

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

Stephen's Story



The Acts of the Sent Ones - Acts 6: 8 - 8: 3

In this next portion of Luke's relating of what happened next in the life of Jesus' disciples, after his ascension, we focus on the story of one man, Stephen. It makes sense for us to look at it all in one go. We discover once more that being given the Holy Spirit to enable them to be bearers of the presence and power of Jesus in the world around them didn't mean that life would be easy.

False accusations Acts 6:8-15

I'm writing this at the time of the Presidential election in the USA. The country is divided into two camps and the candidate on the side that has the most to lose has resorted to false accusations and instigation of court action. Stephen also was facing false accusations from people who had a lot to lose. He has already been introduced to us earlier in this chapter as 'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit' (v5). Now, the miraculous deeds the Holy Spirit was performing through him had attracted attention and opposition. When arguing with him in order to discredit him proved futile (due to the superior wisdom of the Holy Spirit), some men from the Freedmen's Synagogue persuaded people to lie about him, stirred up a mob, instigated his arrest and planted false witnesses in court.

- Are there times when you have faced opposition or false accusations simply for being a follower of Jesus? If not, ask yourself what the reason might be. If so, was the source of your strength and hope the same as Stephen's?
- Countless believers across the world are currently being persecuted for their faith. Pray for God's empowering, protection and guidance.
- Pray for yourself and those you know in the difficulties you are facing.

Telling the story Acts 7:1-50

If the high priest was expecting a 'yes' or 'no' answer, he was in for a bit of a surprise. Stephen goes right back to the beginning of the story of God's people, to Abraham, and then traces the story of the Jewish nation from there. This was a story familiar to his hearers and yet he told it in a way that made Jesus, and his coming as God's Messiah, the climax to and fulfilment of the story. As we saw previously in Acts 2 and 3, this is a case of the Holy Spirit bringing to mind the scriptures Stephen already knew well, and helping him to relate them powerfully and meaningfully so his words struck home.

- Sometimes telling a story conveys far more meaning than a simple statement (e.g. 2 Sam 12:1-14). Would you include the same highlights from the Old Testament in your telling of what Jesus' coming means?

Our knowing the story is far more than just being able to relate historical facts. It's about being able to see the bigger picture, being able to see God's purposes being worked out in all the ups and downs of life. And it's also about being able to see that, in some sense, the Bible's story is our story. The God of the characters we read about is also our God. The things they learn and discover are the same lessons we need to learn today. The story of a God who loves his people and comes to be with them, rescue them and sort things out is also a story we need to live by and be transformed by.

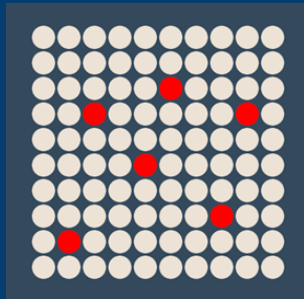
- When we hear people interviewed on the media, whether it be politicians on the news or the judges on Strictly Come Dancing, when asked a straightforward question they often don't take the bait but make the point they want to make instead. Do you always answer questions you are asked directly, or do you seek to understand what is behind the question and address that instead?
- What points would you want to put across in explaining how you see yourself fitting into God's story?

Stephen's Story (cont)

Stephen concludes his speech by speaking about the Law and the Temple, both things in which the Jews took much pride and held in high regard. He criticises neither, even describing the Law as 'living words' (v38), but points out the limitations of both. The Law did not stop prevent people rebelling against God and the Temple could not contain God. The Temple wasn't holy because it was the Temple, but because it was where God was to be found. However, as Moses discovered, God could be found anywhere. This was a touchy subject. The Jewish authorities regarded the Temple as the supreme location of God's presence and here was Stephen pointing out how absurd the idea is that the Most High God could ever be confined in any sort of building made by human hands, no matter how grand it might be. The coming of the Holy Spirit on followers of Jesus was opening up a whole new era of how God's presence was to be discovered and known across the whole world.

Reflecting on what we have learned from lockdown and the period of restrictions since the spring, many church leaders are saying that one thing the church has learned is to focus less on its buildings. Maintaining and improving buildings, whilst important, should not be the focus and our priority should be as least as much on what happens beyond them as in them. It is natural that the building in which we worship has a special place in our hearts, but the danger for us also is when we begin to envisage God's presence being restricted to the building – that we have to be in a church building to experience his presence. Even if we don't go quite that far, what is perhaps more likely is that somewhere along the line we have formed the opinion that the most important things that the church is engaged in take place in the church building.

- Read Ephesians 2:21-22. What do they have to say to us about the sort of temple in which God's presence is to be found?
- Read Jesus' words in John 14:20. Ask God to speak to you about how he wants his presence within you to impact the lives of those around you. Ask him to show you what he is already doing outside our buildings that he wants you to be part of.
- Look at the following two diagrams, one representing the church gathered in a building and the other out in the community.



In which diagram are members of the church (red dots) in contact with the most people? Which one most closely represents Jesus' statement in Acts 1:8? What do these diagrams help us understand about God's intention for his church during this season of pandemic? What do they have to say to us as a church and how God wants to use us at this time?

Pray that each of us would recognise ourselves as being bearers of God's presence and witnesses to his hope wherever and with whoever we find ourselves in the days ahead.

Stephen is stoned Acts 7:51-8:3

Having related a story of God's presence with, faithfulness towards and guidance of his people down the ages, and then how, under Moses, God's people became rebellious and disobedient, Stephen then turns to accuse his hearers of the same thing. He tells them they have resisted God, persecuted his messengers and rejected and murdered his Messiah, using language lifted straight from their law and prophets. And they know it! This was never going to go down well. In a culture well used to stoning to death anyone deemed guilty of blasphemy, they lost no time in dragging him in fury out to a place where they could fulfil their murderous intent. Note how Stephen's final words echo the words on Jesus on the cross.

- Stephen knew what he believed and was willing to die for it. He had already seen what was awaiting him, and knew that to die was to enter into the glorious presence of his Lord and Saviour. Does this same belief give you courage to speak out for what you believe in the face of opposition or do you stay quiet when you fear people might not like what they hear?
- Read Philippians 3:10-11. Paul speaks of knowing the power of the resurrection, participating in Christ's sufferings, becoming like him in his death and being resurrected from the dead. Is this what we see in the life of Stephen? Consider how far you can say these words also apply to you and your relationship with Christ.
- Spend time with God, asking him to show you what insights he wants you to gain from the story of Stephen and in what way he is challenging you to live and think differently as a result. Pray that you would continue to be changed and transformed into the likeness of Christ.