

## “Not Made by Human Hands” (Acts 6:8-8:3)

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*Acts 6:8–15 (ESV)*

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.<sup>1</sup>

Last Sunday, I looked at the *Parade* magazine that comes with the Boston Globe. In it, Morgan Freeman was asked about his role in a new documentary produced by National Geographic, which is called *The Story of God*. This documentary explores different religions across the globe. Freeman was asked, “Why do you think people believe in a higher power?” And here’s his answer:

If you go back far enough—let’s say to the beginning of human curiosity—we began to wonder why the top of a mountain would blow off or why all of a sudden it wouldn’t stop raining or why the earth shook. Those were unknowable, unanswerable questions. And the answer for what you don’t know is God, the great unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Freeman is basically saying that ignorant people who didn’t know science explained what they didn’t know by saying that “God” was behind everything. Freeman isn’t alone in this view. A number of people think that humans made up the concept of God.

Freeman has some interesting views on God. A few years ago, he was on CNN being interviewed by Piers Morgan. Morgan asked Freeman if he was a God-fearing man. Freeman said, “No, I don’t fear anything. I’m God.” Morgan said, “You have played God, of course.” He

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Scott, “What Did Morgan Freeman Learn from *The Story of God*?” *Parade*, April 1, 2016, <http://parade.com/466680/walterscott/what-did-morgan-freeman-learn-from-the-story-of-god/> (accessed April 9, 2016).

was referring to two movies in which Freeman played God: *Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty*. But that's now what Freeman meant. He said, "I'm God. Now, that sounds frivolous but what I mean is that if God exists it only has to—it can only exist in you, not outside you, right?"<sup>3</sup>

In another interview given the following year, Freeman was asked "Do you think there is a God?" After a pause, he said yes. When asked about that pause, he said, "I paused because I am God." The interviewer said, "Because every man is created in God's image." Freeman responded, "Yes or God's created in my image." And in yet another interview, Freeman said we have invented God.<sup>4</sup>

Now, I think Freeman is wrong about pretty much all his views of God. Human beings didn't create the idea of God. God exists. Period. Without God, there would be no universe, no earth, no humans. He is a necessary being, not one made up to fill a gap in our knowledge or some hole in our hearts. We believe in God because he has revealed himself to us in many ways. The clearest revelation of God is Jesus. We also have the Bible and even the whole creation itself. But Freeman is right about something: We tend to make God in our own image. That is, we want God to be like our idea of God. We want God to be the kind of God we would want if we could fabricate a god. We want God to be like us and act like us. We don't want God to challenge us and correct us and remind us that we are not the center of the universe.

In other words, we tend to make false gods and prefer false gods to the real God. The great theologian John Calvin wrote that "man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."<sup>5</sup> Calvin added: "Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity; as it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed with the crassest ignorance, it conceives an unreality and an empty appearance as God."<sup>6</sup> This is true even for those who should know better. It's true for people who have access to the Bible. We see it even in churches today. And we certainly see it in the history of Israel. All kinds of people exchange the truth of God for a lie.

As we continue our study of the book of Acts, we're going to encounter a long speech given by Stephen, one of the seven Jewish Christian men who were selected to serve the

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<sup>3</sup> September 23, 2011, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1109/23/pmt.01.html> (accessed April 9, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Jason Howerton, "'I Am God': Morgan Freeman Explains His Bizarre Take on Religion," *The Blaze*, July 8, 2012, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/07/08/i-am-god-morgan-freeman-explains-his-bizarre-take-on-religion/> (accessed April 9, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1:108.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

church's widows (Acts 6:1-7). It seems that he was performing miracles and he was preaching about how Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple and of the law given to Israel through Moses. And this got him into trouble with the powers that be in Jerusalem. He then delivered a long speech that shows that the Jews had a way of rejecting God's messengers and turning to idols. His point was that they were still doing that, even now. And that got Stephen into more trouble, as we'll see.

What I'm going for most of today's sermon is explain Stephen's speech, which is kind of a history lesson of Israel. But don't think that this is merely a lecture about some ancient history. This is a story that illustrates the human heart. What Israel did was what all of us tend to do, apart from God's grace.

Let's first get a bit of context. At the end of Acts 6, we're told that Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> 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." <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen was doing signs and wonders—miracles that validated his message. Stephen apparently was also teaching in a synagogue in Jerusalem. This was the "synagogue of the Freedmen." Freedmen were slaves that had been freed. "Freedmen" could also refer to the children of those freed slaves. This synagogue was probably a Greek-speaking one, a place of worship where the Scriptures were read and explained. It's possible that this was the synagogue of Saul of Tarsus, otherwise known as Paul.

We don't know exactly what Stephen was teaching, but various people at the synagogue attempted to dispute with him. They couldn't win that argument, because he was filled with the Holy Spirit and he spoke with the wisdom that comes from God. Because they couldn't win a debate with Stephen, they did the next best thing: They stirred up people against Stephen by

bringing false charges against him. They thought Stephen was saying things against the law of Moses and against God. Whether they understood Stephen properly or not, they decided they would set up false witnesses against him. These people said that he was speaking against the temple and against the law that God gave the Israelites. They also said that Jesus would destroy the temple and change Jewish customs.

To understand the importance of what's happening here, we have to understand something about Judaism. At this time, the Jews had three badges of national identity: observing dietary laws found in the law of Moses; observing the Sabbath; and circumcision. They also had three symbols of their identity: the temple, the land, and the Torah, or the law.<sup>7</sup> It seems that a number of the leaders of Judaism at the time of Jesus and the apostles were more concerned about such things than they were about God. For them, to suggest that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled the law and the temple, who spiritually circumcised his people, who gave people them true rest, and who was the new "place" of worship, was to commit blasphemy.

It's clear that Luke, the author of Acts, wants us to see that the tension that had been building between Jesus' followers and the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus is now coming to a head. This tension took place at the temple, which was now the center of controversy.

Luke also wants us to see that Stephen is following in Jesus' footsteps. False witnesses accused Jesus, too (Mark 14:56). They said about Jesus, "We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands" (Mark 14:58). It's true that Jesus said his body was the temple, and that after it was destroyed, in three days he would raise it up (John 2:20). But Jesus didn't mean he was going to lead a revolution against the temple and its authorities. Instead, he meant that the true temple had arrived. Jesus is the dwelling place of God on earth. Jesus is the place of worship. Jesus is the place of forgiveness. And the same is true of the body of Christ, the church. Now it is the church that is the temple.

But Stephen might not have said all of that. What he said was probably very similar to what he says in chapter 7. And there he says nothing about the law being obsolete and the destruction of the temple. Now, those things might be implications of what he said, but he didn't actually say those things. So Stephen is being falsely accused, just like Jesus was.

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<sup>7</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 49.

I should point out that that is what so often happens, even today. When someone can't win a debate, they often make up false charges. That happens often on both sides of the political aisle, and from various religious corners. So often, people misrepresent what their opponents say, particularly when their opponents are telling the truth. That is something that we cannot do as Christians. Here's a good rule of thumb: If you disagree with someone, at least be able to repeat their own beliefs or argument in a way that they would agree with. Before you say someone else is wrong, at least understand what they believe.

There's one last verse in chapter 6 that requires some explanation. In verse 15, we're told that Stephen's "face was like the face of an angel." Did that mean that Stephen had a sweet face? "Oh, he looks like an angel!" No. We've just heard the name "Moses." You may remember that Moses received the Ten Commandments and the law from God on Mount Sinai, and when he met with God on top of that mountain, his face would shine because he was in the direct presence of God's glory. When he came down from the mountain, the Israelites could see his shining face. It was so bright, that he began wearing a veil (Exod. 34:29-35). So the idea is that Stephen was beholding the glory of God. He was as close to God as Moses was. He was seeing something that these Jewish leaders couldn't see.

Stephen was seized and brought before the council. He was being put on trial. And in chapter 7, the high priest asks him about these charges. Stephen doesn't really answer. He's not on the defensive. Instead, he offers them a history lesson that reveals a few things. I'll point these out now so you can see them. First, he goes all the way back to Abraham, the father of Israel, and he then continues his lesson by talking about Joseph and Moses. Second, Stephen points out that God often displayed his glory apart from the tabernacle and the temple. The point is that God is too big to dwell in a building. He can't be confined to a man-made structure. God also appeared to his people outside the so-called "Promised Land." The point is that God is the God of the universe, not just the God of Israel. Third, Stephen points out that God's messengers are often rejected by other Israelites. Look for these things as we read this passage.

I'll try to explain important details as I go, but I'm going to assume that many of us are familiar with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. If you're not, you may want to look these figures up in the Bible later so you can learn more about the history of Israel.

Let's begin with the first eight verses of Chapter 7.

<sup>1</sup>And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" <sup>2</sup>And Stephen said:

“Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,<sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’<sup>4</sup> Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.<sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.<sup>6</sup> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.<sup>7</sup> ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’<sup>8</sup> And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

Stephen’s speech begins and ends with the glory of God. He says that the God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. God manifested his glory in Ur of the Chaldeans, not in the “Holy Land.” And even when Abraham came to the land, he had no inheritance in it, “not even a foot’s length.” He didn’t get to settle there permanently. The author of Hebrews says, “By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:9-10).

Stephen then moves on to talk about Joseph, Abraham’s great-grandson. Let’s read verses 9-16:

<sup>9</sup>“And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him<sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.<sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food.<sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.<sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh.<sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.<sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers,<sup>16</sup> and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Joseph’s brothers, the “patriarchs,” were jealous of Joseph and they sold him into slavery in Egypt. But though Joseph was betrayed, God was with him and he gave him favor and wisdom—just like Stephen had wisdom. And Joseph rose to second in command in Egypt, and he helped

Pharaoh and Egypt handle a large famine. Joseph was able to save his own brothers, who came to get food from him. Joseph forgave his brothers and the whole family moved down to Egypt.

There are three interesting things here: One, Joseph was rejected by his brothers. Two, God was with Joseph in Egypt, not in the Promised Land. Three, when Joseph's brothers first came to Egypt, they didn't recognize him, because years had passed and he looked different. But on their second visit, Joseph "made himself known." And at that time, they were reconciled to each other. Tuck that information away in the back of your brain.

Then Stephen moves on to Moses and the story of Exodus. Let's read verses 17-22:

<sup>17</sup> "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt <sup>18</sup> until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. <sup>19</sup> He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. <sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, <sup>21</sup> and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

In the years after Joseph died, the people both increased and multiplied—I talked about the meaning of that last week—and they also became slaves. The Pharaoh ordered that male Hebrew babies were to be killed, so Moses's mother put in a basket and floated him down the Nile. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as a Egyptian in Pharaoh's court. He was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. That verse shows us that we Christians can learn from non-Christians. But the point here seems to be that Moses was wise, just like Joseph and Stephen. And he was mighty in words and deeds, just like Stephen—and Jesus.

Let's now read verses 23-29:

<sup>23</sup> "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' <sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?' <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' <sup>29</sup> At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

Moses tried to rescue a fellow Israelite, which led him to kill an Egyptian. He thought that “his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they didn’t understand.” His fellow Israelites didn’t see Moses as a savior. Instead, they continued to fight with each other and they rejected his attempt to reconcile them. They rejected his leadership: “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” Like Joseph, he was rejected by his fellow Israelites. During his first appearance to the Israelites, they didn’t recognize him as God’s man. Moses then fled to Midian, where he had a family and was a shepherd and lived for forty years.

Here are verses 30-34:

<sup>30</sup> “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’

The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses outside the Promised Land, at Mount Sinai, in the form of the burning bush. Again, the glory of God appeared outside the land. God commissioned Moses to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. Let’s move on to verses 35-43:

<sup>35</sup> “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘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. <sup>36</sup> This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. <sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. <sup>39</sup> Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, <sup>40</sup> saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ <sup>41</sup> And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

“ ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,  
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?  
<sup>43</sup> You took up the tent of Moloch  
and the star of your god Rephan,

the images that you made to worship;  
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’

When Moses came back to the Israelites forty years later, it seems that they received him as a leader and he led them out of Egypt. But it wasn’t long before they disobeyed him. They rejected “this man [who] God sent as both ruler and redeemer,” the one who “performed signs and wonders” in Egypt. Remember that Stephen did “wonders and signs” (6:8). And Jesus did “wonders and signs” (2:22), too. And he was rejected by his people. Moses was the one who promised that a prophet would come (Deut. 18:15). And we were told in Acts 3 that Jesus is that prophet (Acts 3:22-26). He was the one who received and delivered “living oracles” in the “congregation,” which is the Greek word ἐκκλησία, which is the same word translated as “church” (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; etc.). Moses was preaching to the “church” of Israel, and they didn’t listen to him. Instead of listening to Moses, the Israelites turned to idols. They worshiped the golden calf and gloried in the works of their hands.

Because the people wanted to worship idols, God gave them over to that. They even worshiped heavenly bodies, the sun and Saturn. In verses 42 and 43, Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27. The point is that though God had given the Israelites the law and instructions to build the tabernacle and regulations for offering sacrifices to him, they worshiped false gods instead. They worshiped Moloch, the sun god, and Rephan, which is an Egyptian name for the planet Saturn. Because of their idolatry, the Israelites were exiled from the land that God had given to them.

Stephen then continues his speech. Let’s read verses 44-47:

<sup>44</sup> “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

Stephen follows the story of the tabernacle and temple. The Israelites had the tabernacle, which represented the dwelling place of God among them, in the wilderness. They had the tabernacle when they entered into Canaan. They had the tabernacle when David became king, and David wanted to build a permanent temple in Jerusalem, but it was David’s son, Solomon, who built it for them.

Now, before we get to the end of Stephen's speech, we should understand that up to his point, his audience probably didn't get his point. They would have been very familiar with the history of Israel and would have acknowledged everything he said to be true. Stephen was not yet saying anything controversial. His audience might have missed what Stephen was hinting at. He was basically saying that the Jews had a history of rejecting God's servants, people who did signs and wonders. They did that to Joseph and Moses, just like they did it to Jesus. And they were about to do the same to Stephen himself. He has also pointed out that a lot of the key events in Israel's history actually happened outside the land of Israel and apart from the tabernacle and temple. In other words, God is bigger than the temple, and he doesn't need the temple building to reveal his glory. (Keep in mind that the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle and the temple; Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Kgs. 8:10-11.) If they missed what he was getting at earlier, they certainly didn't misunderstand the end of his speech.

This is what he says in verses 48-53:

<sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

<sup>49</sup> “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?

<sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?”

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

Stephen finally gets to his point: God can't be contained in a man-made temple. God is infinite. He is omnipresent. The tabernacle and the temple were signs of God's special presence in the midst of his people. But they were signs that pointed to a greater reality. And that greater reality is Jesus. He is the true temple. There's now no need for a building. Yet when the true temple was in the midst of these leaders, they killed him. He was the Righteous One, the only one who was ever truly innocent, and they murdered him. Jesus was in a long line of God's servants who were rejected by their own people.

Stephen also throws three other jabs at them. He calls them uncircumcised in the heart and ears. Physical circumcision was the act of removing the foreskin, and it marked the Israelites out as God's people. But it too was a sign. What the people really needed was to have their hearts of stone and their deaf ears removed. The people needed to have new hearts and new ears to hear God's word. Moses and the prophet Jeremiah spoke of this need to have new hearts and new ears and even circumcised lips (Exod. 6:12, 30; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25-26). The New Testament says that Jesus has circumcised the hearts of his people (Col. 2:11-12). That means Jesus has given us new hearts; he's performed heart surgery on us, so we can love God and hear him and obey him. In fact, Paul even calls Christians "the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). These Jewish leaders that heard Stephen would have been proud of their physical circumcision, and Stephen says they were uncircumcised. In other words, they aren't really God's people, Abraham's children. The second jab is that they were just like their fathers, who murdered the prophets. Their rejection of Jesus is the same as the rejection of earlier prophets. The third jab is that even though they were so concerned with the law, they failed to keep it themselves. By putting all their pride in their temple and their rituals and their positions, they had made idols. They rejected the true temple, made by God, in favor of the man-made temple. In doing that, they broke the first two of the Ten Commandments.

We know Stephen's speech upset his audience because of what happened next. Let's read verses 54-56:

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

The members of the council become angry. But they don't move to action. It's not until they hear what Stephen says next that they move to punish him. We're told that he has a vision of "the glory of God, and Jesus standing there." The speech began with God's glory, and it's ending with God's glory. Normally, God's glory was associated with the tabernacle and the temple, but now it's associated with Jesus. And Stephen says that he sees Jesus, the Son of Man, at the right hand of God. He's saying that Jesus is the "Son of Man" figure of Daniel 7, the one who goes to God and receives all authority and power. This council had condemned Jesus as a blasphemer and Jesus died as a criminal. He died as one who bore a curse (Deut. 21:22-23; Gal. 3:13). And

now Stephen is saying he is the one who has all authority and power. He is where the glory of God could be found.

The council know what Stephen was saying, so they attack. We see that in verses 57-60:

<sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> 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. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> 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.

These very people rejected Jesus the first time. Now they have a chance to change their ways and they reject Jesus again by rejecting his messenger. They can't bear to hear Stephen's words. They are long past the point of debating and arguing. They stop their ears. They simply won't hear anymore. The only way to silence this man was to kill him. So that's what they do. They rush him out of the city and throw stones at him. Like Jesus, Stephen dies outside the city. And he says two things that remind us of Jesus. He says, “receive my spirit.” When Jesus died, he said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). And Stephen says, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus said, ““Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Notice that Stephen prays to Jesus, not the Father. It's not that he couldn't or shouldn't pray to the Father. But he prays to Lord Jesus. This shows that Jesus is God. The earliest Christians realized this.

At Stephen's murder, there was a man named Saul, and we'll learn a lot more about him later. We're told in the beginning of chapter 8 that he started to persecute the church. But we're also told that this persecution caused Christians to scatter, which would actually help to spread the message of Christianity. These are the first three verses of chapter 8:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

So, what do we learn from all this? What does this have to do with us?

First, we should see the greatness of Jesus. Most of this passage isn't directly about him. But Stephen's point is that Jesus is the true wise man, the true prophet, the true deliverer, the true king, and the true temple. Jesus is greater than anything else.

Second, all of us, particularly the most religious people, tend to make idols. And we value our idols—the works of our hands, man-made things—more than we value Jesus. We try to make manipulate God through our rites and rituals. Our natural tendency is to reject the true God, even when he comes in the flesh. That's how people are. Apart from the work of the Spirit, we would stop our ears and reject Jesus, too.

Third, one particular form of idolatry is nationalism. The Jews thought they were right with God simply because they belonged to a certain country. They assumed they were in the right because they lived in a particular land. And that can be true for Americans today. We can assume that we are better than people from other countries. Some people routinely confuse America with Christianity. Some people confuse patriotism with Christianity. This is a particularly bad idol, because it doesn't completely replace Jesus. Instead, it relegates Jesus to a national deity. Politics can also be an idol for us. We put too much trust in our country and our government, and therefore we are more concerned about elections than we are about God's glory. Fortunately, the more our government and American culture departs from God, Christians will be able to see more clearly that nationalism is an idol.

Fourth, even well-intentioned Christians can miss the point. We can focus more on our own traditions than what God has revealed in the Bible. We can turn church into a social club that exists to please us or comfort us or entertain us. We can slip back into moralism—the idea that by being good people, we can earn God's favor, and those "bad people" over there clearly don't deserve God's favor. But Jesus came to die for bad people, including me and you. The whole point is that we aren't good and can't earn God's favor. And no man-made religion can put us in the right with God. We need to have Jesus' perfect righteousness applied to our account because we're not perfectly righteous. And we him to take care of our sin. We need him to take our sin upon himself so that our sin could be punished in his death. We need we him to bear our sin for us, because if we bore it, we would be judged and cast out of God's presence forever.

We need to keep our eyes focused on Jesus. We need to have our hearts moved by what he has done for us, stooping to save lost people, which is how all of us start out in life. We need

to have our minds meditate on the gospel and God's word, knowing that we exist to glorify God through heartfelt obedience and through making disciples.

Here's a fifth point: The council tried to silence Stephen by killing him. But they didn't succeed. His message is still being read and proclaimed nearly two thousand years later. Enemies of Christianity still try to silence the gospel, but they will fail.

Let us not be stiff-necked, stubborn people who resist the Holy Spirit. Instead, let us be like Stephen, beholding the glory of God revealed in Jesus, willing to risk it all to follow Jesus.