

**Sermon Notes of
Pastor Craig Kuhlman's Sermon on November 8, 2020:**

**"Transformation of the Early Church Series on
The Book of Acts – Where is God When We Face Death? [Part 2]
(Acts 6:1 – 7:60) (Part 7)"**

[In today's sermon, Pastor Craig Kuhlman on Zoom shows us from the writing of Luke about how the church dealt with its problems by appointing 7 men, one of them Stephen, who became persecuted by the Jewish religious leaders and then was martyred.]

Introduction:

- Last week we looked at chapter 6 and this week we'll look at chapter 7.
- Now there 2 key things going on here.
- For Luke to include such a long discourse from Stephen, it is significant to understand.
- Now, Luke is a Greek, himself, and so, he's taking the time to address the Hellenistic Jews and the Greeks.

- First, Luke is taking out the old administration and leading in the new administration.
- And he is also showing that the Hellenistic Jews and the Greek community are truly a part of receiving the Gospel and being included in the chosen people of God and restored people of God.
- Luke will show us that the leaders of the Sanhedrin have now been disqualified.
- In fact, the 12 patriarchs of the Sanhedrin have been disqualified and now we have the 12 apostles replacing them.

- And also, obedience to the Holy Spirit becomes front and center replacing the obedience to the OT Law.
- Now, genealogy and blood line that was so important in the Old Testament has now changed and replaced by faith and trust in the Holy Spirit.
- And also, Jesus has replaced Moses as the key to following God.

- In the past, the temple in Jerusalem became an object of worship because of where God once resided.
- Now, we see that the temple today, where God resides, is in Christians because God no longer resides in a building.
- And Luke, for the first time in Acts, calls the church *ecclesia*, which word was used to describe the assembly in the wilderness.
- So, the word "church" was first used to describe the nation of Israel in the wilderness.
- And now the church has been restored and renewed in Acts.

- So, the second key element that Luke talks about is going through hard times.
- This passage in Luke 7 gives us an answer to the question: "Where is God when we face death?"
- Now, how should we, as believers, approach and face death as it comes upon us?

- What's so interesting is that the Stoic philosophers back in Jesus' time knew that there was something bigger than this life, which they saw in the nature of creation.
- Seneca, a Stoic philosopher, asked whether he should face death crying and being upset?
- And, so this passage helps us to approach the reality of death.

Here's the outline of last week's and today's message:

1. Changing structures (appointment of the seven) (Acts 6:1-7)
 - a. The problem within the church
 - b. The principle
 - c. The solution
 - d. The end result
2. Changing beliefs (Stephen's testimony) (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)
 - a. Stephen is accused (Acts 6:13-15)
 - b. Stephen makes his defense with 4 time periods of the OT (Acts 7:1-53)
(These accounts provide a lens to the rest of Acts and the Gospel message to the whole world, not just the Jews.)
 - Abraham (covenant of circumcision)
 - Patriarchs in Egypt (Joseph)
 - Account of Moses who foretold about Jesus
 - Account of David and Solomon
 - c. Stephen is stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60)

Acts 7:1 (NIV), Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” 2) To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me!

- Stephen is going to reveal how the Old Testament should be looked at and interpreted because of the coming of Jesus.

2) To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran.

- Now, Abraham, through whom God's promise was made, started out as pagan, non-believer, just like how the Gentiles are.
- So, the very foundation of what we believe started out with a pagan in the land of Mesopotamia.

3) ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’

4) “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5) He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.

- So, this certainly was an epic moment for Abraham, who had a completely different belief system, but he listened to God and followed what he was told to do.

6) God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7) But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ 8) Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision.

- Now the NIV calls this “the covenant of circumcision”, but in the Hebrew manuscripts it just says, “Then he gave Abraham the covenant.”
- Now circumcision was a practice that reflected the covenant, but it wasn’t a covenant of circumcision.

And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

- So here, we’re being taken back to the original structure of Israel.

9) “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt.

- Now, for Luke, “jealousy” is an identifier or code word that is tied to idolatry, which disqualifies the 12 patriarchs, which are then replaced by the 12 apostles in terms of administration of the New Covenant.

9b) But God was with him 10) and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

- Joseph was blessed despite all the circumstances he went through.
- Pastor Craig has always loved the story of Joseph.
- Now, today when we are in times of trouble and times of stress, we can question where is God.
- But, when we look back over a number of years, God took our troubling times, just as He did with Joseph, and set it up for a purpose.
- We can be reminded by these positive stories of Joseph and how he reacted to the various trials that he had to experience over a period of time like 3 years he spent in jail.
- Now today, we’ve been going through this COVID 19 trial for about 9 months, yet we know that it shall pass and one day we’ll be back to our normalcy.
- Now, we have to understand that God deals with a time frame that is something we are not used to.
- As an example, Moses, at the age of 40, was given his job description by God that he would be the savior of his people, but it took another 40 years before he started to fulfill it.

11) “Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12) When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13) On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. 14) After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15) Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died.

16) Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money. 17) “As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. 18) Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ 19) He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

- In this example, Joseph showed that faith and trust is so important for us to survive difficult times.
- God hadn’t left Joseph, even though it looked that way when the new king of Egypt came on the scene.
- This also created the events for Moses to come.

20) “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. 21) When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son.

- You have to believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding all of this action.
- When we come to strategic milestones in our lives, God is there for us.

22) Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

- This is a common way how the Greeks identified who their heroes were, which Stephen used.

23) “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. 24) He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian.

- Moses thought he was called to save and to restore his people.
- So, he tried it out early on, but failed.

25) Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. 26) The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’ 27) “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28) Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ 29) When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

- 40 years went by since Moses was given his commission from God – so wouldn’t he have a lot of doubt about it?
- This shows that God works in a completely different time frame than we do.

30) “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31) When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32) ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and

did not dare to look. 33) “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

- The place of holiness for the Jews had become the temple, because God had resided there.
- Now, today, what means holy is wherever God’s presence is.
- So Luke is showing us that God’s presence, through the Holy Spirit, is in His people – it’s not in a place anymore.

34) I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’

35) “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36) He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

- Luke uses the phrase “performed wonders and signs” to identify a prophet.
- So, Moses, indeed, was a prophet.
- But, Luke also showed that Stephen was a prophet as well as Peter and John who also performed wonders and signs.

37) “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ 38) He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

- Now, the prophet that Moses said God would raise up in the future was Jesus.
- The Greek word for “assembly” is *ecclesia*, which now means “church.”
- So, Israel, in the wilderness, was more than a nation, they were also the church.
- Back then they were God’s chosen people and today the church is God’s chosen people and restored people.

39) “But our ancestors refused to obey him.

- The religious leaders tend to forget the fact that the people in Moses’ day refused to obey him.
- In the first century, the leaders placed Moses over Jesus

39b) Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40) They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt – we don’t know what has happened to him!’

- Stephen emphasized that the people had rejected Moses many times.

41) That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. 42) But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: “‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings

forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? 43) You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.

- Stephen is pointing out that what the Israelites did in the wilderness was not what God wanted, even though in Jesus' day the historic Israelites were held in high esteem.

44) "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen.

45) After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46) who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47) But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

- What has happened during the centuries is that the temple was turned into a place of idolatry.

48) "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands.

- So, Stephen is telling the Sanhedrin that the temple is not as special as they say it is.

48b) 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 where will my resting place be? 50) Has not my hand made all these things?' 51) "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised.

- Stephen is calling the religious leaders of his day "stiff-necked people" like God called the children of Israel in the wilderness.

51b) You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

- Stephen is saying that the belief and obedience to the Holy Spirit is more important than obedience to the old covenant law that Moses had delivered.

52) Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – 53) you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

- In these verses, Stephen called out the Sanhedrin, which showed their disqualification and that they were to be replaced by the apostles to lead God's people.

54) When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55) But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56) "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

- "Full of the Holy Spirit" was another term that Luke used to identify a prophet.
- As Stephen was facing death, he knew he would be facing a lot of pain.

- We can't imagine what death by stoning would be like, but it would be agonizing.
- And as we face death today, there can be a lot of pain involved.
- We know where God was at that moment in time in Stephen's life – He was right there with Jesus at His side giving Stephen the courage, the trust and the faith to die and to die with dignity and to die with grace.
- It's interesting to note that God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and the angels were there beside the first martyr of the New Covenant church.

57) At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58) dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

- Luke shows us that Saul, who later became Paul, was the one orchestrating this stoning of death.

59) While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

- Stephen dies the same way as Jesus did by saying the same words of Jesus – “receive my spirit.”
- The Holy Spirit gave Stephen confidence and courage and also grace, by the way, as we'll soon see.
- This gives us an example that we can face death today with confidence; we can face death with courage.
- Stephen's words also show us that our spirit goes to another place when we die.
- So, we do have eternal life, through the Holy Spirit.
- It's interesting to note that the Greek word describing witness is *marturos*, but after Stephen's death *marturos* takes on a new meaning as well – it also means martyr.
- We know that all the martyrs of the New Testament church will be raised to meet Jesus in the air at time of our resurrection.

60) Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

- Sleep, for us, is a time of peace; it's a time of rest.
- So, we can face death as a time of peace, as a time of rest.
- Death is transitional time period before we see Jesus face to face.
- Scripture isn't clear whether we have that state of consciousness when our spirit is received by God or not.
- But, we can trust and believe in God's love for us, as we face death.
- We should take these final words of Stephen as encouraging words for us.
- So, now let's go through our summary of Acts 6 and 7.

In Summary of Acts (Acts 6-7:60) (Let's say this together):

*As the church was growing, some began to Brood,
The issue over, distributing Food.*

*A reorganization was the solution at Hand,
A delegation of duties to those in the Band.*

*The Hellenists chose seven, full of Spirit and Faith,
A phrase for prophets, Luke does Saith.
Growth continued as they Knew,
Even priests were joining, and not just a Few.*

*One of the seven was a man named Stephen,
Against whom some, started their Grievin'.
They said he spoke blasphemy against Moses and God,
Stirring up the leaders, wanting their Nod.*

*The false charges had no basis in Claim,
He presented a defense to clear his Name.
His face began to shine like an angel from Heaven,
Further confirming he was one of the Seven.*

*So when they asked, are these charges True?
His reply - the longest discourse in Acts would now Ensue.
First with Abraham and where he Began,
How God promised descendants would possess the Land.*

*Then a time in Egypt serving as Slaves,
To the birth of his children, and one of his Fave's.
The story of Joseph we all love to Hear,
His conflict with brothers turns out so Dear.*

*Famine struck throughout the Land,
Jacob's family reunited, by God's Hand.
Some years later, the prophet Moses was Born,
To deliver God's people from the land of Scorn.*

*Educated and trained as a Leader,
Although his actions at first seemed like a Bleeder.
After forty years, summoned from a Bush,
Seemed like now was the time to kick Pharaoh's Tush.*

*But Israel proved a stiff-necked people to Lead,
Even though in the wilderness, God did Feed.
Israel rejected Moses, it was their Way,
Not much different then Messiah you might Say.*

*Moses foretold, someday he would Come,
But they were idolatrous, and they were Dumb.
With them the tabernacle of covenant law Stayed,
Until David offered to build God a house, to be Repaid.*

*But God doesn't need houses, who would've Known?
As it turns out, heaven's his Throne.
So his accusers and their ancestors are just the Same,
Killing the prophets and in God's Name.*

*And you, the Sanhedrin killed the Messiah,
Stephen made them feel like a Pariah.
Enough of this, no more to be Said,
They wanted his blood they wanted it Shed.*

*On Stephen's face God's glory was Shone.
At the time of his death, killed by a Stone.
So where was the Father when Stephen Died?
Right there with him from heaven, his Son at his Side.*

*Despite all this Stephen displayed such Grace,
When he fell to his knees almost upon his Face.
Dear Lord Jesus, don't punish their Sin,
And Luke describes death as sleep Herein.*

(Closing prayer)