

Unstoppable...Unstoppable Word

7/7/19 – Pastor Randy

Acts 6:8-15

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us." At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.

Have you ever had someone lie about you, slander you? Have you ever had someone criticize you publicly for speaking the truth? Have you ever had someone want to hurt you for speaking the truth?

I had told a young lady in my youth ministry that she shouldn't date a young man because he was not serving the Lord and he ran with a bad crowd. Her mom accused me of not being loving enough to the young man. One of the other youth who was a friend of his, but also liked me, came to me to warn me that this boy had said I was "going to pay". It was only a few months later that he was in my arms at the altar crying because he was facing possible jail time following an incident where he and two other boys jumped and stabbed another kid.

About a year before I came to Calvary I was teaching a class of about 30 new people at my last church. I was sharing our beliefs and values and shared that we held to the conviction that marriage is a life-long union of one man and one woman and that the will of God is for sexual expression to take place only within that union. A man stood up and said, "What you just said is very unloving and very unkind. Who are you to tell people who they should love?"

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My favorite story is the lady who came to me church, wrote me a letter detailing the problems with my teaching, and letting me know she was leaving. Then I found out that she had tried to influence one of our board members and his wife not to listen to me. Why is that a favorite? She came back several months later. The board member's wife asked her why she came back and she said the Holy Spirit told her He had something he wanted her to learn from me! Well, that sounds great, right? Except that only a few months later she left again but not without sending me another letter ripping me to shreds!! I thought, "Wow, you must be a glutton for punishment if listening to my preaching is that upsetting but you keep coming back for more!!"

Last week we ended in chapter 6 with Luke's retelling of the wisdom exercised by the apostles in their handling of the discrimination that was experienced by some of the needy widows in the church. Chapters 7 & 8 focus primarily on two of the men chosen to handle the responsibility of making sure that all needy widows, regardless of cultural background, were adequately taken care of.

The first of these two men that comes to the forefront in the story is a man named Stephen. The first thing we learn about Stephen is that, although he was given an administrative responsibility in the church, he was also being used by God to perform miracles described as "signs". The miracles done by the hands of Jesus and the apostles were referred to as "signs" because they pointed to God. Their ultimate purpose was to authenticate the message and the messenger.

Some Jews started to debate with Stephen about what he was saying about Jesus but they couldn't refute his teaching. Frustrated because they could not refute the truth of what he was saying, they decided to twist his words and slander him. Their lies were malicious lies, intended to paint Stephen as evil so as to arouse anger and hatred towards him. They slapped the most emotively powerful label on him among Jews at that time; "blasphemer". That word would be akin to labeling someone a racist or a nazi today.

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Chapter 7 begins Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin (judicial council) like Peter and John were before. The rest of the chapter consists solely of Stephen's message to the Sanhedrin. Stephen, in approx. 1200 words, retells the story of Israel beginning with God's covenant with Abraham. It is worthy of its own series of messages but my purpose today is to focus on some of the other aspects of the narrative of Acts 6-8; the actions of Philip and Stephen and the way people responded to their actions. So let's look at the response to Stephen's message.

Acts 7: 51-60

"You stiff-necked people, 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 announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

The response to Stephen was to kill him. Why was there no deliverance for Stephen as there was for Peter and John? Is the church really unstoppable?

Following the execution of Stephen we read in Acts 8:1-4,
*A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison. **But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went.***

Next, Luke focuses on the preaching of one specific believer, a man named Philip, who was one of the seven men assigned to the task of managing the

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benevolence fund. Philip had traveled to Samaria preaching that Jesus was the Messiah. People were especially eager to hear his message because it was accompanied by healings and people being delivered from demonic spirits. The whole city was filled with excitement! But then Luke introduces us to a man named Simon.

Acts 8:9-11

*“A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great. Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as “the Great One—the Power of God.” **They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic. But now the people believed Philip’s message** of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.*

Notice that Simon was very impressed by the miracles and happening through Philip. Then Luke tells us that Peter and John came to Samaria to pray for these new Christians who had believed and had been baptized so that they would also be filled with the Holy Spirit. But watch Simon’s response when he witnessed these new Christians being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:18-21

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. 19 “Let me have this power, too,” he exclaimed, “so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!” But Peter replied, “May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God’s gift can be bought! You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God.

Peter warned Simon that he was in a dangerous place and that he better repent now, and hope and pray that God would forgive him. We don’t know what happened with Simon. Luke leaves us only with the fact that Simon asked Peter to pray God would not judge him.

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I. So What? What lessons are there for us to learn?

A. We shouldn't be surprised by attacks against Christianity and Christians.

Why was Stephen slandered and persecuted? For having the gall to speak truth that people couldn't refute. They lost the debate so they resorted to slander.

Why was Stephen killed? He accused the religious leaders of being one in heart and mind with those who rebelled against Moses and those who killed the prophets, because they rejected and killed Jesus. On top of that when he said he saw Jesus at the right hand of the Father, that was considered blasphemy. It wasn't actually but their animus towards Stephen predisposed them to interpret anything he said in the worst light.

The content of the Christian faith will be attacked. Christians will be attacked personally because of what they believe. Christians without the stomach for being criticized, ridiculed, and even slandered will either withdraw from talking about their beliefs or they will abandon their beliefs. They are shamed into silence about the faith or even outright denial of the faith.

If no one is offended by our faith, we probably are not being true to the faith once delivered. On the other hand, if everyone is offended by our faith that is equally a sign that we are not being true to our faith. The story of Jesus and the early disciples of Jesus show us that they elicited strong responses, either for or against. Jesus words were provocative. The apostle's message was provocative as well. They attracted some and offended others.

2. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

The Church and the Christian faith may be attacked, but they can't be stopped. The church is God's work and God's work is unstoppable. The Christian faith is God's word and His word is unstoppable. Stephen was killed and Saul began an aggressive attack against the church but God was working through that to move his people with his message into Samaria in fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

3. Every Christian is sent by Christ to bear witness to Christ.

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God does not only speak and work through a select, elite group of Christians. Being used by God is not limited to those who hold a title or office.

In Acts 6 - Stephen shares the good news as God does miracles through him.

In Acts 8 - ALL the believers except the apostles are sharing the good news.

Later in Acts 8 - Philip shares the good news.

Stephen and Philip were appointed to the team tasked with helping manage the widows' benevolence fund. The reason this ministry team existed was so the apostles would be able to focus on prayer and preaching. The next thing you know these two men are out doing the work of an evangelist. Were they trying to do the apostles job? No! Every Christian is called to be a witness.

4. Pride is a seductive vice that corrupts the heart of man.

The incident with Simon is a striking example of how pride corrupts.

Luke wrote, "They listened closely to him...for a long time...", "But now the people believed Philips message". When Simon saw people being filled with the Spirit his attention shifted from Philip to Peter. He was fixated on people with power because he was fixated on power. His passion was for power, not for God's glory. His passion for power was for his prestige, not for the good of others. He wanted power for HIS glory and HIS good.

He was clearly seduced by the praise and power he had as a sorcerer.

Remember what Luke wrote about Simon's status with the people?

"Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as "the Great One—the Power of God." Power and prestige are as powerfully intoxicating as any physical substance. They can easily infect the spirit of a person, creating a craving for more and praise, more and more prestige. It becomes a craving that is never satisfied.

III. NOW WHAT?

- 1. Don't be surprised or silenced by attacks against you for your faith. Pray for the strength and courage to be persecuted for Jesus sake.**
- 2. Don't buy the lie that the church is dying. Jesus is still building His church.**
- 3. You are called to be a witness. Sharing Jesus is not the sole job of the pastors.**
- 4. Ask God for a pure heart that can handle the power of the Holy Spirit.**

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The Power of Offense!

Some people attack Christianity for personal reasons. They are jealous

Some attack because they misunderstand. Ex. Paul said I was ignorant.

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Why was Stephen killed? He accused the religious leaders of being one in heart and mind with those who rebelled against Moses and those who killed the prophets, because they rejected and killed Jesus. On top of that when he said he saw Jesus at the right hand of the Father,

Simon tried to buy the power of God. He doesn't want God's power for God's glory and the good of others.

He wants it for HIS glory and HIS good.

"Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as "the Great One—the Power of God."

They listened closely to him...for a long time...

But now the people believed Philip's message

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Now What?