

The Hopelessness of Missing Jesus

Stephen Kasun | Acts 6:8-7:53

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Have you ever been so sure of something and then been so utterly and completely wrong? Jess and I were visiting my mom this last week, and we had a date night and went for a drive. I wanted to show her this place that I spent so much time. I wanted to explore what had changed since I was young. We were driving and had this plan on where to go. And Jess asked if we were going the right way. I'm a percentage guy. I like to give percentages. I often go with the 99%. I'm 99% sure. Here, my simple response to being questioned about a place of course I knew, was 100%. Only to realize like two seconds later I missed a turn.

The story we read this morning is going to have a bunch of guys that are 100% sure they are right. And yet, are going to come face to face with the reality that they are obviously missing something. But rather than simply wasting a couple minutes driving in the wrong direction, their misplaced assurance would be far more consequential.

If you have your Bibles, turn to Acts 6. We are going to finish Acts 6 and most of Acts 7 this morning. Last week we encountered the seven servants that the apostles appointed. Two of them get their own stories in the book of Acts, and one of them we're encountering this morning. Stephen was one of these men, a man, we're told, was filled with "faith and the Holy Spirit." We are going to see part of the conclusion to his ministry, which includes a really long sermon he gives before the court of the Sanhedrin.

The main idea I want us to hold in our minds as we wrestle with the text is this: **Proclaiming hope to the hopeless, means embracing hopelessness without Jesus.** An uncomfortable message in a pluralistic society like ours, certainly. But in Stephen's context, a deadly message to a group of high ranking religious leaders, who thought Jesus a fraud. We'll see the text in three parts this morning: In the preamble to the sermon, we will see **1) Spirit filled proclamation**, in the sermon itself we will see **2) The hopelessness of man**, and putting the two together at the end, **3) The transcendent hope of Jesus.**

1. Spirit filled proclamation. Stephen is unique among the seven chosen. We mentioned how Stephen is previously described, "filled with faith and the Holy Spirit." Notice, as we read the rest of Acts 6 how Luke portrays Stephen in the narrative. **Acts 6:8-15.**

What's happening here? Stephen is doing incredible things through the power of the Holy Spirit. We're told he's doing all kinds of signs and wonder and miracles. Some of the more staunchly religious Jews don't like what Stephen is doing, or the message that accompanies his mighty works. So they dispute with him.

In their opposition, they cannot win an argument. They can't come up with a way to beat him in debate. Why? Because Stephen is filled with the power, the words, of the Holy Spirit. They can't overcome Stephen because they can't overcome God. So rather than oppose him openly anymore, they rile up a crowd, whispering and conniving behind the scenes. Concocting untruths about Stephen, hoping the crowd would become unruly and overcome him.

It's not simply the crowd they whisper these lies to, they get together some of the religious and Jewish officials, people with real power and a very real ability to harm him, and convince them that Stephen is dangerous and should be arrested! So they arrest him and drag him before the council of religious leaders, charging him with the highest crimes possible. There were three lies and accusations that were being spread about him: blaspheming God, rejecting Moses and the law, and speaking against the temple, their holy place.

All of this happens rather quickly in the narrative, but did you notice how Luke describes Stephen through it all? Verse 8, 10, 15. Luke clearly wants us to see a man blessed and empowered by God, full of the Holy Spirit, and even shining with the glory of an angel. We are meant to pause and notice that he described very differently than most in Luke's accounts.

It's hard not to be awestruck with the miracles of the apostles and the disciples, and of Stephen, one of the seven servants. For me it's like, both an enamored love, and a trepidation fear. Modern Christians have a hard time with the recorded history of Acts because of this.

Whether you're one who longs for some transcendent experience with the Holy Spirit, to see something miraculous. Or if you're one who's a little uncomfortable with considering miracles in a world where nearly everything we encounter has some rational explanation. These kinds of passages where supernatural, Spirit filled things happen, doesn't usually sit super well.

But I think the Story of Stephen is actually really helpful here. We aren't told what the miracles that Stephen performed were. We aren't even told how the religious council responds to a man standing before them, with the shining face of an angel. You'd think there'd be some kind of reaction....but Luke doesn't give us great and miraculous things, Luke gives us a sermon.

A 53 verse sermon. A 53 verse proclamation by a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, a man full of grace and power, a man with the face of an angel. All these descriptors...and we get a sermon, not great and grand miracles. And a sermon, that's let's be honest, is a hard one to get through without our minds wander off.

What does this mean? The true gift that comes with being filled with the Holy Spirit is the clear and unashamed proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. If I were to create a clickbaity internet headline for this text it would, "You too are filled with the Power of the Spirit!" The video is just the simple, clear, unashamed message of the gospel.

Living in the Spirit is simply wearing the gospel on your lips. It's not some big, flashy miraculous and culturally relevant ministry. George Muller was a pretty famous 19th century pastor and educator. Very famous. But he didn't grow up in the faith. He was 15 when his friend Beta invited him to a Bible study, where this little thieving delinquent was convicted of his sin and converted to faith. George Muller would go on, to start a number of orphanages in Bristol England, eventually caring for over 10 thousand orphans boys and girls. He would found over 100 different Christian schools through which more than 120 thousand boys and girls would hear the gospel. He would spend the later years of his life, 17 years, preaching as a missionary.

George Muller did great things. And so did Beta. Most of us want to be George Muller. Not many of us long to be Beta. But it was Beta's ordinary faithfulness, that was the catalyst for a gospel witness that would reach hundreds of thousands of children.

It is the ordinary, Spirit filled proclamation of the gospel of truth that changes the world. It is the ordinary, Spirit filled proclamation of the gospel that changes the destiny of souls. If you want some special gift from the Holy Spirit, you've been given one: It's a message of hope that can save souls.

Perhaps even more difficult than letting go of our grand, and lofty ambitions of doing great things, is the pointed sharpness of the sermon that Stephen preaches to this council of Jewish leaders. **2) Hopelessness of Man.**

The sermon of Stephen goes almost the entirety of chapter 7, 53 verses. And it is both dour, and long. But it's actually a masterclass, in using a present circumstance, to illustrate gospel realities. If you recall, there are three charges against Stephen, as he stands before the court. And each part is a defense or response to those charges. But as we read sections, we are going to interpret it, and see the argument that Stephen is building inside of his response to the charges.

a) God's patient promises. Stephen is himself a Jew, standing before this court of educated OT teachers and rabbis and leaders. Acts 7:1-22. The first section is him establishing his Hebrew bonafides, as well as defending himself against the charge of blaspheming God. He rejects this false charge brought against him. What he does here is establish common ground between his accusers and him.

He begins by revering and honoring Abraham. He demonstrates the unfolding of history as the beginning of fulfillment to the promise God made to Abraham. He recounts the covenant between God and his people, the sign of circumcision that marked them as set apart. He moves through Jacob and his twelve sons, to the selling of Joseph into slavery, and how God used that evil for something very good: the preservation of Israel and even life among the nations. To the group of leaders that are accusing him of blaspheming their heritage and faith, he shakes his head. He too honors and trusts the word of God, and the tradition of God's people.

And yet, what he weaves into his account, are threads of a promise unfulfilled. A covenant not yet realized. **Acts 7:6-7, 9-10, 17b-21.** Four hundred years of subjugation under the tyrannical thumb of Egypt, the sons of Jacob who would betray their own brother Joseph and sell him into slavery, and just as God's people would find themselves clawing their way out of oppression they would be thrust back into slavery by a king who didn't know Joseph's faithful service, and feared the Jews. And yet God would preserve them in his patience. Protecting Moses, again, using the evil of man for his good purposes.

Through this whole sermon, not just this section, we see a patient God. A patient God whose timing of final deliverance and covenant fulfillment could be tasted, the scent of it reaching them, and yet no substance to satisfy their longing and their need.

As much as the history of Israel and the OT is one of man's rebellion, it is as much if not more about the enduring patience of God. Over and over God would let mercy triumph over judgment. Over and over offering a taste of a deliverance that would not be temporary, but permanent. Stephen reminds those judging him that the history of Israel was always pointing forward.

The promises of God to Abraham were pointing forward. Pointing toward everlasting realities, not temporary ones. Even in all of Israel's triumphs and deliverances, there was only a vapor of what was meant to be solid and enduring. Every time they seem to be heading in the right

direction, something goes awry, and they thrust again into suffering. Why? Because God's people's earthy prosperity was never the end, their eternal satisfaction is.

b) A pattern of rebellion. This is the other side of God's patience, what it is He has patience with: man's constant rebellion. Acts 7:23-35. He makes a second defense, against the second accusation, that he would ignore Moses and the law.

He recounts the story of Moses, when he kills an Egyptian slaver for abusing a fellow Jew. In detail Stephen describes Moses encounter with God in the burning bush, and his calling to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt.

As Stephen stand's before this council and is accused of rejecting Moses, again he shakes his head. He is would not simply throw out the history and tradition of God's people. He perhaps revers Moses more than anyone else he discusses in his sermon. Even when Moses kills a dude in anger, he describes it as "defending the oppressed man." A very gentle euphemism for murder. He holds Moses up as a redeemer.

But how do the people of Israel respond to Moses and to their God? **Acts 7:35-43.** They reject Moses, somehow forgetting the supernatural plagues and the giant sea that split in half that allowed them to escape, they disobey God's instructions, groan that they were better off under the oppression of the Egyptians, and when Moses leaves for 10 seconds to literally go speak to God on their behalf, they begin making golden idols to worship.

Their rebellion would be hard to believe, if it wasn't simply a summary of their entire history as God's people. Stephen starts poking the bear, putting pressure on the repeated unfaithfulness of God's people. That even in their deliverance and relief from their circumstantial sufferings, they would remain rebels and sinners. Even in the euphoria of escaping slavery and oppression, the heart of man would remain rebellious and dark.

As we read this, the story of Israel's rebellion is really the story of all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, from the fall in Genesis 3, to August 18, 2024.

In Romans 1 we're told that every person who has ever lived sits under God without excuse. No one can escape the reality of rebellion. Whether you believe in God or not, you are subject to his rule. The story of Israel's rebellion is really the story of humanity's rebellion.

And so we arrive at the thrust of Stephen's sermon. A critique of Israel and really, all of humanity, as holding onto, and looking for hope in all the wrong places. **c) Man's misplaced worship.** Stephen encounters the last of the charges against him, speaking against the temple. **Acts 7:44-48.**

Different from the previous two charges, Stephen doesn't defend himself here. He doesn't disagree with the accusation that he speaks against the temple. Even in his little biblical historical excursion, he doesn't say anything really positive about the temple. But he does the tabernacle, why is that?

To really understand what's going on here, and what really sets off the anger of the court Stephen is preaching in, we have to briefly go back to 2 Samuel. David was the origin of the idea for the temple.

He wanted to build a temple for the Lord. He requested leave from his duties, to go build it. Something grand. Something impressive. Something remarkable. **2 Samuel 7:4-7.** Nathan the

prophet tells David that God never wanted or desired a temple. And denies him leave to build one.

And just as Stephen mentions Solomon as having built the temple, way back in 2 Samuel 7, Nathan also mentions the offspring of David. **2 Samuel 7:12-13**. I don't know a lot. I'm not the sharpest or the brightest. But I do know what the word everlasting means. I do know that a "forever kingdom" is not the same thing as a temporary kingdom. And the temporary kingdom and temple would eventually be conquered by the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, the temple destroyed and then rebuild, and then conquered again by the Roman empire, and destroyed again under their rule.

The early church and Christians universally understood 2 Samuel 7:12, David's offspring establishing an everlasting kingdom and place of eternal rest, to not be Solomon but the promised messiah. Stephen's following quotations, from Psalms and Isaiah, Acts 7:48-50, reinforce his anti-temple rhetoric. Everything Stephen was saying about the temple would have made it abundantly clear to those before him that he was speaking of Christ as worthy of the worship they have misapplied toward a pile of stones. And this is what would enrage them.

Stephen speaks against the temple, because the idolatrous worship of the temple is a result of Israel's chronic habit of taking a God's messianic promises, and demanding payment up front. A testament to humanity's inability to simply trust that the Lord would do what he says he will do. Rather than wait on God, they try to do it themselves.

Adam and Eve couldn't simply live peacefully obeying, they needed something grand and better now. As they were led out of Egypt, Israel couldn't simply trust the God who had already performed extraordinary miracles, they needed all their needs met now. Abraham and Sarah couldn't simply trust God would provide a child, so they concocted a salacious scheme to commit adultery and conceive a child themselves.

There is even temptation here for God's people. As Christians today, we are so often looking for a way to pull from God's promises, things meant for eternity, something to hold on to now. Something that we don't have trust, but can feel. We don't want to wait for our best life, we want it now; we don't want to wait for eternal satisfaction in the presence of our Lord, we want to find total fulfillment in a career or a family, a reputation or a legacy.

Or maybe, you don't call yourself Christian. And like these Hebrew scholars and religious leaders, have missed Jesus entirely. Maybe you're even here at church, because you've diagnosed that you have missed something but can't quite put your finger on it. You know there's something more, and everywhere you look in this world, something is fading away.

The uncomfortable and not very pc reality of gospel proclamation is the truth, the objective truth, that all of mankind stands, on his own, before God as one condemned. On our own, with no hope in this world to speak of. Nothing to hold on to that will last. There is no, "that's not my God," "that's not the God I believe in," "that not the god I want to believe in." Either man stands condemned, and needs a savior, or we don't. Either there is an eternal reality beyond this fleeting planet, or there isn't. And if there is, what could you possibly do to earn it? The history of God's people that Stephen recounts shows us we can do nothing to get there.

The uncomfortable reality of gospel proclamation, and the thrust of Stephen's sermon in Acts 7, is the hopelessness of mankind without a savior. When we stand on our own before God, we stand with nothing in our hands, except the condemnation of faithless works of the flesh.

And it is in Stephen's own words that we get that conclusion clear as day. **Acts 7:51-53.**

As Stephen stands condemned before men, he proclaims his accusers as the ones who actually stand condemned. But not before the fleeting power of fallen men, but the before the everlasting throne of the almighty God they claim to represent. He flips the script on his accusers, and runs then through with the pristinely sharp sword of the truth of God's word. Don't miss that he calls them uncircumcised, quoting Isaiah. How dare this insolent fake messiah worshiper, call us uncircumcised?! This would have been the final nail in the coffin of their overwhelming rage and anger.

As he began his sermon, his hearers probably agreed with him on most points. But they saw themselves as the faithful. The heroes of the story. The ones who identified with David, and Moses, and Joseph. But in the end, Stephen argues them into being the villains. The ones who sold their brother into slavery. The ones who grumbled against Moses and God.

It would have been like reading Lord of the Rings, and identifying yourself with Frodo. Being the hero. The ringbearer. The struggling protagonist, suffering and yet exalted on the pages of the story. Only to arrive at the end, and be told your nothing like Frodo at all. You're actually Golem. You, are a villain. You, are the one who had a chance at redemption, but instead of taking it, chose to wallow in your own misery and sin.

The only way that he was able to be so deft, in his handling of these accusations in such an intense and pressure filled moment, was the miracle of him being filled with the Holy Spirit. Most of those who would read Luke's history of the church in Acts, would have been familiar with his gospel. **Luke 12:11-12.**

This doesn't mean that Stephen was ignorant of the scriptures, and in some divine moment a bolt of spiritual knowledge came down and cracked the words of scripture into his mind. Causing him to know the details of the entire history of Israel. The details of where Jacob was buried, the exact number, 75, that were in his enterough when he went to Egypt. It's possible. Of course we wouldn't say God couldn't do that, we wouldn't want to confine God to a box, like a temple or anything.

Stephen was faithful, obedient, Spirit filled follower of Jesus. He would have hidden God's word in his heart. Delighted at the law the law of lord. Remembered the statutes and commandments that the Lord had given.

Clear and obedient proclamation of gospel truth must be built upon an enduring and intimate friendship with God's word. If you want to be Spirit filled, if you long for some supernatural experience with the Spirit, try listening to his words. Consume scripture like you're consuming the breath of God, the words of the Spirit.

As difficult and even uncomfortable as the OT can be, don't neglect it thinking it is irrelevant or somehow less than. This entire, incisive, piercing sermon is lifted from the OT. And not just the stories. Every single line is taken from the books of history, from the law, from the Psalms, from the prophets, there's a lot in here from the book of Isaiah. Stephen knew his scripture.

In talking about the OT, Martin Luther, the great reformer, calls the OT, *“the cradle in which the Christ child is laid.”* Of course it is not irrelevant to study the OT. Rather it is vital to our understanding the unfolding of the story of our savior, and God’s promises realized in him. The OT is as real and as much the breathed word of God as are the letters of Paul. Don’t neglect them thinking because Jesus fulfills much of what was promised, they have nothing to teach us. Going back to the clickbaity internet article title, if you want to experience the Spirit of God, try committing yourself to his words.

For it is in those pages that we have the bright neon lights, pointing to our hope. **3)The transcendent hope of Jesus.** If we take a step back from this massive text this morning. Lets put our two pieces together. In one part we have this effervescent description of Luke gives Stephen. Full of grace, and power, and truth, and the Holy Spirit, standing before his enemies with the face of an angel. Only for that angel faced man to offer a dour, condemning, and accusing sermon, that would leave his hearers enraged and bloodthirsty.

In the scope of Luke’s historical account in Acts, this is part of a turning point in the movement of the gospel. Where what was meant as fulfillment for the Jews, would be offered, just as God promised to Abraham, the whole world. After Stephen, Phillip, and then Paul, and a host of other faithful servants of the Lord are going to bring the gospel to the nations. What was offered first as fulfillment of a promise to God’s ethnic people, will be offered as hope to all people.

Luke describes Stephen as he does, because Stephen has what all Christian’s have when facing down our own hopeless works and circumstances. Luke describes Stephen as he does because what comes next is the gospel for all mankind. A transcendent Jesus not bound to a temple, not bound to this world, not bound to a grave, not captured by death. Our hope is in not missing Jesus. Freely offered. Freely given of his blood. Risen from death. The true temple, destroyed and in three days rebuilt. **John 2:19-22.**

If you sit here this morning and don’t feel the hope pouring from the pages of scripture, if you feel more like Golem than Frodo, if you feel nothing but the condemnation of worthless and fleeting effort that never seems to satisfy your soul, if like those who heard Stephen’s Acts 7 sermon you are pierced to the heart in hopeless rage, I implore you this morning to receive the free offer of hope in the historical and risen Christ.