

Let's open our Bibles tonight. We have communion as well, so let's get to it. Acts 7:1.

The book of Acts, as you've known if you've been with us at all on Wednesday nights, is really the report from the Lord for the first thirty years of the church: the early church, the rapid growth, the outpouring of God's Spirit, the carrying of the gospel through the great commission - not only beginning in Jerusalem but then heading out from there through the ends of the earth. And because of that - the report that we are given by Luke - we can compare what kind of church should we be, and what kind of people should we be so that God could use us because that work continues to tonight.

Chapter 6 (and really the first six chapters) is really all about the spread of the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem. Stephen will, through his death, drive it out into Samaria. Paul will follow. In the middle of that, there is Philip taking the gospel to Samaria, which is kind of a little further out yet. And then Paul will take it to the Gentiles. So we kind of get the report of everyone. In chapter 6, the church had grown so quickly (and now it had begun to multiply in numbers) that you find the first organizational move in the ministry. They picked seven guys that were going to sort out the issue of the widows who were not feeling like they were getting as much support as the Jewish widows. But these were Hellenist widows. They were Jews, for the most part from other countries, with different cultures and languages, and they felt like they were being discriminated against. So the guys, the apostles, said, "We'll pick seven guys filled with the Spirit, known amongst the tribes," if you will, "those that we can entrust this job to," and they did. These were men of reputation and wisdom and all. And they picked seven Hellenist guys, guys that came from other cultures, and they put them over the service, and seven of them are named. They are, like I said, Hellenists. A couple of them - Stephen and Philip - God will use to greater places of responsibility. They were faithful in the little, and then God gave them much.

But we begin in chapter 6 with Stephen. He was ministering to a synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, where the Hellenists met in Jerusalem. They spoke different languages, maybe ate different foods, had different practices.

And they began to contend with him about Jesus, and he stood his ground. He knew the Bible really well. They couldn't overthrow him. God began to pour out His Spirit upon Stephen in a way that, as he prayed for people, people were getting healed and delivered from the enemy, if you will. And frustration began to grow amongst this Hellenist group. And so, in response to his words to them, rather than repenting, they began to concoct lies about him. They made stuff up, they brought in false witnesses. The Sanhedrin had become increasingly violent (the ruling party, if you will) against the church. And so Paul (or Saul, as his name would early be called) was one of the chief persecutors driven by that group. But Stephen is brought before this hateful group. And, if you've been with us, we kind of despise these guys - religious guys who are bent on violence to have their way. And we read in verse 15 of the last chapter (chapter 6) that Stephen stood before them to give an answer for these charges, and they looked steadfastly upon him as he had the face of an angel. There was a peace, an angelic look, to Stephen as he has to endure these false charges against him.

Chapter 7, in which we will look at his message today (we'll stop at verse 50 or so - we want to look at the result next week), what we would like to learn from the message tonight is Stephen's defense of the gospel. It is the longest sermon in the book of Acts. It is noteworthy because Stephen is not an apostle. He is just an ordinary dude who got saved and began to love the Lord and walk with God. He uses the Septuagint version of the Old Testament (or the Greek translation of the Old Testament) because he's a Hellenist - he came from a place that wouldn't really speak Hebrew, but he learned Greek. And due to its length, I think it's easy to miss what Stephen is attempting to do. So I'd like to at least put you in the position where fifty verses don't just kind of get muddled, but you see the heart behind, and the plan behind, Stephen's words to these men.

But maybe you can put yourself in his shoes for a minute. Stephen is now arrested by the authority in the country and made to stand where Jesus was condemned to death - before the same group. He was made to stand where Peter and John were threatened, and then recently the apostles had been brought and beaten. He was made to stand before a crowd that was steeped in religious ceremony but had no relationship with God at all. They were not at all opposed to resorting to violence and threats and even murder to get what they wanted. And now you stand there, where they stood, and you're expected to give a defense for your faith, and you know that this audience is not going to be on your side. But today you get the opportunity to speak to them. Peter would write, in his first letter, "Sanctify the

Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). The word "defense" is where we get our word "apology" from. But that's really not the way that it is used here. It is, rather, a defense with reason and substantive arguments. Paul gave his defense in Jerusalem (in Acts 22:1) when he was arrested, and he stands before the people, and he says, "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." Paul would write in chapter 1:7 of Philippians, as he began his letter to this young church, and he says, "I want you to know that in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of God's grace." Paul found himself oftentimes having to defend what he believed to those who were hell-bent on resisting him.

I think that most believers could tell you what they believed, hopefully. But not every believer can defend why they believe what they believe and what is the reasoning behind and the assurance in their heart that they can really clearly define why they believe in Christ. I think it is made all the more difficult by the pressure that Stephen is under. I mean, he, I'm pretty sure, knows this could be his death sentence. These guys were not exactly easy to deal with, and his critics could have struck fear in his heart. I think that he would have had to been completely persuaded in his own heart to speak like this at all. In other words, he had to just know what he believed, and why, in such a manner that nothing could deter him from saying that to those that were listening. God would have you and me, I think, be ready to answer for our faith, to be able to talk about the cross and about sin and about the resurrection, and God's forgiveness. And we could defend our hopes.

I just want to remind you (if you weren't with us last week) that they accused Stephen of four things. And you can look back (in verse 11) where they said this, " 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' " And then (in verse 13), " 'This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place' " (the Temple) " 'and the law' " (of God). So they accused him of four things - to blaspheme the temple, the law, Moses and God Himself. That was their accusations. And I think, as you read through the sermon (and we will read it, I think, quickly enough to be able to not lose track of where we're at), that Stephen doesn't employ any kind of debate strategy. I don't know if you've ever taken a debate class. I remember having to take one in college. And there are certain things, I think, that you can do to win arguments when you're before others. He doesn't do that. He just quotes the Bible, a lot. He is a fellow that knows the

Scriptures well. He bounces from place to place. It's kind of like you wouldn't want to hang around with him in a Bible quiz because he's going to win. And he proclaims the message. And Paul uses the same approach when he (in Acts 17) gets to the Thessalonians, and he gets to the synagogue there, and he reasons with them, and he alleges with them, and he opens to them, and he demonstrates, and he explains. And then they told him to take a hike. But he went with reason to give an explanation. So, there in Thessalonica, some got saved, many were angry, and violence would follow.

Now, just putting yourself in Stephen's shoes - how would you feel standing here when your life is on the line, and you're pretty sure that your best presentation is probably not going to be received? But yet you're representing the Lord. You've got to give it your best shot, and you've got to lay it out. So there's something to be said for this young man. I think I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago there're a lot of sermons in the book of Acts, and I think it's so that we can learn about sharing our faith. But there're a couple things that are always in common, and I think that they're things that you should probably at least put in your notes when you go out and share with people. There're some pointers here, and I'll point them out before we start.

The one thing you want to do, always, when you go out to share is know your audience. I think if you say to somebody, "I have been blood bought and sanctified, and I'm rapture-bound," you're going to lose an audience fairly quickly. I think people go, "You're a nut. I have no idea what you're talking about." And sometimes there is confusion in the way people share their faith. Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians, said in chapter 9:22 of the first book, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." In other words, it's all right to meet people where they live. We had a lady with us one day who went to the Salvation Army with us at a place where they were housing ladies who were abused and were under protective custody and were homeless and had children. And she told a story about how frustrated she had been when she had gone to Nordstrom that day to find 500-count Egyptian cotton and couldn't find any. And I thought, "Yeah, these ladies are gonna care about that." But yet to her it made a lot of sense. It just didn't make very much sense in her presentation. Stephen is very aware of who he's speaking to.

Secondly, he's very relevant. And I think there's something to be said for being boring. You're boring. And it is hard to keep people interested if you're trying to

reach them when you're boring. Stephen does something really wise. He talks to them about their favorite subject - them and their history, which they loved more than anything else. He uses the words "our fathers" a lot. He throws himself in with those that he is speaking to. He's not lecturing to them, he's sharing with them, and he speaks to them about what concerns them.

Thirdly, he uses the Bible, the Word of God. I think you can't say it enough. This is not just a book, it's God's Word. It is not just a set of words written in a book years ago, it is the declaration of Almighty God that He tells us will never go out void (Isaiah 55:11). So you should be very confident to give the Word out to the extent that you know it well. Psalm 119:130 says, "The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." Paul said to the Romans (1:16), "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek." And so it is important that in your sharing you share the Word, emphasize the sinfulness of man. Ultimately you're going to have to get to man didn't do it on his own. He can't do it. It is the hardest part of the gospel message - you're a sinner. We usually try to avoid that or cushion it. But we can't really do that. Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-4), "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." But it's a speaking to the fact that man is hungry to have a life that will be pleasing to God. You can't lose sight of the essentials, and this is a big one that has to be addressed.

And then finally I would say, from all of the sermons in the book of Acts, point to Jesus as the answer. Make sure you mention Him a lot because it is all about Him, isn't it? We will read, in chapter 8 (when we get to Philip out in the wilderness, talking to a fellow in a chariot), and the verse reads, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture" (the man was reading), "preached Jesus to him" (verse 35). It didn't matter where he was. "All right. Let's turn to Jesus."

And so I think those are the things that you will find here a lot. In this sermon, you will find Stephen answering all of the false charges of blaspheming God and Moses and the law and the temple. But he will weave into the story their track record as God's people in national blindness, in national rebellion, and will say to them, "You've always missed God's plan. Now you missed Jesus." That's really his argument in one sentence. Stephen will speak to them about repentance and faith in Christ. The conviction that it will bring will cause these men to kill him. But

more importantly, and this is God's plan, it drove Saul to start to think about his life. And Paul's ministry, ultimately, is indebted to Stephen's faithfulness to preach fifty verses. It changed the way Paul looked at life. And God used Stephen to get to Paul.

So, verse 1, "Then the high priest said, 'Are these things so?' " Having heard the false witnesses (back in verses 13 and 11, the lies), Stephen is now asked to respond to Caiaphas, who was the high priest. "Is that true?" To which Stephen, I think, says in his heart, "I'm glad you asked." And the Lord gave him an open door, and Stephen is not the fellow that's going to run away from a very great opportunity. But it isn't without danger. So he says this, verse 2, " 'Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, "Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you." Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.' " First point - "Hey, God found us." Right? "We're God's people. He called our father Abraham who asked him to follow God's direction." He haltingly did. Abraham left Ur, but he didn't really leave in the direction God called him. He took his sweet time. He camped on the edge of the wilderness in Haran for years before his father finally died, and then, when Terah died, he made his move, and he listened to what God had to say. Notice in verse 4 he said, "Then he came out. God moved him to the place that we're now living." Stephen declares that God was with Abraham. "This is how we were born as a people. We were led by the Lord and guided by the Lord." And I suspect that the whole audience of these old, stuck-in-the-mud, hateful, bitter men were hanging on every word to be sure he wasn't deviating from what they understood. They were just waiting for him to say something wrong.

Now, you can mark as we go how many different verses and all that he applies. He doesn't have notes. He wasn't planning for this. He didn't have a sermon prepared. He's just sharing from his heart, and yet he's nailing the Scriptures and weaving them together from all over the place. To him, God laid out the future for Israel. Abraham was the promised seed even before he had a son. He's not blaspheming God. He's acknowledging God. He's honoring the Lord. He's recognizing who He is. He quotes out of Genesis 15, he quotes out of Exodus 3, he even speaks (in verse 5) and he says, " 'And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. But God spoke in this way: that his

descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. "And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge" said God, "and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place." ' " Abraham had lived his entire life by faith - never received the land. God laid out for him what He was planning to do. He didn't have any children, but the Lord was talking about a nation being in captivity for four hundred years to Egypt. He runs through history very quickly, but he has a point. He wants to show them it's walking by faith. It's God's choices that they have set aside in their history.

He said, in verse 8, " 'Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs. And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.' " So, Abraham lived by faith. He was given the covenant of circumcision, which distinguished the Jews from everyone in the world. They were to cut away the flesh. They were to live as people that didn't live by the flesh but by the Spirit. And Abraham died believing God, being faithful to the Lord, appropriating His promises for a future generation. He then quickly moves forward hundreds of years. He blasts through everything to get us to the place that Joseph comes upon the scene. And notice what he says (in verse 9 and in verse 10), "You guys have a pretty bad track record of being faithful. God was good to you, but you didn't really love the Lord very much. In fact, Jacob's twelve sons and everyone in that room was a part of that tribe, one way or another. But notice our fathers, the patriarchs, moved with envy against God's choice." God chose Joseph. You remember his dreams. He went and told his brothers, very innocently, told his mom and dad, too, and they all kind of scoffed at him. "We're not going to bow to you! Who do you think you are?" Made the brothers mad enough to sell him into slavery. And so they were moved with envy against God's choice. God stuck with him. We read that right here. God delivered him, God was with him (the end of verse 9). But this young nation that God had chosen had rebellious hearts, and they had rejected God's choice, and they fought against God's ways. Point one - we don't have a good track record of walking with God.

Verse 11, " 'Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there

was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.' " Joseph was rejected by his people. The Gentiles received him. Isn't that interesting? Just like Jesus. It isn't until the second time that the family comes that they recognize him, and he spares them. I just want you to notice the groundwork that Stephen is laying out. He would ultimately say, "Jesus came. You rejected him, too. He's the Savior. You killed Him. Just like you wanted to kill Joseph, just like you wanted to set him aside, just like you've never wanted to live by faith, yet we were founded on faith. The just shall live by faith." Abraham had faith. Joseph was God's choice. And Stephen just continues to answer these accusations. "You blasphemed God." "I didn't blaspheme God. I'm telling you, you set Him aside, the ones that He had chosen."

He will turn, in a moment, to Moses, verse 17. " 'But when the time of the promise drew near' " (he skips 430 years) " 'which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt till another king arose who did not know Joseph. This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live. At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months. But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.' " So he goes from God, who established the people, to Moses, the one that they said he had blasphemed. Moses was born under adverse conditions. He was spared by the faith of his parents. You can read that in Hebrews 11:23. He miraculously survives a government edict, a Pharaoh that rules much of the world. Moses would be God's next deliverer. Right? He was His man of the hour. Joseph to get them into Egypt to save them; now Moses to get them out of Egypt. Raised early by his parents (and I think it's just a story that you're all well familiar with), he eventually went to the best schools in Egypt that they could offer him. Yet God kept Moses' spirit for Himself. So far not so blasphemous, and maybe the guy settled down all of these blood-thirsty men listening. It is hard to know.

He continues the story of Moses, verse 23, " 'Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, "Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?" But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?" Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian where he had two sons.' " So, at forty years old Moses realized God's calling upon his life. He realized he would be a deliverer that God had chosen him to be. He was surprised that Israel didn't see it. And if you're putting yourself in Stephen's picture, this is now the second time that Israel has decided to ignore a deliverer that God had sent. They are now two for two. As a result, Moses fled to the backside of Midian, which happened to be, again, a Gentile area, where he was received. He took a Gentile bride. He grew up in the Lord on the backside of the mountain for the next forty years. He had a couple of children as well. Moses' life is kind of divided up into forties - forty in Pharaoh's court, forty in the middle of nowhere. He went from somebody to nobody to learn that he could be somebody in the Lord - the last forty years, if you will, of his life. So Moses spent forty years out in the wilderness, away from the work that God had planned for him to do.

Verse 30, " 'And when forty years had passed,' " (now he's 80 years old) " 'an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, "I am the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses trembled and dared not look. Then the LORD said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt." This Moses whom they rejected, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge?" is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush.' " Quoting out of Exodus 2 and 3, in verse 34 the LORD says to Moses, "I am aware of the people and their suffering. The time has come. It is time for you to go and bring deliverance. I'm going to use you as the vessel. You're going to be My deliverer." And Stephen goes out of his way to say, "They rejected Moses

forty years earlier. Now he comes back because God is still faithful and will do what God has said, and He's going to bring the grace of God. But he's still not going to be so welcome by the people because you're not really a very in-tune-with-the-LORD kind of people. You're good at missing, swinging and missing." I love verse 34. The LORD said, "I've seen, I've heard, and I've come. So you go. I see it, I hear it, I want to do something about it. I'm going to use you." And you know Moses and how he kind of hemmed and hawed. But suffice it to say, at least from Stephen's argument, the LORD was saying, "It is now time to go." Now the people might very well, in this crowd of folks who were hearing his testimony, have said, "Okay, so far, so good. That's exactly what happened." I don't think they could have been rubbed the wrong way. But Stephen's strategy is just to bring them face to face with their failure to obey God and then show them how God had always been good to them, even in their direct rebellion, time and time and time again. And that had been the case for them. They were proud of their religion. "We're God's people." "Well, were you? Because you certainly haven't walked with God." And so he is rightfully dividing the Scriptures. He's comparing their historical responses to God and to the deliverers that God sent to their recent response, in the present tense, to Jesus - God's ultimate Deliverer and Lord, to whom much of these folks, actually, were a type. They didn't see it yet. He hadn't made the application yet. But when he does, oh, man, it all blows up in his face, and the people go crazy.

So he says, in verse 35, " 'This Moses whom they rejected.' " Exodus 2 again. "You refused him, but God still used him. As with Joseph, so with Moses." The Jewish argument, certainly in the 1st century, was, "If Jesus had been the Messiah, we would have recognized Him." Stephen's argument would have been, "Oh, really? You're not really good at recognizing anything God's done! You missed it, you missed it, and you missed it again. You've only gotten this far by the grace and the mercy and the love of God, not by your own faithfulness or obedience." Their own history indicted them, and Stephen is quietly hammering away at the issue of sin and the grace of God. I mean, the whole purpose for the religious system, if you will, the law that they loved so much was to point out their failures and their need for a Savior. The law was intended to make you guilty, not pick up to try to make you holy.

So we read at the end of verse 36 (and at the end of those forty years), " 'He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.' " So he just jumps ahead, if you

will, continues to move. They spent forty years in the wilderness. Why? Because of their unbelief. God had put His power on display. He had shown His strength for their benefit. Always taking the wrong side of things. That's literally what they were doing.

Verse 37, " 'This is that Moses' " (Stephen goes on to say) " 'who said to the children of Israel, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear." ' " Him you shall hear. Now he quotes a prophecy of Moses from Deuteronomy 18:15 where Moses said, "One day there's coming someone just like me, a Prophet, who is going to speak on your behalf, who is going to come to deliver you." Look, he's not blaspheming Moses. He's just paying close attention to what the LORD had said. Even during the ministry of Jesus (if you read the gospels), you will find that many people thought He might be that very One. John 6:14, there's a quote there where they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world," and they used the exact same language that Moses had. At the Feast of Tabernacles, in John 7:40, they said, "Truly this is the Prophet." "I know this is the guy that Moses was talking about," and yet they rejected him. The first time they rejected him, and he went and got a Gentile bride, and then he returned Israel to the Land of Promise. So, he ends with Moses' quote (verse 37) about the coming Messiah. He lets Moses kind of die there, if you will. That's the part of the insinuation, that he had blasphemed Moses. "Well, look, Moses' words were, 'After me, there's coming One just like me who's going to come to bring deliverance.' " Well they had never really listened to Moses or followed him very faithfully. They had rejected him, and they were continuing in that vain.

Well, then there was the accusation, "You blasphemed the law" or the Word of God. Verse 38, " 'This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us,' " (the words of God) " 'whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, "Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.' " So he quotes, now, out of Exodus 32, and he says this, "Our fathers, the guys we're so proud of, rejected God, they rejected Moses, and let's face it - they're the ones who rejected the law of God themselves. In fact, while Moses was up in the mountain receiving the living oracles, they were down in the valley breaking them already. Their faithfulness to the LORD didn't even last till the

thing got written down on rock. Moses was up in the mount of God, and the people were in the valley worshipping false idols and desiring life and religion as they'd known in Egypt, the very place from which God had delivered them. Which is why, when you get to the Ten Commandments, that the first commandment is what? 'You shall not make any likeness of Me. Have no strange Gods before Me.' And yet look what they're doing here." That's his argument. "I know I'm on trial for breaking your rules, but I want to tell you how you've walked with God all of these generations. You've not done well." And Stephen continues to draw attention to the wicked response to the LORD, Scripture upon Scripture. This guy knew his Bible. Like I said, it's an amazing thought to see where he reached from, and he's able to put the story together under this kind of duress and do it well - because he was a man that walked with God.

Well, verse 42 tells us the result of those things in those days. " 'Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: "Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship; and I will carry you away beyond Babylon." ' " The result was, over these many years - and there were many years covered here really quickly - that historically the children of Israel fell into idolatry to such a degree that they would finally be carried off into captivity for seventy years so that they could learn of the goodness of God. But here's Stephen's picture. "Our fathers were horrible! They denied faith. They blasphemed Moses. They mistreated the law. You're accusing me of this! God would not be mocked." We read nine times, in the account in Egypt, that Pharaoh would not believe; the tenth time, that he could not believe. The children of Israel eventually just sold themselves out to idolatry. The quote here is from the book of Amos, chapter 5:25-27. Thank God that He tempers His judgments with grace. But their long history would say that they always failed to do what God had said, though God gave them plenty of reasons to believe in Him, even to the point where they ended up in captivity in Babylon.

"And because you're accusing me also of blaspheming the temple," he goes on, and he says this. Verse 44, " 'Our fathers had the tabernacle' " (the portable temple, if you will) " 'of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, who God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David,

who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built him a house. However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?" ' " Fourth accusation, chapter 6:13, "You blasphemed the holy place." So he grabs ahold of that. Look, Moses was given by God, in the wilderness, a blueprint. He was told, if you go back and read it, that he would build it in such a way that it would be a reflection of what heaven was like. So build it carefully. It would be a picture of the true house of God in heaven. And Stephen's point is very clear. "You chose to worship idols at a time when you had in your very midst the presence of God and the picture of heaven itself, and God's inhabitation. So you had everything you needed - God there, His glory, the cloud by day, the fire by night. You had everything you needed, and you chose to go worship a golden calf." Even so (verse 45, 46, 47), God continued to be faithful to His Word. He brought the nation across the Jordan. He brought them into the Promised Land that He had told (years ago) Abraham He would give it to them. He gave them victory over all of the enemies in the land under the leadership of Joshua. He met with them at this tabernacle for generation after generation, never forsook the place until David came and said, "You know, I'm living in a palace. The LORD's still living in that dirty tent. I want to build Him a beautiful house." And the LORD said, "You're a man of war. So I'll let your son build it, but you're not going to build it." And David spent the rest of his life gathering together the materials to make this the most beautiful place ever. It would become Solomon's Temple. God, who would choose who would build the Temple, when it would be built. Even at the dedication (1 Kings 8), it was Solomon who stood up and said, "I realize God doesn't live here. The place is too small. It can't hold Almighty God. But it is a great representation to us, as His people, of a place that we can come and meet with Him. A point of reference, a place to turn. God is bigger than the Temple." David knew it, Solomon knew it, and both saw the Temple as a place of worship for the nation. In fact, as Stephen was speaking (here), Solomon's Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. They had started to rebuild the second Temple with Ezra and Zerubbabel. It was currently being remodeled, as Stephen spoke, by Herod of all people - not exactly a godly man - only half a Jew, actually, and the last of his kind. But he was pouring money into it because he wanted to be known for his building. He could have cared less about the God of the Temple, but he loved the building idea. That Temple, by 70 A.D. - not very far forward (thirty years or less), will be absolutely leveled by the Tenth Roman Legion led by Titus. In fact, we were in Rome with our

group here, a couple or six months ago, and the Arch of Titus, the arch that they build for conquering heroes to come home, in Rome depicts him riding in his chariot with a menorah in his hand. He'd wiped out the Temple of God. That still stands. But even so, this Temple, "Well, we've got the Temple. You've blasphemed the Temple." Well, wait a minute. Is that what he has done? "Rather than being so attached to the Temple, you ought to be impressed with the God of the Temple who has shown mercy and patience over the hundreds of years since He chose you as His people. As He's been faithful to every generation, you didn't acknowledge Him."

It's a pretty powerful sermon, but I think verse 51 signed his death warrant. But he says this to them, " 'You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.' When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth." One thing for sure. His closing comments were pretty powerful. Right? He's not very wishy-washy. "How long are you going to continue in the same pattern of rebellion and rejection, as your long history shows, against God and His goodness to us as His people?" For fifty-three verses, Stephen lays out the Word. He points out sin. He points out blindness. He refers to rebellion in the lives of God's people. He says to them, "You ignored the walk of faith where we started. We didn't start because we earned something. Abraham walked with God to a place he didn't know where he was going. That was his claim to faith. He followed the LORD, not knowing where he went. He trusted God. You missed Joseph when God had chosen him. You rejected Moses, though he was sent to deliver you. You trusted in the very law for your righteousness that you are guilty of breaking. Even when it was written down by God, you were already breaking it, and you honor a Temple without honoring the LORD of the Temple when even the people who built the Temple said, 'God doesn't live here. This can't be His place. At best it would be a place where we acknowledge Him.' " Nothing had changed over the years. And he says to them, "As your fathers have done it, you've done it." It's a straight-forward message, and the response is explosive, I think, in more ways than one.

Sometimes, to share your faith it requires just boldly speaking. Not always so easy. But if you know someone's on their way to hell, love would warn them, I think.

Just tell them. You don't have to be the most well-liked, but you should be the best-quoted one. Why don't we do it more often? I don't know if it's fear. I don't know if it's lack of confidence in the sharing of God's Word. I don't know if it's feelings of inadequacy. I think if you study, systematically (and I'm singing to the choir - you're here in the middle of the week), then you should know God's Word. And knowing God's Word, it should be able to be poured forth from your heart. I always think about Jesus on the afternoon where He met with the two on the road to Emmaus - Easter afternoon. Spent the whole afternoon with them, walked with them for miles. And He began to talk to them, and one of the things He said to them (Luke 24:25), "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And then it says, "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." And I find Stephen doing the same thing here. Right? As you realize that this is God's Word, and you can put it together in a way that you can present it to others, I think that there is no room to contain the fruit that can come from our lives.

What I, unfortunately, see so often in Christians - and maybe you do as well - is that much of the Western church is more interested in how God can bless them than in how God might use them to reach others. So, you know, read the books. Go to a Christian bookstore, and read the titles. It's all about what you're going to get in walking with God, and how you can believe to prosperity, and, "Oh, how I just said the word of faith, I made the promise, I claimed the word." But I think that unless you're here to reach the lost, you might as well just go to heaven. Because you're on your way anyway. So why does the Lord leave you here? Because He doesn't like you? No. He'd rather be with you. But He leaves you here so that the world can know who He is. And certainly the church grew at this most phenomenal rate at a time when men like Stephen (and women as well) were willing to give their lives for the sake of the gospel and share it with others. Not where we spend our days wondering how we can be served. I had a guy that said to me, "Hey, we're leaving the church." I said, "All right." I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, I found a place that has a 10:45 service, and that suits me better." And I thought, "Well, then you probably should go there because if that's all that church is to you, then you haven't got it yet. You have missed the boat." God's interest in you and me is that we can take the Word of God to the strongest skeptic and be able to leave them with an inability to answer the convictions of the Scriptures. And that's what Stephen did. They either had to repent, or they had to kill him. And they went

with the killing. Right? I mean, God stirs us to evangelism because that's the reason that the church is still here. I think that oftentimes the people you find most active in preaching the gospel are new believers because they're still excited about what God has done. Old believers are oftentimes worthless. They're too refined. They come to church - not to reach people but to analyze. "Oh, I've heard that joke before." They want to find fault. They don't want to be touched by God. They want to talk about theory, not action. I think if you and I, all of us, led five people to the Lord this year - here's the math - we'd have to have fifteen services on Sunday morning in this building. Fifteen! We're a long way from where God wants us to be. God help us. We are surrounded by dead men, and we have the cure. Don't we? It's right there in front of you. Give an answer for the hope that lies within you.

Stephen is a remarkable guy. The Bible says "of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38). He's one of them. But we have a task to accomplish, and it isn't to get more for ourselves. It is to get Jesus' name out to the world, and we're going to do it in a society that, increasingly, is going to hate you for it and think you're just nuts. But, hey, I would rather be judged nuts by them and faithful by the Lord than the other way around. I'll wait for His applause. How about you?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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