Study of Acts – Discussion Notes Chapter 7

Introduction
Throughout our study of Acts, we have seen the determined will of God which cannot be stopped. It may not always be understood or clear to us but it cannot be stopped. It may not even make sense to us at times but it cannot be stopped.

In Acts 7, we read a lengthy and well prepared sermon by Stephen. One might say Stephen’s sermon was not persuasive enough. It angered the Jewish leadership and lead to his death as the first martyr of Christianity.

His name “Stephen” means “crown” in Greek. Stephen’s mother and father did not know when they gave him that name, he would one day become a disciple of the one who wore a crown of thorns. They did not know their son would ultimately wear a crown far greater than his given name.

1. The groundwork of Stephen’s sermon.

Why do you think Stephen is so historical in his message to the Sanhedrin?
Stephen covers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in his sermon. He then moves on to Joseph and Moses. Over and over he recounts the faithfulness of God to keep His promises while pointing out the unfaithfulness of their ancestors.

Stephen is establishing a history of unbelief and rejection. Read verses 35-41 and notice how Stephen spells out their rejection and attitude. He is pointing out how blindness took place and leading up to their own blindness as it relates to the Messiah.

In what ways is our world the same today in rejecting the Lord?

Even today, people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. They not only reject the message but the messenger as well. Preachers today are often seen as shady characters that always have some hidden agenda or purpose. They are always after your money or something. The average salary of a full-time SBC pastor is $55,829 and for bivocational it is $20,667. I don’t think your average preacher is in the profession for the money.

Richard Baxter said, “I preach as a dying man to dying men and women as if never to preach again.” Most preachers have a calling from God to tell others of the gospel that has so drastically changed their life. The message is powerful and the rewards for those who receive are great. And yet so much of the world rejects the message, often by discrediting the messengers.

2. The conclusion of Stephen’s sermon.

Stephen carefully lays out this continued pattern of rejection and unbelief. God reaches out to the Israelites with gestures of grace and love. As long as it is pleasing their hunger for the moment, they are receptive. But their faith is short lived. When the prophets warn of their unbelief, instead of heeding the warnings, they kill the prophet. Silencing the message never destroys the truth.

Stephen carefully selected his words and the events he retold. Each one was building up to the main point he desired to make which was to point out their own unbelief.

Read verses 51-53 and notice how Stephen goes from “they” and “them” to “you.” After laying out this history of their ancestors rejecting God’s prophets, Stephen then points out to them how they too have rejected the Messiah; Jesus Christ.
This is the point where Stephen goes for broke in his sermon. He knows his words will either raise their anger or break their hearts and lead them to repentance. He so desperately desires for them to hear with their hearts and receive his message and repent.

People are usually ok with a sermon as long as you speak about others or in generalities. You can talk about the sin or unbelief of others all you want but when you start addressing them directly, that’s when the air gets thick and tension rises. For some you have gone too far.

Illus: A few years ago I went for broke in an Easter sermon. I so desperately wanted the crowd of special occasion worshipers to understand the importance of truly making Christ Lord of their life. The title of the sermon was Jesus – Celebrity or Savior. I talked about the difference between truly making Christ Lord of your life vs. treating Him like a celebrity on special occasions. For some, the message was challenging and for others it was the last straw. Some have never returned since that sermon.

But as preachers, we understand what is on the line. We may question our delivery and wonder if we could have worded something different but we always know our message is the truth and we know our purpose is sincere. We know our heart’s desire is the same as God’s heart’s desire; to call people to repentance and to experience God’s grace.

Make no mistake about it, Stephen gave everything he could to inspire his listeners to repentance.

3. The punishment of Stephen’s sermon.

Read verses 54-60 and note the response of the listeners vs. the heart of Stephen.

Participation Activity: Have 6 to 10 people come up front. Let half of them pretend to be the Jewish leaders enraged in their hearts and gnashing their teeth in great anger. Have the other half appear as Stephen with complete contentment and peace. Ask which person you would rather be.

What stood so firmly between the religious leaders and repentance?

Common throughout the New Testament is the understanding that salvation requires repentance. And repentance requires an acknowledgement of sin. One cannot be saved without repentance and repentance cannot occur until one is willing to acknowledge they have sinned.

This past weekend my grandson spent Friday night and Saturday with us. We were instructed to help him keep practicing his Bible verse for AWANA. He quickly learned to repeat the verse; “All have sinned, Romans 3:23.” That is an abbreviated version of the verse but it states it well. All have sinned and until we realize that “All” means us, we cannot be saved.

For the Jewish leaders, that just was not possible. So steeped in their law and their rituals, they could not bring themselves to acknowledge themselves as sinners. In their hearts, they knew they were sinners. Every man and every woman knows in their heart they have done wrong. Privately, we are all keenly aware of the fact that we are sinners. But, there is a huge difference between admitting something to ourselves and admitting it publicly and before God.

After hearing Stephen so carefully recite how their forefathers consistently killed the messengers rather than heed the message, they did the exact same thing. Someone once said the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. Had those present for Stephen’s sermon felt indifference, they would have simply shrugged their shoulders and walked away. What they felt was not indifference; it was conviction from the Holy Spirit. They felt a feeling that could not be ignored. It required a response of acceptance or rejection. They chose to reject and kill the messenger.

The world doesn’t want to hear a message on sin but it is required in order to experience God’s grace.
4. The response of Stephen’s sermon.

It is only natural for us to ask the standard set of questions. How could God allow this to happen to such a faithful witness? Why didn’t God stop it? Why snuff out the flame of Stephen who was at the peak of his spiritual experience? We’ve all asked these sort of questions when tragedy occurs.

The answer can only be found by reflecting on the event historically and with a solid understanding that God has a determined will that must take place. And what is at the heart of God’s determined will? It is to build the kingdom of God; the reign of Christ in people’s heart.

Because of the death of Stephen, the believers were scattered. Without it, they would have remained in Jerusalem but because of it, they were forced to flee. They were to be a part of the spread of the good news that would eventually spread to the ends of the earth; ultimately falling on our ears.

There is a saying that is true; “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” Stephen was the first martyr and his blood became the seed for much of the growth of the kingdom of God.

Not to be overlooked was a young man standing, watching and approving of the stoning of Stephen. Young Saul was one of those filled with anger over the words of Stephen. But there was something else filling the heart of young Saul; fear. Saul could not help but feel threatened by the truth of the words of Stephen. And, there was the look on the face of Stephen. Fear, anger and resentment were missing in the face of Stephen and they were replaced with peace. Stephen showed the same peace in death that he enjoyed in living. Stephen whose name means “crown” approached death as if a crown of glory was being placed on his head. A picture Saul would later describe to Luke for the book of Acts.

Finally, there was the dying words of Stephen that must have echoed in Saul’s head every day and night; “Lord, do not charge them with this sin!” Of all the things for him to say, he dares to ask for the forgiveness of those who are stoning him to death.

God’s determined will was thrusting forward. Probably no one could see it that sad day but God’s will was taking place. The church was growing. The message was heard and though the response was not as one might expect, it was heard and is still heard today. And a young man by the name of Saul was being prepared for a day soon to come when Jesus Christ himself would call his name and change his life forever.

Conclusion

God has a way of taking things that we do not understand and making complete sense of them in time. He will use the sins of men just as He uses the faithfulness of men. One could easily look at the sermon of Stephen and conclude it was a failure but it was anything but a failure. It was a complete success in furthering the will of God.

One thing I have learned as a preacher is my responsibility is to preach what God lays on my heart and leave the results to the Holy Spirit. While I am always encouraged by favorable comments from those leaving the worship service, I have learned the real results can only be seen in time as the Holy Spirit does His work in people’s hearts.

In Romans chapter 2 and Galatians 5, we see that Paul heard the words of Stephen loud and clear. He restates them as he writes “circumcision is of the heart” and explains that “what matters is faith working through love.”

Stephen’s sermon, his testimony and his death serve as a crown of glory to one who was truly faithful. And now we must look in the mirror and ask, “Am I willing to be faithful to my Lord?”