepts and rewards people with his presence because of what they do but because they depend upon him to do what he promises to do. What we see in the story of Abraham is that faith has no power. Faith depends upon God to powerfully do what God has promised to do. Faith does not earn favor it receives God's favor. Abraham depended on God's faithfulness to his promises not upon his performance of certain rituals or prayers or anything else. Verse 8 emphasizes the same thing Paul emphasizes in Romans 4:9b-11a, "We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." God made promises to Abraham and he believed those promises before he was circumcised. Abraham's circumcision of Isaac and the other male members of his house was done following God's promises and his faith in them. Circumcision is a symbol of God's grace and Abraham's faith, not the cause of it. It is so easy for people to believe that they are accepted by God because they perform certain religious acts, like circumcision. However, it is quite clear in Stephen's account and in Paul's commentary on these events that God's grace received by faith is the cause and circumcision is the symbol.

It is as we remember that Stephen is summarizing vast quantities of biblical history and yet refers to very specific statements and events out of that history that we can see the theological points he is seeking to make. I'm particularly struck by his apparently random reference to God's telling Abraham that his descendants are going to suffer horribly as slaves for 400 years before they will come back to the land of Canaan. Why does

Stephen draw attention to this part of God's promise? Let's put the whole promise in Genesis 15 into perspective. God promises to Abraham an innumerable number of descendants who will live in the Land of Promise. That is the ultimate end of God's promise. Yet, he also "promises" that prior to that glorious end they are going to suffer as slaves for 400 years.

There are at least two points Stephen is making with this reference. First, it is God's will that Israel be enslaved and mistreated. The people of God whom God has destined for glory are first destined for suffering. The message to the Jewish religious leaders is this: They are the powerful ones. They killed Jesus. They are about to kill Stephen and destroy the church in Jerusalem. They assume that because they killed Jesus he cannot be the Messiah because how could God possibly permit such a horrible thing to happen to the Messiah? They will assume that because the church and its leaders are so vulnerable and powerless against them that they are therefore wrong, while they, the Jewish leaders are right. What Stephen's reference to Israel's slavery communicates is that God intentionally causes his people to suffer and thus the suffering and death of Jesus and the suffering and death of Christians is not evidence that God is not for them but rather evidence that he is treating them the way he has always treated his people. Religious people believe that God will always do good to the faithful. If your life is good it is because you are good but if your life is bad it is because you are bad. The fact that God told Abraham that Israel would be enslaved for 400 years, thus showing it was his will that it be so, turns that whole way of thinking on its head. God, on purpose and for good purposes, sends suffering to his people as evidenced by the fact that it was his will that Israel live as slaves in Egypt.

The second thing this shows is again the centrality of faith in God's promises and God's power and God's sovereignty over all things. We must live by faith, not by sight. When life falls apart, when difficulties come, this is no sign of God's displeasure or that God is not going to keep his promises. His promise is that one day we will live in the Land of Promise with him forever. His promise is not that we will live a pain free existence in this life. Just as Egypt was not the Land of Promise so these United States of America are not the Land of Promise. Like Abraham and like faithful Israel in Egypt, "we fix our eyes on what is unseen, not on what is seen because what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal." We are not dismayed by trouble and heartache because we know that God has good purposes in it and we know that no matter what happens to us we cannot be separated from the love of God that has been pledged to us in Jesus. One day we will live with God in that eternal Land of Promise and so we can endure by faith the difficulties he sends until we get there.

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III. God has always saved his people through a rejected but exalted Savior (vv. 9-16)

Why does Stephen fix his attention on Joseph and his relationship to his 10 brothers, the patriarchs? I don't think it is hard to understand why Joseph is highlighted here. First, he is betrayed and sold into the hands of the Gentiles by the patriarchs of Israel. Every person listening to Stephen knows from which of those patriarchs he is descended. They openly and enthusiastically identify themselves with these brothers of Joseph. Thus, Stephen is none too subtly comparing what the brothers did to Joseph with what they did to Jesus. These Jewish leaders fell upon their "brother" Jesus and betrayed him into the hands of the Gentiles. Just as the brothers plotted to rid themselves of Joseph so these men plotted to be rid of Jesus.

Now notice that though the patriarchs wanted Joseph dead, God sovereignly and powerfully exalted Joseph as lord of Egypt and head of Pharaoh's house. The hatred of the brothers not only did not destroy Joseph but was the means through which God made Joseph king and savior of the world. It is just as Joseph told his brothers when they came to him in fear of their lives after the death of Jacob: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." This very Sanhedrin,

just like Joseph's brothers, intended harm, evil to Jesus and yet in the very same actions God intended good for his people. The Sanhedrin thought they were doing away with Jesus but God was accomplishing the salvation of all of his people through their killing of Jesus. It was through his crucifixion that Jesus became the king and Savior of all God's people.

Now notice in v. 13 Stephen reminds them that Joseph revealed himself to his brothers on their second visit to Egypt. Do you remember that scene from Genesis 45? Listen to how it goes: **Genesis 45:4-9**, "Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."

Do you hear Jesus pleading with these stubborn men through Stephen to recognize him and to trust him so that they can be saved? Jesus is, through Stephan and the rest of the church "telling his brothers who he is" so that they will recognize him alone as their savior. He is the one they betrayed and he is now the only one who can save them because of what God did through their betrayal. If they refuse him it will be exactly as it would have been had Joseph's brothers refused to acknowledge Joseph and to bring Jacob down to Egypt. If those 75 Israelites would have remained in Canaan, they would have perished. They had to trust in Joseph, the brother they betrayed, and leave Canaan and live in Egypt if they were to be saved. In the same way the Jewish religious leaders had to leave behind their attachment to temple and law and land and go to Jesus, the one they betrayed but who now is ready to save them if they will come to him.

How often have each of us betrayed this same Jesus? How often have we depended upon our own performance of moral or religious duties rather than him? How often have we rejected him as the object of our affection and chosen other gods, other pleasures? Yet, Jesus reveals himself to us as the one we've betrayed but whom God has exalted so that he can be our Savior and Lord. He pleads with us to not fear him but to draw near to him and to let him care for us and for our children. We will perish if we hold onto the things that are currently giving us pleasure and do not give ourselves wholly to him. Do not be like these hard hearted men whom, as we will see, love their own righteousness, their own view of reality, their own lifestyle and refuse to leave it all behind and go to their rejected brother to be saved. He will not refuse any who come to him and depend upon him to fulfill all the promises God has made to his people.

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