

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, On the GO!
(Studies of the book of Acts)

The Limits of Orchestration

(Acts 6:8--8:4)

Study #10

Introduction: Dearly departed...

A couple of weeks ago, Northwest said our good-byes to David and Beth Taylor and their three daughters as they moved to Alaska. In a few short weeks, we'll say good-bye to Brent and Lindsey Savage and their kids as they move to Hawaii.

To which I say, "*Nuts.*"

I have never much enjoyed the regularity of such departures of good friends and treasured partners in ministry from the church - and that's an understatement.

To tell the truth, I have copped an attitude many, many times in response to these leavings. And, while I wish I could tell you that I'm past all that stuff now, that would be a lie. I'm not.

I first remember "the attitude" hitting soon into the start of our church, back in the mid '80's.

I had been meeting with a few men on Saturday mornings at 6am. We were meeting together to grow as disciples, and were having a great time together, studying, praying, sharing life.

We had been meeting for quite a while when one of those guys moved away from San Antonio. I was sad. I knew that I would miss him and his family.

Then another of the men moved away. Then a third. And that's when the attitude hit.

I had invested time and energy into these guys. I wanted them to grow as Christians AND I wanted them to become leaders here in the church.

As they moved away I saw my efforts at leadership training going up in smoke. I struggled with bitterness and resentment. I was deeply disappointed and I wondered what the Lord was up to.

Over the years, I have griped (in a very mature, spiritual way, of course) about the trail of families that have left our church.

Now, some have left for reasons of like and dislike, of course. But others - like the Savages and the Taylors - are gone because of such flimsy excuses as, "*The military is PCS-ing me*" or "*My company is transferring me*" or "*I'm going away for additional schooling.*"

Over the years, Care Group leaders have left. Elders have left. Staff members have left. Sunday School teachers and Deacons have left. A secretary left because her husband got a job in Dallas. What was she thinking?

I've long been bugged by the frequent exoduses of people who leave our church - and I know that I'm not alone.

A bunch of years ago, one family told me that they left Northwest because so many people left due to job transfers that it was too emotionally taxing to stay.

There is light at the end of this sad tunnel, though, because after a while I discovered something that has helped me deal with the trauma of departures. And it is a truth that lies at the very heart of the passage we are exploring this morning.

When I recall this truth, I'm able to do more than just endure the disappointment of people leaving. In fact, it's a truth that equips me to have a whole different, much better perspective on all sorts of disappointments.

And I think that God will use this truth to help you, too, if you struggle with disappointments, resentments, frustration, and bitterness over life's twists and turns.

Last Sunday, Pastor Jeff walked you through the first part of Acts, chapter 6. He did a great job of highlighting the beauty of service, by showing how the early church met the needs of widows in Jesus' Name. In that message, Jeff covered seven verses in great detail.

This morning, we're going to look at the follow-up story to that story - which has us covering over seventy verses. So, let's ride!

There was a group of seven men who managed the ministry that served the widows. These seven were all Hellenistic Jews, that is, Jews who had been raised in the Greek culture.

Beginning at verse eight, Luke zeroes in on one of the seven servants. It's Stephen, a man who was chosen because he was ***“full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”***

Luke further describes Stephen's character and ministry.

A Fruitful Ministry Leads to... (6:8-14)

Stephen - a Powerful Witness (v. 8)

[6:8] And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

So, picture Stephen involved in healing ministries. He's used by God to free people from demonic oppression.¹

¹ Jesus also performed what are often called *nature miracles* - walking on water, stilling storms, etc... Were these kinds of miracles performed by the apostles and others, like Stephen?

Picture, too, an exceptionally loving man. Stephen was ***“full of grace”*** - filled with a gracious spirit - just like Jesus.

He was recognized as a servant-leader even before he was selected to be a leader of the ministry that served widows.

People in the church noticed and appreciated Stephen's ministry and his message. Those who took exception to his message also noticed.

Stephen - Reviled and Opposed! (vv. 9-14)

The opposition (v. 9)

[6:9] But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

These “Freedmen” were Jews who had been released from slavery by their Roman owners. They were worshiping in the temple one day when Stephen started to talk about Jesus. They heard, and didn't like what they were hearing.

The Freedmen brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court), and charged him with serious offenses.

The opposition's charges (vv. 10-14)

[6:13] They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; [14] for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”²

You heard that these charges were brought by false witnesses. (So, if you thought “fake news” was a 21st century invention, surprise!)

² Jesus had been similarly misrepresented. He had said that if His “temple” (i.e. - His body) was destroyed, He would raise it up again in three days (speaking of resurrection). His enemies twisted that comment and accused Him of saying that He was going to destroy the Herodian Temple and rebuild it in three days.

Stephen hadn't done what the opponents accused him of doing. But the charges kept on coming.³

It's a highly charged confrontation. And as the confrontation rages, Luke draws our attention to, of all things, Stephen's face.

[6:15] And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.⁴

Now, I don't know all that's implied by that comment.

Maybe his face literally glowed with a supernatural radiance (like Moses' face had glowed when he came off the mountain after having met with God). Or maybe Stephen was just beaming with excitement about an opportunity to talk about Jesus to the Synagogue of the Freedman and to the Sanhedrin.

Whatever it was, all eyes were on Stephen as the High Priest began the formal proceedings with a simple question.

Stephen Invited to Speak (7:1)

With respect to the accusations against him, he asked Stephen, **[7:1] "Are these things so?"** - and he didn't have to ask twice! Stephen immediately grabbed the mic and launched into a very spirited talk.

What follows is the longest message recorded in the book of Acts. That tells us that Luke saw Stephen's speech as really important.⁵

³ You'll notice that this is exactly what had been done against Jesus, throughout His life and especially at His trial. This is not the only similarity we will see between the Jesus and Stephen stories.

⁴ The Greek word for "angel" is also the word for "messenger." It may be that Luke is telling us that the Council saw that Stephen was a messenger sent to them with a message from God.

⁵ Luke's interest in Stephen was probably due to his grasp of the strategically significant fact that this man emerged just as the church was being called on to undertake a new stage of its mission to the world - the Samaritan advance (an intermediate step before the full advance to the Gentile world).

And, while I'm not going to spend a whole lot of time explaining Stephen's sermon in the course of giving my sermon, what Stephen has to say is great, and I do want us all to get his "point."

Now, here's the main thought: Stephen's opponents were arguing that Stephen and all those who followed Jesus were against all things Jewish.

Stephen's sermon is a response to that charge. But his response was not to say, *"You misunderstand. We're not against Jewishness."* His response was to say, *"You misunderstand God and His ways. He's never been as tied to Jewishness as you think."*

His speech is a Jewish history lesson, taken from some of the key events in the lives of a few key Old Testament heroes.

Exhibit A is Abraham, the father of the Jews.

...A Powerful Message, Which Leads to... (7:2-53)

About Israel's Heroes (7:2-38)

Abraham's story (vv. 2-8)

Abraham lived a life of high adventure. He was the father of the Jewish nation and a man of great faith. Stephen mentions some of Abraham's notable adventures with God.

- God called Abraham while he was living in Mesopotamia.
- Abraham never did receive his promised inheritance in Palestine.
- Abraham's descendants lived in a foreign land (Egypt) for centuries before entering the Promised Land.

Everything Stephen mentioned about Abraham had to do with his life *outside* of the promised land of Palestine. And yet, Abraham enjoyed a covenant relationship with God. Amazing!

While his audience was digesting that "take" on Abraham, Stephen went on to mention two more patriarchs.

Jacob's and Joseph's story (vv. 9-16)

One was Abraham's grandson, Jacob. Jacob's faith journey with God began only after he left the land of promise, while he was living with his Uncle Laban.

The other was Joseph, one of Jacob's sons (and Abraham's great-grandson). Joseph was a man of character and faith - and he spent nearly his entire life in Egypt, not in Palestine.⁶

So, Stephen gave three examples of God's involvement in people's lives **apart** from the land of Israel, **before** the Law (which hadn't been given), and **separate** from the temple (which hadn't been built).

Then, Stephen spoke about Moses. He had been accused of dissing Moses, the great law-giver, so he had a lot to say about Moses.

Moses' story (vv. 17-38)

We don't learn all that much about Moses' early life from the Old Testament. But Stephen borrowed from Jewish tradition and told more than we would ever know from Exodus. He tells us just how brilliant, beautiful, precocious, and well-rounded Moses was.

And where was this prodigy raised? Not in Israel. Moses was raised in Egypt.

Stephen also mentioned the time when Moses rescued one of his fellow Jews by killing the Egyptian who was beating him.

It was because of this act that Moses was forced to flee Egypt. He wound up in the land of Midian where he herded sheep in the desert for forty years.

⁶ Stephen's mention of Shechem at the end of this paragraph is very interesting, since in the first century Shechem was the center of **Samaritan** life (there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans). By emphasizing Shechem, he is foreshadowing the soon to come advance of the Gospel into Samaria.

Stephen takes us to the scene of the burning bush, where God said to Moses, *[Exodus 3:5]... "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."*

And where was that "**holy ground**"? It wasn't in the Promised Land. It was in Midian!

And just in case they might not have ever thought about it, Stephen points out that the great Moses lived his entire life outside of the Promised Land. He never set foot in the land of Israel.

SO, based on the life stories of Abraham, Joseph, Jacob and Moses - four heavyweights! - Stephen could say that God was not restricted to working with people only in the land of Palestine, or only along the lines of the Law of Moses, or only within the confines of the temple.

His point? That Jesus is not all about Jewishness is not really all that unusual...

Then Stephen turned a corner to make another point to the Sanhedrin about their pride in Jewish history. Now Stephen was a Jew speaking as a Jew. But he reminded them, *Guys, our national history isn't all that shiny, anyway."*

About Israel's Worship (7:39-43)

He took them all the way back to Mount Sinai, to that glorious time when Moses was getting the Ten Commandments from God. And he brought up that embarrassing incident about the people worshiping the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain with God.

He went on to quote the prophet Amos, who reported that hundreds of years later, the Jews were STILL practicing idolatry. (Acts 7:42-43)

The Synagogue of the Freedmen had accused Stephen of speaking against the temple, too. So, Stephen tackled the temple, and pointed out exactly what they didn't want him to say.

About God's "house" (7:44-50)

Tabernacle vs. temple (vv. 44-47)

It was King David who thought up the idea of building a temple for God. He felt badly that he was living in a fancy, cedar-paneled home while God was "housed" on the other side of the tracks in a tent (tabernacle).

God commended David for his desire to build a temple. It was, eventually, David's son, Solomon, who oversaw the construction of the temple, and God was pleased with the finished product. He filled the "house" with His shekinah glory.

But listen to what Solomon said on the day of the temple's dedication.

Will you "house" God?! (vv. 48-50)

[Acts7:48] "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

[49] 'Heaven is My throne,

And earth is the footstool of My feet;

What kind of house will you build for Me?' says the Lord,

'Or what place is there for My repose?

[50] 'Was it not My hand which made all these things?'

Stephen's two points here are that, one, while God appreciated the gesture of building Him a temple, it wasn't ever His idea;⁷ and two, the temple, which should have been a great boon to worship, became instead, a detriment to worship because the Jews paid more attention to the temple than to the God it was built to serve.

And now for the punch line of Stephen's message.

About YOUR Hearts! (7:51-53)

[7:51] "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. [52] "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; [53] you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

You can hear anger in Stephen's words. But there was sorrow, too. He is reflecting on the fact of Israel's consistent rebellion against God, from Day One forward.

And they have taken their rebellion to the absolute limit. They murdered the Righteous One - the Son of God! - the One whose name Stephen never even got to mention.

He never got the chance to call his audience to faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. He never even said the word, "resurrection."

Certainly, he may have intended to say more than he did, but what he had said to this point so infuriated his audience that he didn't even get to finish.

The response of the Jews to such stinging words could have been one of two. They could either REPENT - as did Peter's audience on the day of Pentecost - or, they could REJECT.

Luke graphically describes their response - ***[54]...they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him*** - while grace shines.

⁷ Stephen was probably emphasizing the dynamic nature of the tabernacle vs. the static nature of the Temple. The tabernacle - a tent well suited to life in the desert for a nomadic people - pictured movement. It spoke of going along with God under His direction, vs. being satisfied with the *status quo* that made the nation unresponsive when God did something new.

...Devastating Persecution. Which Leads to... (7:54--8:4)

Stephen - the First Christian Martyr (7:54-60)

An inviting vision... (vv. 55-56)

[7:55] But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Almost always, whenever there is a reference to the post-resurrected Jesus in Heaven He is *seated* at the right hand of God.⁸ Here, though, He is standing - no doubt to welcome Stephen home.

The method of Stephen's martyrdom was the way of stoning. Luke describes his death.

...then stoned to death (vv. 54-59)⁹

[7:59] They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" [7:60] Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.¹⁰

He died just like Jesus did - commending himself to his God and forgiving those who killed him.¹¹

⁸ The significance of Him being seated is that His work is finished.

⁹ Harrison suggests that Caiaphas was no longer the High Priest, having been replaced by a man named Jonathan, and that Pilate had been replaced by Vitellius, who was much more lenient than Pilate had been, and probably gave the Jews the privilege of capital punishment. Perhaps, but our knowledge of the chronology is not precise. Even if it was still the Pilate-Caiaphas show, capital punishment could have been enacted. It just would have been risky, a risk the Sanhedrin was evidently willing to take in the present case.

¹⁰ Again, we see here a man doing exactly the right thing, suffering for it.

¹¹ This is precisely what Luke meant earlier in this passage when he told us that Stephen was not only "*performing great wonders and signs among the people*" but that he was also "*full of grace.*"

Now, following Stephen's death, there is a dramatic shift in the experience of the church.

Luke tells us of a major persecution that was sparked by this first martyrdom, a persecution spearheaded by a young man who had been standing on the sidelines while Stephen was being stoned (See 7:58).¹²

The young man's name was Saul. And Saul moved off the sidelines of persecution and jumped into the game.

Saul - a Prime Persecutor (8:1a, 2-3)

[8:1a] Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death...[3] But Saul began ravaging¹³ the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Saul became the face of the church's opposition. He firmly believed that Stephen got just what he deserved. And he was determined to do what he could to see to it that other Jesus-followers got the same treatment.

He launched what we would today call a *jihad* against the church and tried to destroy it.

Wholesale persecution is a terribly disruptive thing. You can just imagine how your life would be affected if it suddenly became as dangerous to live as a Jesus-follower in San Antonio as it was for the first Christians in Jerusalem.

You might hang around for a bit, suffer the constant threats and danger, expose your family to intimidation.

¹² Saul is mentioned here, just as Barnabas was mentioned at chapter 4, to introduce him and to foreshadow his growing role in the chapters to come.

¹³ The word used to describe Saul's efforts are used to describe a wild boar ravaging a vineyard.

But, after a while, as we are seeing happen in the Middle East today with the refugees leaving Syria and other places, you might consider the possibility of leaving town. And that was exactly what many of those in the first century did.

Lots of the brand-new Christians in Jerusalem, who had been enjoying community and growing in Jesus since the Day of Pentecost left. Luke tells us why.

The Church - Suffering and Scattering (8:1b)

[8:1b]...And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem,¹⁴ and they were all scattered¹⁵ throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

So, in the midst of the persecution, the apostles stood fast and stayed in Jerusalem. They wanted to remain there, come what may.

But, most of the rest scattered. Or, more accurately, as Luke says it, they “*were...scattered*.”¹⁶

The word that Luke chose here - *scattered* - was an agricultural term. They were scattered like seed sown by a farmer on a field.

And everywhere these scattered disciples went, they dropped the seed of the Gospel.

...the Spread of the Gospel! (8:4)

[8:4] Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

¹⁴ Stephen’s speech has now prompted the opposition of Pharisees (Saul was a Pharisee) in addition to the already intransigent opposition of the Sadducees to the Christian message.

¹⁵ The Greek word for “scattered” here is *diaspeiro*, the word from which we derive the English “diaspora” which refers to a population that is displaced from its homeland.

¹⁶ Although it appears in a slightly irregular form, this word is an aorist passive, indicating that the subject (the church) was acted upon. The church didn’t “scatter”. The church “was scattered.”

The people went out from Jerusalem as seed pods carrying seed, not as refugees, but as ambassadors.

To this point in Acts, we have been mostly seeing the apostles taking the lead in evangelism in in the context of the church *gathered*.

Now, it was the church *scattered* that took up the evangelistic task, with every Christian becoming a missionary.

And it turns out that the enemy of the church - Satan (who is at some level behind all persecution) - over-reached. He outsmarted himself. His plan to persecute the followers of Jesus carried some unintended consequences.

Instead of smothering the Gospel, persecution spread it. So...

- Stephen’s martyrdom brought about a great persecution.
- The great persecution led to a great dispersion.
- The great dispersion resulted in world-wide evangelism.

Conclusion:

From the first time that I “got” this story of Stephen’s martyrdom and the scattering and mission that followed, it has had about as profound an impact on me as any story in the Bible.

This whole episode of the church is really helpful when I am in need of an “attitude adjustment” due to disappointment, frustration, anxiety, resentment, or bitterness.

For instance, when I am tempted to cop an attitude about people leaving San Antonio - and especially about people leaving Northwest - this story reminds me that the biggest game in town is never the size or even the smooth functioning of our church. It’s never primarily about me enjoying the company of good friends.

When the first church suffered persecution in Jerusalem, just think what the resulting “scattering” did to the meals ministry to widows. It destroyed that ministry.

Think of all the plans the apostles probably had for Bible studies, small groups, fellowship nights, youth retreats, and more. They all went up in smoke when the church was scattered.

But, as they were scattered, the Gospel spread. Acts reminds us here that at any given moment, the most important thing is always the progress of the soul-saving, life-transforming Gospel of Jesus.

There are lots of people who have been equipped for ministry at Northwest who are now making a difference for Jesus elsewhere. It's all good. The painful departures are kingdom wins.

And today, we can broaden the application of this story from Acts beyond what one near-sighted, left-handed, San Antonio pastor has needed to learn.

So, you tell me. Would the early church have ever chosen to pursue the Great Commission's *"Go!"* (Matthew 28:18-20) through persecution and suffering?

Can you imagine the apostles ever coming up with this plan at a brainstorming session? *"I know. Let's start with the death of Stephen and then we'll take the message of salvation to Judea and Samaria."*

I seriously doubt it.

They might have put together some great plans and they might have prepped for some bold initiatives. But not this.¹⁷ All the planning and orchestration and strategizing in the world would not have resulted in THIS scheme for evangelism.

I'm not saying that God caused the persecution of the early church. But He clearly used it to move His people out of the cocoon of a safe Jerusalem to spread the Gospel and to fulfill Acts 1:8.¹⁸

So...by all means, plan. Prepare. Organize. Strategize.

Scripture commends the wisdom of planning our work and working our plan.

It was great to see the church putting together a plan to care for and to serve widows. And it's great to see a smooth-running Food Pantry, an organized Men's Breakfast, a Praise Team on key.

Managing the work of God is a very important thing. And that management requires planning, delegation, execution, and teamwork.

But, our trust is not in our plans. It is in God we trust. And the work of God is ultimately "managed" by the Lord Himself.

So, let's determine to hold our plans with an open hand. Let's embrace the truth that there are limits to what can be accomplished by our thoughtful orchestration.

And let's live with the great expectation that God will be at work in life's small and big disappointments and challenges and disruptions.

After all, if He used the suffering and the persecution of His people to ignite a spark that spread the Gospel outside of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, is it not likely that He will use the tough things going on in your life to accomplish His highest purposes?

The same Lord who used the first church's persecution-fueled scattering to reach the world, will use the hard things in our lives to push His purposes forward today.

Maybe today's "next step" for you is to embrace the truth that the biggest game in town is never the advance of "The Kingdom of Me." It's always the progress of the Gospel of Jesus.

¹⁷ And my suspicion is that their plans would have been for Jerusalem outreaches.

¹⁸ The verse that predicts that Jesus' followers would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria - and to the remotest part of the earth.