**The Same Old Story**

**Acts 6:7-8:4 (ESV)**

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Pastor Josh Beakley

Pastor Ritch is not feeling well, so he is resting. So we’re actually going to change directions. We’ve been in Romans 12 and we’re talking about community. But we’re going to actually take a pause and look at the back story of the one God used to write this letter of Romans. We’re going to look at the back story of the Apostle Paul, who used to be Saul, and a key moment that would give context to what we’re building towards. So in Romans chapter 12, we have talked about some of the positive angles, but we’re talking in a few weeks about some of the challenges. He builds towards the phrase “don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” What kind of back story informs someone who would say something like that?

We’re going to look at the book of Acts. We’re in Acts chapter 6. What we’ll do is we’ll read the second half of chapter 6 and then skip ahead to the end of chapter 7 and into chapter 8. We’re going to read about the story of Stephen and something that Saul was a witness to. It gets right into the heart of this conflict in Romans. Paul is writing to the church at Rome. There are Jews and Gentiles there together and he is appealing to them about how to walk together in following Jesus. He would have been able to think back at this moment. It will help inform us as we think about where he came from. So in Acts chapter 6 we have the beginning of the church and this one named Stephen.

***7*** *And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.* ***8*** *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.* ***9*** *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.* ***10*** *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.* ***11*** *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”* ***12*** *And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,* ***13*** *and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,* ***14*** *for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”* ***15*** *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

**Acts 7**

***1*** *And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”*

Now, Stephen gives a defense there in the rest of chapter 7. He walks through the history of God’s work in Israel and he builds towards this moment in verse 51. Jump ahead to Acts 7:51. Stephen says

***51*** *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.* ***52*** *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,* ***53*** *you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*

***54*** *Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.* ***55*** *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.* ***56*** *And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”* ***57*** *But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.* ***58*** *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.* ***59*** *And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”* ***60*** *And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

**Acts 8**

***1*** *And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.* ***2*** *Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.* ***3*** *But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.* ***4*** *Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*

Some endings seem all too predictable. At least, that’s the case with a good number of stories that we teach our kids. We have some books on courageous people from history that our children like to read. They are these short biographies of men and women. They’re typically one page. These are people who take a brave stand for what is right. Not all of them end the same way, but often they do. The courageous person dies.

One of the accounts I was reading some time ago was the story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot and Nate and Marjorie Saint. They were these Christians with young families who felt compelled to share the good news of Jesus Christ with unreached people groups. They eventually were drawn to a tribe in South America that was known for being violent to outsiders. As I read this history, before I even made it halfway through the page, the kids could already tell that the men who wanted to be witnesses for Jesus were going to lose their lives. Some endings seem all too predictable.

At the height of his ministry, Stephen is caught up in a scandal manufactured by some jealous Jews. It was the same old story replayed time and time again. We’ve seen it all before. If we were to give this morning’s message a title, it will be *The Same Old Story*. People follow God. They begin to proclaim His message then others get upset and they begin to oppose that message. It happened that way from Moses to the prophets to Jesus. In the book of Acts, it has happened twice now to the apostles and now with Stephen, one of the Greek-speaking followers. The ending of this growing conflict is all too predictable. Now, it’s not looking good.

It figures. Do you ever say that? Or we sometimes say, “That’s typical.” Things seem to be going well. We’re getting a break, finally. We’re in rhythm. Ministry is in stride. Then that’s all of a sudden when the biggest problem comes to the surface. It’s all too predictable. It’s just typical that opposition rises right when things seem like they might be working out. That’s when the trial begins to surface. That’s when sickness comes and strikes. It’s when relational tension arises. But if God’s wisdom is consistent as it has been for so many years, should we really be surprised?

Rejection of God’s wisdom, rejection of His plan and message is nothing new. We shouldn’t be shocked at the challenges that inevitably come as we strive to follow Him. But it isn’t where the pattern ends. There is more to God’s wisdom than its inevitable opposition. His wisdom will always face challenges. That’s a fact that we can count on. But there is another truth that is just as reliable. In the end, He always wins. The rejection of God should be no surprise, but neither is His sure victory. We may not see how that could be possible in the moment. We may not even get to see how that happens in our lifetime. But as sure as we can expect the rejection of God’s plan and wisdom, we should anticipate the certainty of His victory. That’s a great truth that Scripture reminds us of time and time again. But it’s stories like this that sort of help us sort of endure the opposition as it comes. It is stories like this that help us to be patient, to have faith, to trust while we face challenges and rejection here and now.

How do we ready ourselves to trust God in the meantime while we wait in the darkness for the day to break? One way we can ready ourselves is by reminding ourselves as we look at a passage like this of what we know about God’s wisdom and how He works even in the midst of conflict. As we think down the road about the verse

**Romans 12:21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What are some stories, some testimonies, some reminders of how God works that can give us faith in the midst of our own challenges and conflicts and opposition? We’re going to try to touch on a few reminders of God’s wisdom. When we think about God’s wisdom, the first thought is the legitimacy of God’s wisdom. It’s a legitimate plan that God unfolds.

**A Legitimacy We Can Respect (6:8-15)**

We’ll start in Acts 6:8-15. God’s wisdom is on display through Stephen’s ministry that comes under fire from the religious establishment as they challenge the legitimacy of this ministry and the wisdom with which he speaks.

Legitimate means to be real or valid. It is able to be defended or justified by logic. Legitimacy of this particular idea or ministry comes into question because it’s being doubted or denied as being valid or real or logical. Stephen’s ministry is being accused of being illegitimate. So in verses 8-15 we can see that God’s wisdom is on display and the legitimacy of it is on display in several ways. First, if you look at verse 8, you can see the character through which it shows.

***8*** *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*

If you look back up in the chapter, you can see that we’ve been introduced to this individual. He was Hellenistic or a Grecian Jew. So he was likely familiar with Greek culture. He was specifically chosen by the people and then listed first to help support the apostles in their care for the Hellenistic widows who were being neglected. He was probably part of the Hellenistic synagogue and Greek culture that was made up of many Jews who had returned from foreign countries back to their homeland. As a follower of Jesus, he was a man of exemplary character. He was full of the Spirit and of faith and of grace and of power. He is a man on fire for Jesus. He was being used by God to perform signs that were likely similar to the apostles and he was under the full control of the Holy Spirit. He is a model witness of God’s grace and power. These are basic signs of a legitimate ministry from God that are advancing His wisdom. God’s character is showing in his life.

But we see also what God’s wisdom through Stephen, this ministry, provokes. We see the conflict that he encounters. Despite being legitimate, it provokes some conflict because Stephen’s ministry was disruptive for some. He was one of the seven selected to help with the benevolence ministry. It’s likely that his unique influence in the Hellenistic community was creating opportunities for him. It’s likely that he was able to share the hope of Christ in spaces that hadn’t yet fully been reached by the apostles. His ministry, being on the front lines and sharing Jesus where the name hadn’t been heard or thought of with hope, all of the sudden now is causing no small disturbance.

***9*** *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.*

You can see several groups there. There are four, maybe five groups that rose to dispute with Stephen that were all associated with that particular synagogue. It’s possible that they were also Grecian Jews from foreign areas who had been set free and who had now returned to the homeland. Stephen’s ministry could be overlapping with their community. So for them, this message of Jesus from the mouth of a fellow Hellenist is just a little too close to home. So there is this whole bunch of people from a variety of areas that begin to dispute with and debate the wisdom of Stephen’s message. He’s on the front lines.

You can be sure that if you try to advance the message of Jesus and share the Gospel in places where it isn’t being claimed and heard, as you enter the front lines there will be opposition. So here, just because Stephen’s ministry is legitimate, it doesn’t mean that it’s not going to go without opposition and conflict. In fact, a legitimate ministry is provoking dispute. It’s not a reason for fear, though. We see how this ministry holds up because it is legitimate. We see the confidence that we can enjoy.

***10*** *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

For all of their emotion and experiences and the vast number, they couldn’t withstand the content and passion of a ministry that is legitimate, that is real. Stephen was unfazed by the debate. The reason being was he knew he was right. He had the ability to back that up with confidence. Falsehood is no match for truth and he spoke with truth.

But that doesn’t mean God’s opponents will always fight fair. In verses 11-14, we start to see the challenges of what even a legitimate ministry may face. We see the challenges he experiences that get even worse. When the men can’t succeed in an honest debate, they decide that triumph is more important than truth because they would rather be in charge than right. So they covertly hatch a scheme to frame Stephen with false evidence in a way that could destroy his life.

***11*** *Then they secretly instigated men*

These are men who were going to raise religious charges against Stephen, the first two being that he was anti-Moses and anti-God. So they deceitfully incite men

*who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”*

They were intentionally riling up the crowd and leaders into a frenzy.

***12*** *And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,*

So there is sort of this rushed impromptu court hearing.

***13*** *and they set up false witnesses*

These people add to the charges, sharing misleading quotes that Stephen is anti-Temple and anti-Law. They misconstrue this message of Jesus to be a form of lawless insurrection. They are inaccurate and they say

*who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,* ***14*** *for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”*

They charged Stephen and this Jesus that he preached with being anti-God, anti-Moses, anti-Law and anti-Temple. He is the ultimate enemy of all that these Jews would hold dear. They do this with the use of willful conspiracy, violent chaos, false charges and unfair quotations. It’s not that Stephen hadn’t made statements that were similar perhaps to what these witnesses claim, but they were misrepresenting Stephen’s message to assert things that he never actually said.

God’s wisdom, even when legitimate, or perhaps we can say especially when legitimate, because it is legitimate, it’s going to encounter these kinds of challenges. Yet it doesn’t discourage Stephen. We see the conviction and the confidence that he exudes. It’s almost because of the dark backdrop of all these challenges that we see the stark contrast of how legitimate God’s wisdom is on display. We see the glorious conviction that true wisdom empowers us to exude.

***15*** *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

What a phrase; the face of an angel. The idea is not a sort of Hallmark card sentimentalism. It’s sort of this glorious, overwhelming intensity. Everybody feels it. Scholars are split on whether it’s just a way to describe the intensity of his natural expression or whether it’s some sort of supernatural radiance exuding from Stephen. It seems like the idea is that there is a validation of God upon him. There is some kind of empowerment that he has conviction for this exact moment. Everyone understands that something special is happening. It’s a powerful symbol that I think is intended to point us back to the glory that is shown from Moses’ face back in Exodus. It’s not the same thing, but it’s sort of reminding us of that sign that something meaningful is about to happen. There is something so genuine, so legitimate, so true that it must come from God.

This kind of wisdom is not always going to have a supernatural glow, but it does have a sort of resolute conviction in the face of opposition that stands out. All of this shows that the wisdom of God cannot be beat. The truth about Jesus is undeniably legitimate. It cannot be disproven. It cannot be debunked. God asserts it as true. He speaks with authority. God’s wisdom is true no matter what happens. The legitimacy of that wisdom is worth the utmost respect. When you look at the Scriptures, you see the confidence and conviction that God’s people have about His Word.

I don’t know about you, but some of my favorite portions of Scripture to read, especially when I was younger, were the encounters that Jesus had with the leaders who would come and oppose Him. They would try to trap Him in His words. They had those Q & A’s. They would cite those controversial questions of whatever the issue was. They would bring these dilemmas and they would try to stump Him because they knew He had stumped them. Yet Jesus was unfazed. He would answer in a perfect way. It’s like watching theological jujitsu. Then they would run away with their tail between their legs. He could not be beat. After all these years, He stands as the undisputed most influential figure in human history because He is the central figure of human history and all history.

He is the one who resurrected from the dead. That’s a historical fact. The message of hope that He offers is unlike any other. The good news is that He is the Savior that God promised to send to save sinners from His just wrath for our sins. He is the only one who can rescue us from death and judgment, and He did. This is the wisdom of God. It’s the plan of God. The message of Jesus is a good news message that we understand to be the Gospel. Standing with Him is something that we can do with conviction and confidence even though we know it means that we’re going to get drawn into difficult battles. If we want to be ready to endure that kind of opposition and rejection, we need to begin by expecting that the legitimacy of God’s wisdom is going to come under attack, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. We’re going to encounter that kind of opposition. We can trust that God’s plan and this Gospel ministry is going to face opposition. It’s legitimate. There is not only the legitimacy that we can trust. We see how it’s built upon the historic proof upon which it rests. God’s Word throughout history in the Old Testament is what Stephen is going to turn to now in chapter 7.

**A History We Can Recount (7:1-50)**

There is a legitimacy that we can respect and there is a history that we can recount. If you look at Acts 7:1-50, you might call this Back to Sunday School. Stephen is going to go back and he is going to give his defense, his public speech or apology or defense here in this trial. In verses 10-50, Stephen is going to respond to all these charges.

***1*** *And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”*

Here are the charges raised against you. Are these things so? He could even be saying, “How do you plead?” Option A is pleading guilty. Option B is pleading not guilty. What follows is Stephen’s argument in response. It’s one of the most famous speeches in the Bible. It’s the longest speech in the book of Acts. It is a masterful defense whereby Stephen says, “Not Option A and not Option B. I choose Option C.” He recounts biblical history and we’ll see where it leads.

He has a very respectful opening. You can look there in verse 2. He makes his appeal for them to hear him out. He associates himself with them as fellow Jews and honors their position.

***2*** *And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me.*

He is respectful and insightful. Then rather than outright answering the question, he enters into a speech that focuses on the heritage that he knows that the Jews hold in such deep affection. He begins by expressing a deep respect for the very things that he is being accused of being against. He works his way from the era of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Joseph and the twelve brothers to Moses and the Law to the conquest, the kingdom and the Temple. We’re not going to unpack all of the verses for the sake of time. I’m going to summarize or highlight two themes that sort of recur throughout his recounting of the story. These two themes are things Stephen incorporates throughout history that build into this final climax at the end. The two themes are the limits that God’s plan transcends and then the resistance that God’s people sustain.

First, as you look at this, you’re going to see Stephen highlight the limits that God’s plans transcend. To transcend means to go beyond or surpass. It means to not be confined or constrained by it. God’s plan is not limited the way that sometimes we think of as humans. Stephen makes the case from the Old Testament Scriptures that these leaders would have respected so deeply, that God’s plan is much bigger and more transcendent than the crude limits that they believe He is confined to. The two most obvious limits that Stephen argues that they might be susceptible to placing upon God are the limits of place and space. God’s plan transcends their limitations of place and space in regards to the land of Canaan and in space in regards to the landmark of the Temple.

Stephen works his way through several eras of Israel’s history and he references God’s work. You can see many times that God works outside of that place and that territory of the land of Israel that those Jews held so dearly. You look in verse 2 and he highlights how God appeared to Abraham outside the land. In verse 5 he talks about how Abraham had died awaiting fulfillment of the Promised Land. We see how in verse 6, Abraham’s offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others. In the following verses, we see how Joseph and his descendants would be provided for in Egypt and how Moses would be spoken to and used by God in Egypt, Midian, Sinai, and in the wilderness. The power and work of God’s plans are not to be thought of as being confined to a particular place, even though He has a very specific promise. But it doesn’t limit His power and His plan.

Nor are they confined to a particular space in the way that we might think of as humans. In verse 30, you can see God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai. In verse 33, God is the one who makes holy ground no matter where He appears. In verse 44, we see how God led them through the wilderness and His tabernacle, His temporary dwelling that remained through Joshua until David, who said, “I want to make you a dwelling place, God.” But it wasn’t until Solomon in verse 47 that the temple was actually built. Yet even then, God was clear that He was not to be thought of as needing a place to be confined in. Stephen quotes from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 66. Stephen says

***48*** *Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,* ***49*** *“‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?* ***50*** *Did not my hand make all these things?’*

Isaiah said that to the people back in Isaiah 66. But if you keep reading Isaiah 66 you find out God is less concerned with our sacramental offerings in the temple and more concerned about our personal response to His Word. He says

**Isaiah 66:2** …But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

God’s Word is at work. It always has been. We see that the Word of God was increasing in Acts 6:7 and it is multiplying and increasing. The Word is having its effect. It is being challenged and opposed here, but at the end of our section that we read we saw that the Word of God continued to spread. God’s Word works. Stephen is trying to help them and confront them with the limitations they’re placing upon God’s plan of wisdom and saying listen to the Word. Think about how God works.

It’s no wonder he’s causing a disturbance, here. He has this powerful message to these Hellenistic Jews who have returned to a land and a temple and the Law from foreign lands. So now here at great risk of, in the council’s mind, contaminating and diluting their way of life, Stephen brings this hope of a God who transcends some of the ways that they try to restrict Him. Their way of life had devolved into sort of a callous religious nationalism that worked for them and their culture and what they were doing. He was upsetting that system.

Now, Stephen is not trying to denigrate the promise or the blessings that the gifts represent. They are God at work and he loves them. But he is giving a defense of biblical history that shows God’s plans are not and never have been artificially limited. This should have been more clear to the Jews who were so desperate to defend the temple even though they themselves knew the original temple of Solomon had already been destroyed. The next temple of Zerubbabel had been destroyed. The current temple built by Herod was far more fragile than they wanted to believe and eventually would be destroyed, perhaps even when some of them were still alive. They were clinging to things that weren’t anywhere near as powerful as the actual promise and Word of God which worked in ways that transcended the limits that they were holding to. His point was not to downplay the significance of God’s promises in these places, but only to explain their proper role. The place and space that were limits that God’s plan actually transcends.

He also highlights along with that, the resistance that God’s people maintained. All throughout the story, Stephen keeps giving examples of how God’s people and how His so-called followers continued to resist what God was doing from the beginning of the history. The two clear examples were the rejection of Joseph by his brothers and then the rejection of Moses by the nation. He discusses the call of Abraham, the continuation of God’s promise through Isaac and Jacob. Then he recalls in verse 9 about how the patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph. Do you remember that jealousy and his divine dreams? So they sold him as a slave to Egypt. Joseph was brutally betrayed by his brothers, cruelly enslaved, falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, wrongly imprisoned, and yet he was supernaturally freed by God and used to rescue both Egypt, but primarily Israel, as the deliverer that they so callously had rejected.

Then we see the resistance of God’s people against His plan in their response to the original Moses. The Moses that the Sanhedrin had claimed to so studiously honor themselves was originally resisted as a deliverer by God’s people. In contrast to their accusations that Stephen is anti-Moses, he highlights how precious Moses was in God’s sight. He was especially suited to deliver God’s people. In verses 20-29, Stephen shows a deep respect for Moses and God’s choice of him, even though Israel had not always thought so.

He breaks Moses’ life into three periods of 40 years. There were 40 years of growing in Egypt until he was rejected. Then there was 40 years of exile in Midian until his vision. Then there was 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after the exodus. At the end of each of those eras there is this key event or turning point in the nation’s history. He is highlighting Moses’ protection and preparation through his own deliverance through water and then being raised in the house of Pharaoh with wisdom and might. Then when he steps in to deliver his people, he is rejected outright in verse 27. His own countrymen thrust him aside.

***27*** *But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?*

He was forced to flee to Midian for 40 years until God speaks to him through the burning bush and sends him to deliver Israel. Stephen emphasizes in verse 35 that this is the same Moses

***35*** *“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying,*

There are people constantly rejecting the deliverers that God sends.

*‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.* ***36*** *This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.*

This is the very thing we see that Stephen, at the beginning of our section that we read, is doing right now. He is doing wonders and signs. He makes a major point in verse 37.

***37*** *This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’*

He is quoting from Deuteronomy 18:15. At the end of Moses’ ministry, as they’re about to enter the Promised Land, they’re on the edge and he gave a message in Deuteronomy after those 40 years and after Mount Sinai. He summarizes all that God has done. He tells them, “God is going to carry you forward. I’m not going to go with you, but there will be another like me, a future Moses.” Moses was the one who had spent time with God when no one else could. He had brought back God’s Word as given by angels, yet he says there is going to be someone who comes. Stephen says

***39*** *Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,*

You remember the story of the golden calf that they made. He says

***41*** *And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.*

They made Yahweh into an image that they could understand and control and they blended in with the world around them. They turned from this deliverer that God had given. So as a result,

***42*** *But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven,*

You see Stephen showing how they twisted and God’s people maintained resistance against God’s plan. He quotes from another prophet, Amos 5:25-27. It’s a chapter of lament by a prophet to Israel who is saying your worship is hypocritical. It’s not real. It’s not genuine. These numbing rituals had replaced a heart for God and what true religion is supposed to manifest in real life all around. The accusation was that Israel was persistent in idolatry from the beginning and was well-deserving of being sent into exile. Stephen’s overall contention here is that God’s so-called people have consistently rejected His deliverance and His deliverers and have exchanged them for idols crafted by themselves.

You can see Stephen trying to highlight the limits that God’s plan transcends and then the resistance that God’s people maintained. Within both of these themes is sort of this thread of faith woven through the history from beginning to end where there are people who trust that God will keep His promise to deliver His people despite all of that opposition, exactly according to not their plan, but His. God’s plan unfolds exactly as He intends. Stephen’s point as he goes back to Sunday School is to really show that there is actually nothing new. This is the same old story. God has been consistent from the beginning and we have to trust His promised way of salvation by faith. It has never ultimately been confined to some mere space or place that we can control. Nor has it always been accepted by God’s people. But His Word has been faithful and true, is always at work, and has always involved a deliverance that is rejected by many because it must be received by faith. It’s this deliverance, this way of salvation that Stephen is making the case that has always pointed us to actually the very same person; Jesus Christ.

In every one of these moments, God has been pointing His people to the only one who could save. He is the one that they and we so desperately need. Jesus is the prophet that Moses was anticipating. Jesus is the one who embodied God’s presence here on earth. In His words, He was greater than the temple. Jesus is the only one who can grant the ultimate rest for which God’s people were so desperately longing. He is the perfect picture of how God’s plans transcend the limits of our own expectations. He is the deliverer that the religious leaders had so callously resisted and rejected by crucifying Him on the cross. Here, Stephen shows that by recounting all of this history, God’s wisdom on display through Jesus is actually nothing new.

This is the beautiful reality that we’re actually to embrace and to recognize that any discussion about biblical history or even natural history, as we look to the facts, the truth is going to only serve to confirm the centrality of Jesus Christ. He is the central figure of history. The more you do work to dive into any actual true truth, the more you realize that God’s plan has always been to save through Jesus. He is not some footnote halfway through. He is the center pinnacle point of history. So Stephen is going back to Sunday School and saying this has actually been the story from the beginning. The more you know of biblical history, the more you can see these repeating patterns and anticipate the trends.

If you do so and you’re sitting there with Stephen, like him and like others, you can discern what is about to happen. It’s so predictable. It’s exactly what Stephen has described. These people, as they resist God and the hope of Christ, some are being excited by it and inspired by it and saying things like, “Whoa! I could actually be saved and rescued.” Those who are in control understand that “No, this is threatening. What we want is our way of life and the god that we can control and confine and understand and who makes things about us.” So at this key moment of truth, this point that Stephen has been building towards, he actually at great personal risk makes his final move. Here we can see that one of the ways we ready ourselves for hard times is

**A Hostility We Can Brave (7:51-60)**

Here is this inevitable hostility that is quite disturbing, but all too predictable, where they oppose Stephen. Stephen’s conclusion is something that they really, really don’t like. He has been building his case to this point and he turns his argument sharply into actually an indictment. You see his bravery in the face of this opposition. He is willing to testify to the truth even in danger of his own life. It is showcased for us in the approach that he uses and the response that he faces.

The confrontation here that he offers that causes this hostility is there because he makes a very direct approach. He recounts all this history. He explains how God has been working and he gets to these charges against him now. They said, “How do you plead? Option A? Are you guilty? Option B? Are you not guilty?” Stephen says, “Neither. I choose Option C. I’m making a charge against you.” In fact, in a sense, he is saying, “God is making a charge against you.”

***51*** *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.* ***52*** *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,* ***53*** *you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*

That’s a direct approach! Stephen accuses them with some of the most clear and harsh Old Testament language available. He calls them stiff-necked, which means being stubborn like mules. They won’t follow God. Those who would prize themselves as being circumcised children of Abraham and followers of Moses’ Law, he says they are uncircumcised in heart and ears. He says they are adhering to a form of following God, but it’s not genuine in a way that is relational and spiritually meaningful. He accuses them of resisting the Holy Spirit. It’s the most dangerous condition we could ever find ourselves in. He associates them with the Jews who persecuted and killed the prophets, as their fathers. That’s their spiritual heritage. He calls these leaders out. He gives this ultimate charge that they had rejected God’s deliverers and those other Jews had rejected Joseph and Moses. But they were only types of the one to come; the Messiah who they actually had rejected. This God-man had come as God in the flesh. Christ Jesus was the one that they had betrayed and murdered. All the supernatural gifts received, they had rejected.

Stephen issues this charge with a direct approach and he turns the tables on them. He turns his defense case into actually a prosecution case. He is going to brave the hostility that is going to follow as a result, because it’s like a bucket of scalding water. It’s like kicking a hornet’s nest. They are not happy. So in verses 54-56, we see the extreme response that he faces and the hostility he braves.

***54*** *Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.*

They’re so upset. The veneer of their hypocrisy has been so shredded in two that they are enraged and they grind and gnash their teeth like animals. They are filled with anger and the contrast is clear. Stephen is filled by God.

***55*** *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.*

Here is the true throne room. Here is what actually is happening. Despite what it seems like is happening and who is on defense, Stephen is able to see and he is given a rare glimpse into what truly is going on. This is something similar probably to what Isaiah and Ezekiel had seen. He saw the glory of God confirming the case that he has built, the claim he has made, and Jesus standing there. It prompts him to cry out and testify.

***56*** *And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

That is more than the council can take. Because in this vision of heaven that transcends the land and temple, that exults the deliverer that they had rejected, it actually culminates in a title that Jesus Himself had uttered not so many days before. Jesus had stood on trial before them and they had testified falsely against Him. If you look back in Luke 22:66, they were saying false things and they had assembled together. They said

**Luke 22:67-69** “If you are the Christ, tell us.” But he said to them, “If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.”

At that point, that had been enough for them. It’s like the memory of this moment right now of the rejection of Jesus that causes them

***57*** *But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears*

They’re done listening!

*and rushed together at him.*

Like an animalistic mob, they lose all dignity.

***58*** *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.*

Yet there is still a veneer of legality based on Roman law. It doesn’t appear to be legal, but they do take him outside the city and follow some level of protocols. In fact, there are some witnesses that step forward and they go through the motions in order to silence him and his testimony for good.

You can see how the progression of persecution is escalating in Luke’s book as the church is growing and the Word of God is spreading. Jesus’ followers are first intimidated by threats, after which they undergo flogging. Then here, Stephen suffers execution by stones. This is the extreme response he faces because of the direct approach he takes. He is going to bring the Gospel to a point of response. This is the truth about Jesus. It’s undeniable. What will you do with it? It brings hostility. It brings suffering.

True Gospel proclamation comes to a hard moment of personal decision. What will you do with this truth about Jesus? That moment will bring hostility. If we’re to truly follow Jesus, that’s a suffering that we must be ready to face and to brave. Whether it’s in a context at work, a context of some family gathering, a context of talking with neighbors or some friendship, there is going to be a moment where there is clarity of who Jesus is and the hope that He offers. But the hope is only for those who trust in Him and His sacrifice in a moment of decision. We see here that there are going to be people who reject, who turn. That’s what Stephen faces. Yet in the suffering, Stephen speaks not as a victim, but as a victor even as he faces this hostility. He braves this with courage and he contends with the faith. He is not cowering in fear. That comes to our final point. We can have bravery. We can have courage because of

**A Sovereignty We Can Trust (7:59-8:3)**

You see here through the end of chapter 7 and into chapter 8 that despite the tragic persecution that Stephen suffers, he still gives one of the most beautiful examples of the reliable sovereignty of God that we can trust. God is at work even in the hard things to bring about His master plan. Here we see several areas in which we can trust God’s sovereignty even in the hardest of circumstances. We can see the faith that we can express even in the forgiveness that we can offer.

***59*** *And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*

Just like his Savior had expressed and spoken to His Father on the cross, Stephen calls out and then he pleads for mercy for his attackers, requesting forgiveness.

***60*** *And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”*

Even as others are filled with anger and furry, he is filled with faith and forgiveness. He is ready to commit himself to God and is using his last breath to request mercy for his persecutors who are in the very act of murdering him. That’s a man who trusts in God’s sovereignty. That’s a man who knows who is really in control. He is trusting God to work justice out in His timing. He is a God who can actually transform this hard and painful death into something good. This is the trust that is on display through Stephen. But just because we also can see this trust, it doesn’t mean we ignore the grief. There is grief.

*And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Falling asleep here means he died. This is not teaching the doctrine of soul sleep, that when you’re dead you’re unconscious and not aware of what is going on. No, Stephen fully expected to be in Jesus’ presence and his spirit to be received by Jesus, like the thief on the cross. Sleep is just a gentle way of talking about the death of one of God’s followers. There is a bit of appreciation and grief over what is happening. You see this concept because death is just like passing through a doorway into God’s presence as we await the future resurrection, the final fulfillment. Stephen is with Christ, but he left behind a community and a church in grief.

***2*** *Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.*

Even amidst all this, they understand God’s sovereignty, but in the moment it was hard. Stephen’s death is lamented. Even in the midst of that, we’re confronted with the harsh fact that the persecution has only just begun. It’s about to get worse and worse. We’re confronted by this individual, this young man named Saul who was part of Stephen’s execution. He played a formal role of overseeing the garments of the witnesses. This young Pharisee

***1*** *And Saul approved of his execution.*

Then in alignment with his approval,

*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.* ***3*** *But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

Even in the hope that we have, trusting God’s sovereignty includes an element of grief that we can and will experience. But there is a truth that gives us hope in the midst of that grief and that’s the fruit that we can await. We see some previews of the sweet fruit that we’re able to savor. You see, as a result of this persecution, these Christians were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. In fact, that is what Jesus had said. He told them to go and spread to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and be witnesses. We see here that they go. God is using this to actually accomplish His Word. The apostles stay behind. They face the danger here because they’re determined to help this young church grow. But the scattering of God’s people moves them and there is a shift that causes the enemies of God to unknowingly facilitate His purpose. In the very act of seeking to suppress God’s plan and purpose, they advance it.

But that’s not all. When you look at it, you can see the person that God will transform in this young man named Saul. At this point, he is ripping the church apart. He is a flagrant enemy of God. That is exactly the kind of person God loves to select to transform for His own purposes as an example of undeserved mercy and grace. We know Peter is the great apostle to the Jews, but this young man who would eventually come to be known as Paul becomes a great missionary to the Gentiles.

Stephen here stands in the gap between the two, Peter and Paul here in the book of Acts. He gives a bold witness and a final cry, pleading for God’s forgiveness with the confidence that God’s sovereignty can be trusted. He is just sowing the seed. The fruit of that prayer and the mercy and forgiveness he doesn’t even get to see, but he is trusting that God will work and use this in a way that will be beyond what he can imagine. You have to understand or believe that Paul would look back at this moment in his life. He recounts this season of his life many times in his letters.

When he is writing, as we start to think about community in action, he starts to describe how do you deal with conflict and challenges? How do you deal with persecution? Paul has been on both sides. He’s been the imprisoner and he has been one imprisoned. He is able to say at the end of Romans 12

**Romans 12:21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Saul has experienced that and now as Paul and a follower of Christ, he is able to express that and call the Jews and Gentiles who might have been in conflict in Rome to be able to say as we’re going to follow Jesus, we’re going to have to trust Him. Praise God! We have people in our church family who have lost their jobs and who have sacrificed their careers. People have foregone promotions or have been cut off from family and friends. There are people who bear the scars of persecution that will not become visible until the future return of Christ. They have trusted God’s sovereignty and they can testify that He has proved Himself to be more than faithful. This is the picture of God’s sovereignty at work through the darkest valleys of life, the greatest of which is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus stooped into the greatest valley that we might have the highest hope. God’s plan is one that we can trust. In dark and dreadful moments of life, we hold on because we know resistance and rejection of this Gospel message is to be expected. We can know it’s predictable, but it absolutely also is the victory.

Some endings are all too predictable, but just not in the way we think. Jim Elliot and Nate Saint were killed together along with their teammates, but the story didn’t end there. If you go and read about it, you can see that in the months and years beyond their life spans, their wives returned to the very same tribe to continue the work. They went to the very same tribe that had murdered their spouses, to bring the hope of Jesus. Through their faithfulness and through the message of the Gospel, the Word spread and so many countless others were inspired to go and share the Gospel abroad. People within that village were transformed to also become followers of Christ.

This is the path Jesus forged, the path Stephen followed. It’s the path of any who trust in Christ. Suffering is a predictable part of what it means. We know that it’s too predictable that the world will reject and it will be difficult. But we also should expect absolutely nothing less than in the final chapter, there will be a glorious final victory and end beyond anything we can imagine.