

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY HIS GIVING PEOPLE OVER TO THEIR SINS

Acts 7:39-50

INTRODUCTION

You know, don't you, that this world is full of evil? Terrible things are being done all over the face of this planet even while we sit here. Children are being abused, people are being murdered, angry quarrels are taking place in homes, the hungry and homeless are being disregarded, people are being refused jobs and housing because of the color of their skin or their religion, money is being embezzled, a drunk driver is killing or maiming someone and the list goes on. You also know, don't you, that right now evil is being done in this very room? Some are full of anger towards others who have hurt them. Children are plotting how to hide what they are doing from their parents. Parents are resentful of the ingratitude and disrespect of their children. Many are indifferent to the God they just sang songs about. There are hearts all over this room full of lust and jealousy and evil thoughts and all manner of evil.

I hope none of this shocks you; that you do know this is a part of the reality that you and I inhabit every day. However, the reason I bring up the fact of evil that is present right now, all over the world, including right here, is because we are confronted this morning with this question: how is God, right now, reacting to human evil? Maybe more pointedly let me ask you, how do you think God is right now reacting to the billions of human beings engaged in sinful thoughts, attitudes, words and behaviors? Do you think of God as standing helplessly by while humans flagrantly do evil? After all, he can't interfere with our "free will". Do you think of God as being really sad about the evil we do? Does he look at us with pity, the way we look at a drug addict who continually loses jobs and destroys friendships because he cannot overcome his addiction? Do you only think of God as biding his time, waiting for the end of all things when he will then pour out his wrath and anger upon human evil? Or do you think of God as ignoring evil because of what Jesus has done?

This morning we are considering the conclusion to Stephen's speech to the Jewish ruling council. In our passage this morning, as he wraps up his review of the history of Israel as the revelation of Jesus Christ, he describes how Israel has responded to God's gracious actions towards them as a people but, more importantly, he describes God's response to them. In seeing God's response to the evil that Israel does we are witnessing one of the ways that God responds to human evil.

In vv. 39-41 Stephen reminds his audience and us of how Israel responded to Moses, the Redeemer God sent to bring them out of their slavery in Egypt. They did not obey him but in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They made a golden calf and worshipped it as the god who brought them out of Egypt. Then in v. 42 we are told how God responded to this rebellion. Literally it says: "God turned and handed them over to worship the hosts of heaven (sun, moon, stars)." The language here describes a very deliberate and determined action by God. In the OT this language is used to describe God "handing over" the nations that lived in the land of Canaan to the Israelites. In other words, the Israelites dominated and destroyed those nations because God deliberately handed them over to Israel. In the NT this same language is used not only here by Stephen concerning God's handing rebellious, idol worshipping Israel over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars but also by the apostle Paul in the first chapter of Romans concerning the entire human race.

Please turn with me to Romans 1, which is on page 795. In vv. 19-20 Paul says that every human being in the whole world knows, both by the external creation and their own conscience that there is a majestic, glorious creator to whom we each owe praise and gratitude. However, in vv. 21-23 every human being, in spite of the overwhelming evidence that blazes in front of our face every day refuses to glorify God and refuses to give him thanks but instead we create idols to worship. We worship created things rather than the Creator. Notice how God responds to this fact in vv. 24, 26 and 28. Using the same word that Stephen does in Acts 7 we are told

that God hands us over to sexual impurity, shameful lusts and a depraved mind. In each case the result of being handed over to these wicked impulses is all manner of sinful behavior.

What does it mean for God to hand Israel over to serve the hosts of heaven or the human race over to shameful lusts? First, God does not create sinful desires. Israel rejected obedience to God and turned in their heart back to Egypt. The whole human race refuses to glorify God and give him thanks. We choose to worship creation. We want to sin. The desire to disobey is in us, not outside of us. Therefore we are handed over to sexual impurity, the preposition indicating that the sexual impurity is already present in us, God hands us over to it. However this very active verb indicates that God is not merely removing his hand of restraint from us but he deliberately hands into the full power of our lusts and sinful desires. God's judgment on our sinful desires is to place us fully under the dominion of sin. God's judgment on sin is more sin. When you read the history of Israel you are seeing the consequences of God's handing them over to serve false gods. The reason that Israel becomes such an idolatrous nation at the end of their history is because God handed them over to serve the hosts of heaven.

The obvious implication for those listening to Stephen is that they are the ancestors of those people whom God handed over. Therefore, they too have been justly handed over to serve false gods. The religious men who are listening to him would argue that they are serving God, that there is no way that God has handed them over to serve false gods. Their argument would be based upon what they are doing, how they are treating God's law, that they have the temple and the priesthood. Stephen is arguing that the evidence of the Scripture is that God has handed them over and thus no matter how they protest they are, under cover of their religious performance, worshipping false gods, just like Israel in the desert and throughout their history. Therefore this passage is both the evidence of God's handing them over and the justification for God's handing them over to their sins. This passage demonstrates why it is fair and right and good for God to hand people over to the dominion of their sins. It proves that no one can give a reason as to why God should not hand him over to his sins, nor any reason as to why God should deliver us from our sins. It would be perfectly just for God to give every one of us into the power of sin so that we have no interest in Christ or God or heaven or forgiveness. This is the frightening reality that v. 42 declares.

MAIN POINT

God justly hands people over to their sins because...

I. People would rather obey sin than God (v. 39)

Stephen is referring in this verse primarily to Numbers 14 which is the climax of the disobedience of that first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt. In spite of all that God did for Israel they did not want to obey (not rejected as in NIV) Moses and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt. This is spite of the fact that God delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt by the hand of Moses. He performed mighty miracles through Moses. He gave them food to eat and water to drink through Moses. He gave them living words through Moses. Yet they did not want to obey Moses by going into the land of Canaan to destroy the nations who were there but they wanted to return to Egypt. They wanted to go back to Egypt and obey their former masters rather than obey God by entering into the Promised Land.

Notice how clearly Stephen shows that it is their heart, their inner being that is wrong. They do not want to obey Moses. In their hearts they turn back to Egypt. Thus their words of rebellion spoken against Moses and words of unbelief in God and his promises come from hearts that do not want to obey God but want to obey their masters in Egypt. Living in Egypt as slaves appears more desirable to them than entering Canaan and enjoying the presence and the power of God as he gives them the land. So they refuse to obey God and begin to plot out a course for returning to Egypt. In the same way our problem is not due to external forces like parents or bad friends or economic status or health; neither is our problem primarily located in our thinking or our behavior but rather our problem is located in our desires, in our affections, in what we want, in what we trust in and hope for. We want the wrong things and so we say and feel and do and think the wrong things.

This shows why it is completely right for God to hand us over to sin. God is handing us into the power of what we want. It is not some foreign king to whom God gives us but he hands us over to our own evil desires; into the dominion of our own heart's desires. We are not being handed over against our will but in full accord with our will. For all who are under the dominion of sin it does not feel like we have been sold into slavery because we are doing what we want to do. We do not want to obey God and we want to fulfill the desires of our hearts. We get mad at those who tell us that what we want and what we do is wrong because we are doing what we want to do and it feels right to do what I want to do. We need to feel the weight of this. We ought to be terrified of our sinful desires. It would be completely fair and good of God if he were to hand each one of us over to the dominion of our sinful desires. He is under no obligation to not do so. There is no argument that we can make for why he ought not to give us into the full control of our shameful desires.

What this also means is that if you are a person who wants to obey God and who does not want to obey sin it is because God has not handed you over to your sin as you deserve but has instead acted graciously towards you. If you have any sense of your sinfulness or feel in any way frightened by the power of your desires or feel how helpless you are against your desires, then you can have hope that God is not handing you over to serve false gods. The first work of God when he graciously sets a sinner free is to convince that sinner of the misery and hatefulness of sin and of his or her absolute powerlessness against it. He terrifies us not only by his wrath against our sin but by our willing participation in and slavery to our desires. Then he grants to us a heart that desires him and trusts Christ and wants to be free from sin and slaves to God.

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- *People would rather obey sin than God*
- *And because...*

II. People want a god who gives them what they want (vv. 40-43)

The second evidence of Israel's disobedience which shows God's justice in handing them over to serve false gods is Israel's making a golden calf and worshipping it. Remember the circumstances of this first act of idolatry. After God's bringing them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert, leading them with the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night he showed up on Mt. Sinai in a massive pyrotechnic display of thunder, lightning, fire, smoke and cloud. He spoke audibly to the people as they were gathered at the foot of the mountain. He spoke to them the 10 Commandments; the second commandment of which says not to make images to use in worship of him. They had declared three times that they would do everything God told them to do. However, when Moses was up on Mt. Sinai receiving the rest of the Law from God the people of Israel told Aaron, the brother of Moses to make them gods who would go before them. Though Moses had told them where he was and they had seen him go up the mountain, they were unwilling to wait for him to reappear and tell them what to do. They rejected him and took matters into their own hands and with their own hands made a calf idol.

Now Stephen, in order to prove that this first act of idolatry was not an isolated event but characteristic of Israel throughout their entire history quotes the prophet Amos who lived and wrote about 1000 years after the making of the calf idol. In a passage in which God says he hates the sacrifices and other religious activities of Israel because they are being performed by people who are not righteous and who do not pursue justice Amos says what Stephen quotes. The point is that while Israel was traveling in the wilderness for those 40 years prior to coming into the land of Canaan, even though they had the tabernacle and were making sacrifices at the tent in accord with God's command, yet they were not actually worshipping the true God. While worshipping at the tent they were also worshipping the false gods of the surrounding nations. Thus, all the worship of Israel in the desert was false worship and all the worship of Israel 1000 years later in the days of Amos was false worship. It was false because their hearts were not united to God and his promises but to the promises held out by the false gods. The making and worship of the calf idol at Mt. Sinai was simply the first act of a long history of serving false gods under the cover of their offering of sacrifices at the tabernacle.

There are three things that characterize all idolatry that Stephen is accusing his listeners of engaging in, in spite of their protests to the contrary. First, idolatry is the product of human invention and manufacture. They made the calf idol and they made the other idols they worshipped in the desert and throughout their history as a nation. Every religious system other than Christianity is a man-made religion. Every other god but the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the product of human imagination. Whether the god is worshipped with an idol or not, if it is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then it is a man-made god which is no god at all. If the God you conceive in your mind is not the true God who has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ, then you are worshipping a false god.

The second thing that characterizes all false worship is this, the worshippers do not love the god but rather what the god will give them. All false religion promises various earthly benefits if you will do what the god demands. Thus for example a person would worship Mars, the Roman god of war, not because they love Mars but because they love what Mars will do for you, give you victory in battle. All the idols and false gods named in the Bible are of the same sort. If you will do what the particular god demands then you will be granted good crops, good weather, healthy children, protection from enemies, productive herds or whatever it is that you love. It is the same in our day. All those who claim that God's promises to give health and wealth on this earth to those who trust Jesus are promoting the worship of a false god.

The third feature of all false worship is that it is based upon the ability of humans to provide something that the god wants or needs. All false worship is based on the barter system. The god wants your worship in a particular way and if you give her what she wants then the god will give you what you want. False religion views human beings as capable of meeting the demands of the god and thus worthy of receiving the favor of the god. What Amos is claiming and Stephen by quoting him is that God rejects all of Israel's supposed "worship" at the tabernacle because they are both worshipping false gods while performing the acts commanded by the true God and they are performing acts of worship to the true God in the same way they worship the false gods. In other words, they think of God, not according to how he has revealed himself but according to their own imaginations; they worship God not because they love and desire God but because they love what God can do for them and they believe that God should reward them with his favor because of who they are and what they do. Stephen's point is that these religious leaders are doing the same thing. Though they are claiming to worship the true God in the way he prescribes, the fact of the matter is that they are treating the true God in exactly the same fashion as the idol worshipping Romans treat their false gods.

We need to pay careful attention to what is being said here. While claiming to be trusting and worshipping the Triune God are we actually participating in idol worship? Do you conceive of God as he has revealed himself to be or according to your own preferences? Do you seek God because of what you want him to do for you or because you believe he is the greatest and highest good in the universe? Do you know that there is no reason why God should ever pay attention to you other than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you think that God owes you because of who you are or what you have done? While the men to whom Stephen was speaking never went to a pagan temple, yet he is claiming that they, like their ancestors are engaging in false worship. Thus it is right for God to hand them over to serve false gods. You don't have to go to a Hindu temple or a Moslem mosque or a Wiccan feast to worship false gods. You can do it quite well sitting right here.

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III. People rebel in the face of overwhelming grace (vv. 44-47)

Verses 44-47 are a statement of God's gracious actions on behalf of idol worshipping Israel. In spite of the fact that from the beginning of their history they engaged in false worship God still gave to them the Tent of Testimony. God, as he promised dwelt among them in the Most Holy Place during those 40 years while they persisted in worshipping false gods. Then God, by the hand of Joshua, drove out all the nations who inhabited the land of Canaan. During all those years God continued to live among them in the tabernacle. This in spite of all the evil they did as recorded in the books of Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel. Then God had favor upon wicked David and subdued all of Israel's enemies through him and then promised to establish the throne of one of his sons forever. God enabled Solomon to build him a permanent temple in Jerusalem where God visibly manifested his presence at the dedication.

The purpose of this quick summary of over 500 years of history is to show that in spite of Israel's idolatrous worship God continued to show favor to them. God's actions were not done in response to Israel's faithfulness as even a superficial reading of the OT narrative will show. Rather God did all this according to his own purposes and grace. All of these deliverances and favor shown is in the face of persistent idolatry. Israel never had a good reason to not love God and worship him only. The rebellion of Israel was always in the face of enormous kindness and mercy. It is the same for the entire human race as well. Our unwillingness to glorify God and our delight in glorifying created things instead is carried out in the face of amazing grace being given to us in food and clothing and all the freely given pleasures of this creation. How right it is for God to hand such people as us over to our sins. We cannot claim that God has not given us adequate reasons to trust him. This is especially true of we who sit here. We know that not only has he given us these creation pleasures but also he has sent his son to live and die for our great and many sins. When we persist in disobedience and love of sin we are rejecting the greatest kindness that could possibly be known.

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IV. People want a religion where they are in control (vv. 48-50)

One of the chief complaints of the Jewish leaders about Stephen's proclamation of Jesus as the Savior has been the accusation that he is advocating the end of temple worship. These religious people claim that it is because of the temple and what goes on there that God loves them and accepts them and counts them as his own. So Stephen quotes a passage from Isaiah 66 where God himself says that he is not limited by or to the temple on earth. This quote is again in a context where God is condemning the religious practices of Israel as being of no account. God says in Isaiah 66 that an Israelite offering a bull at the temple is as morally guilty as a man who commits murder. Isaiah and Stephen by quoting him declare that it is an error to think of God as saving people on the basis of their connection to this temple. God is at work all over the world which he has made and connecting him to the temple as the religious people of Israel have done is to deny this fact. They, like all human beings want a deity they can control. They want "god in a box", as it were. They are not willing to accept the fact that God's favor is not connected to this place and to the people associated with this place but that his favor goes out to the whole world and is not determined by religious performance or to some "sacred" location.

I know that people talk a lot about God's unconditional grace but the actual fact is that people in their natural condition are not really in favor of God's grace. God exercises his grace freely, without regard to who we are or what we have done. God's favor is exercised by one who has unlimited power and who needs nothing from anyone. We have nothing to barter with that God needs. In short we are not in control of who God has favor upon. This is contrary to how most human beings think about God. Most humans want a religion where I can be sure of God's favor because I have done these things, I've prayed this prayer, I belong to this group or

whatever. However, God, as he says to Moses, has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he has compassion on who he wants to have compassion. He is under no obligation to be merciful to me. Salvation is by grace through faith so that no human being can take any credit for it but all the credit, all the glory goes to God alone. So when people think and act as though their decisions, their commitment, their prayer, their Bible reading, their grief over sin, their whatever is the cause of God's favor upon them then he is just if he leaves you in your sins. If he hands you over to your prideful heart, you cannot complain. So friends let us approach God with humility, freely acknowledging the fact that he would be just to hand us over to our sins but imploring him, for the honor of his own name, to extend his mercy and to forgive our sins for the sake of Jesus. Come to him on the basis of Christ's obedience and Christ's death for sin, not on the basis of your sincerity or your desire to not go to hell. Come to him to be forgiven and delivered from the dominion of sin and for no other reason.

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