
Acts 7:

Preach On, Brother

by C. Bruce White

“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

“Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse. And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ And having said this, he fell asleep” (7:51-60).

The seventh chapter of Acts is a sermon within itself. It is a sermon God recorded for all preachers to read.

I. THE SERMON (7:1-53)

The chapter opens with Stephen’s sermon. Stephen lays before the Sanhedrin council a cap-

sule of Jewish history. He begins with the call of Abraham and goes to Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs, Joseph’s part in Israel’s move to Egypt, the captivity in Egypt, Moses’ birth and experiences in Egypt, Israel in the wilderness, and deliverance from Egyptian bondage. Stephen outlines Israel’s history to bring out one truth: All history happened to introduce Jesus Christ to the world. All of history is void in answering man’s needs, separate from Jesus Christ.

Justification before God cannot come by the law. Man cannot justify himself. All the law and prophets could not provide what man needs. Man needs release from sin; he needs a sin offering. In Galatians 3, Paul said the law was a schoolmaster, a tutor to bring us to Christ. Since Christ has come, we are made children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. The Scriptures say, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). The teachings of God in the law and prophets point to Christ. Man’s hope is in Christ. We become children of God, brothers as it were with Abraham’s children, by faith in Christ Jesus. When we surrender to the commands of Jesus, making Him Lord of our lives, we are justified.

As Stephen develops these ideas in his sermon, the Sanhedrin legalists were not willing to receive this type of religious instruction. Their attitude was, “We are the children of Abraham. We have never been in bondage to any man. We are the people of God.” Their reaction to the preaching of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord was

simply, "We do not need it. We have all we need in the law and our traditions."

Stephen climaxes his sermon by saying, "You do not even keep the law. Why did your fathers destroy the prophets who tried to bring them back to the law? Jesus, the one whom you have slandered and murdered, was not telling you to disobey the law." Stephen brought the gospel to where these people lived. The sermon he preached is an indictment against false religionists who have become satisfied in their own approach to God and disrespectful of God's approach to man.

In the first few verses of Romans 10 Paul said of the same type of audience,

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [Israel] is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God (vv. 1-3).

Paul may have well remembered the statements Stephen made in Acts 7 as he pointed the finger of accusation to those *pharisaic* Jews.

There is a danger which every true preacher will make clear to his hearers. We, like those pharisaic Jews, can determine in our minds how we are going to serve God. To be more specific, we might say that we can attend three services a week, read our Bibles, say our prayers, have a benevolent spirit, and everything will be all right with God.

This is reminiscent of the days of Hosea, when God through Hosea, charged Israel with establishing *their own* standards of righteousness. Hosea said, "You have your holy days, your feast days, and all your burnt offerings and sacrifices." God says He does not want any of them. He wants their love. The KJV says, "I want your mercy." God does not want rituals. He does not want the punching of a religious clock. He wants hearts. He wants the servitude of love. God is searching for a love response from man. He does not need another system or creed, written or unwritten, but a heart filled with the love of God and overflowing in glory to Him.

Stephen becomes the example to every preacher in every generation of that voice which warns of the replacement of loving service to God by some man-made, legalistic system of

religion. However, there is nothing more difficult for people to face than the destruction of their sacred cows. Preachers get into trouble quickly when they meddle with the religious traditions of their audience. You will not strike at traditions or sacred cows and find much peace.

A preacher can speak constantly on the sins of the people down the street, on the other side of town, or in abstract situations, but when he starts talking about the sins of traditions at home he has quit preaching and gone to meddling. That is what Stephen did. He stood with a sincere love for God's truth, exposing their lives by the truth of God.

II. THE SANHEDRIN (7:54-57)

Stephen is put on trial. He is a preacher on trial for his sermon: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him" (7:54).

What will hurt pride do? It will blind us to all reason! Men fill themselves with pride; they build their own little air castles. What man builds is his. Somebody crushes his castles. Then He loses practical sense. He loses reason. We might say, "That is unreal. It does not make any sense." But it happens. The Sanhedrin was composed of men of distinction. But their religious pride had been hurt, and they lost all reason.

The Bible teaches that a proud look is an abomination to God. This is why the Bible teaches us again and again to resist the sin of pride, to humble ourselves, to not be striving for vain glory. John mentions Diotrophes in 3 John, saying, ". . . who loves to be first among them." These eloquent men were seen gnashing at Stephen with their teeth. This may be figurative language, but it is a sordid picture.

They cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears. They were saying, "You are saying something I do not want to hear. I will stop up my ears." They ran upon him with one accord, saying, "You are saying things we do not want to hear, so we will attack you and cast you out of the city." How many preachers have been cast out because they shot arrows into religious tradition, brought down religious air castles, or shot a hole in some religious prophet's pride?

III. THE STONING (7:58-60)

They cast Stephen out of the city and stoned him. Stoning was a fairly common practice in that day. When someone had blasphemed God or had done something similar, they would be stoned. What we need most to get out of these verses on Stephen's trial is the ends to which men will go to support their own cause. Men will not go to such ends to support someone else's cause. Men will not work as hard, put forth as much effort, or spend the same energy in supporting the work of the Lord. It is a sad commentary, but it is true. These men were willing to not only behave as animals but were also prepared to literally take the life of another man because of their own cause.

Look at Stephen's death. He died for truth. Do we believe in anything enough to die for it? A flyer says, "Suppose you were carried before a court to be tried as a Christian. Would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

We meet in nice buildings to worship God, enjoying comforts and conveniences and feeling no pressure whatsoever. Suppose another force

overran our government. Suppose the militia should burst in the doors of a church building where you were present, and the first thing they do is shoot the preacher. They do not ask him anything; they just shoot him. They say, "We want everyone to stand; you cannot leave." They start with the elders and deacons and go right down the rows. Each must come down the aisle to the front where a soldier awaits with a gun. The officer asks you as you get to the front, "Do you believe that Jesus is God's Son? Or are you ready to deny Him?" The man in front of you says, "I believe that Jesus is God's Son," and they shoot him right in the head. You are next. What would you say? Do we really believe in Him?

Stephen died in peace. He knew his Savior. He even talked like Jesus. He died in security. Notice his words, "Receive my spirit." Being confident of heaven helps one face the inevitable—death.

CONCLUSION

Do you have any conviction for which you would die? Are we like Stephen?

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