

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses... ...bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.

(Studies in the book of Acts)

The Surprising Launch of Mission

(Acts 6:8--8:4)

Study #10

Introduction: Dearly departed...

With great regularity, we at Northwest have waved *"Good-bye"* to dear friends.

But then, that's "life" in San Antonio. There is a transience element here (departures due to college, military, and business), so it isn't surprising that there is transience element at our church.

To which I say, *"Nuts."* - and that's an understatement.

I've never enjoyed these departures of good friends and treasured ministry partners from the church. And I've often had a bad attitude in response to these leavings.

I first remember the "attitude" hitting soon after Northwest launched.

Back in the '80's, I was meeting with a few men on Saturday mornings from 6:00am. We met to grow as disciples, and were having a great time together, studying, praying, and 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. That was when the attitude hit.

I had invested time and energy in these guys. I wanted them to grow as disciples and to stay and make disciples here in San Antonio - and in our church.

As they moved away, I saw my efforts at leadership development go up in smoke. I was disappointed. 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 lots of others have left Northwest, giving flimsy excuses like, *"The military is PCS-ing me"* or *"My company is transferring me."*

Over the years, Care Group leaders have left. Elders have left. Staff members have left. Sunday School teachers and Deacons have left.

One of our first admins 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.

Over twenty 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 here.

Now, relax, there is light at the end of this sad tunnel.

After a few years of what I'll call "transfer trauma," I discovered something from the very passage of the Bible that we're exploring this morning that has helped me tremendously.

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 much better, more eternal, perspective on all sorts of disappointments.

Today, the primary theme we're considering is persecution.

My prayer is that God will use the truth of this passage to enter into the suffering of Christians who are currently being persecuted.

I'm also praying that He will equip all of us who struggle with life's disappointments, challenges, disruptions, suffering, and even persecution to lead a deeper life of trust in Him.

Review...

Last Sunday, we saw that the early church did a great job of meeting the needs of widows in Jesus' Name.

Seven Jewish men, who all hailed from the Hellenistic (Greek) world, managed the ministry that served the Judean and Hellenistic widows.

Last Sunday, we looked at seven verses. This morning, our study covers seventy verses. Luke zeroes in on the story of Stephen, who was one of these seven servants.

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

Stephen's Powerful Witness (6:8)

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

God was using Stephen to perform the miraculous, just like Jesus. Stephen was a man of grace, just like Jesus.

The congregation had appointed Stephen to be one of the Seven Servants precisely because he was a man who was ***"full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."***

They had noticed both his character and the fruitfulness of his ministry. Some people who took exception to his message also noticed.

Stephen Being Reviled and Opposed! (6:9-14)

The opposition from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (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 were Jews who had formerly been enslaved to Romans. Now they were "free men." One day in Jerusalem, they happened to be where Stephen was when he was talking about Jesus.

They didn't like what they were hearing, so they dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin and charged him with serious offenses.

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

***[6:13] They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man does not stop speaking against this holy place and the Law; [14] for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us."*¹**

¹ Jesus had been similarly misrepresented. For instance, He had said that if His "temple" (meaning, His body) was destroyed, He would raise it up again in three

days (that is, resurrection). His enemies twisted that comment and accused Him of saying that He was going to destroy the Herodian temple.

Of course, Stephen hadn't done any of what the opponents accused him of. But the charges kept on coming and the confrontation raged.²

Then, of all things, Luke drew attention to Stephen's face.

[6:15] And all who were sitting in the Council stared at him, and they saw his face, which was like the face of an angel.³

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

Maybe his face literally glowed with a supernatural radiance.⁴

Or maybe Stephen's face was beaming with excitement at this chance to speak to the Synagogue of the Freedman and to the Sanhedrin about Jesus.

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

Stephen Being Invited to Speak (7:1)

The High Priest had heard all the accusations against Stephen. He simply asked, ***[7:1] "Are these things so?"*** - and he didn't have to ask twice! Stephen grabbed the mic and launched into a very spirited talk.

What follows is the longest message recorded in the book of Acts.

And, while I'm not going to go verse by verse through Stephen's sermon, what Stephen has to say is really important and I don't want us to miss his main point.

Here's the flow of his thought.

- Stephen's opponents were arguing that Stephen and all those who followed Jesus were against all things Jewish.
- Stephen's message gave his response to that charge.
- His response WAS NOT to say, *"You misunderstand me. I'm 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 was a Jewish history lesson, taken from some of the key events in the lives of a few key Old Testament heroes.

Exhibit A was Abraham, the father of the Jews.

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

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

Abraham's story (vv. 2-8)

Abraham was the human source of the Jewish nation and a man of great faith. Stephen mentioned some of Abraham's notable adventures with God.

- God called Abraham while he was living hundreds of miles away from Palestine 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 in this sermon 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 very Jewish audience was digesting that "take" on Abraham's life, Stephen mentioned two more patriarchs.

² You'll notice that this is exactly what had been done against Jesus, throughout His life and especially at His trial.

³ The Greek word for "angel" is also the word for "messenger." Luke might be saying that the Council saw Stephen as a messenger from God. (Probably not.)

⁴ As Moses' face had quite literally glowed when he came off the mountain after having met with God. (See Exodus 34)

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 (Palestine) and while on his way, traveling, to live with his Uncle Laban in the land of Haran.

Stephen also mentioned Joseph, who was one of Jacob's sons (thus, Abraham's great-grandson). Joseph was a man of character and faith...who spent nearly his entire life in Egypt, not in the Promised Land.⁵

So, Stephen gave three examples of God's involvement in the lives of three major players in His plan who lived **apart** from the land of Israel, who lived **before** the Law was given, and who lived **separate** from the temple, which hadn't been built.

Then, Stephen spoke about Moses. He had been accused of speaking against the great Law-Giver (Acts 6:14), so he had to say something 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 us just how beautiful, precocious, and well-rounded Moses was.

And where was this prodigy nurtured and 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.

Stephen then took his audience to the scene of the burning bush, where God spoke to Moses.

God said, *[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 the middle of the desert of Midian.

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

Thus, based on the life stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses - four Old Testament 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? The fact that Jesus was not only or all about Jewishness was not all that unusual. Par for the course. Status quo for how God had always worked.

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.

⁵ Stephen's mention of Shechem at the end of this paragraph was significant, since in the 1st century Shechem was the center of Samaritan life. By naming Shechem, he was foreshadowing the soon to come advance of the gospel into Samaria.

Stephen had the gall to bring up that embarrassing moment when the people worshipped a golden calf - idolatry! -while Moses was on the mountain with God.

He then, pivoted, and quoted the prophet Amos, who reported that hundreds of years later, the Jews were STILL practicing idolatry. (Acts 7:42-43)

Finally, this group from the Synagogue of the Freedmen had accused Stephen of speaking against the Jerusalem temple.

Stephen pointed out exactly what they didn't want him to say about their temple.

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

Tabernacle vs. temple (vv. 44-47)

We remember that it was King David who first had the idea of building a temple for God. David 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 (the tabernacle).

God did commend David for his desire to build a temple. David's son, Solomon, did eventually build God's temple. And God was pleased with the finished product. He filled the temple with His shekinah glory.

But listen as Stephen quoted what Solomon himself said on the day of the temple's dedication.

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

[Acts 7:48] "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 REST?
[50] 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND THAT MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'***

Here are Stephen's two points about the temple.

One, God did appreciate the heart behind this gesture of building Him a temple. But it wasn't His idea. He had never commanded that a temple be built.⁶

Two, the temple, which was to have been a great boon to worship, became instead a detriment to worship because the Jews paid more attention to the temple than they did to the God it was built to serve.

And now, the punchline 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, and you have now become betrayers and murderers of Him; [53] you who received the Law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Here, Stephen's words reflect both anger and sadness. He has shown Israel's consistent rebellion against God. He says that now, by murdering the Righteous One, they have perfected their rebellion.

Sadly, Stephen's address stopped here. He never got the chance to name the Name of Jesus or to call his audience to believe in Jesus. His audience didn't let him continue.

⁶ 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. Not so the temple.

The response of the Jews to such stinging words could have been repentance, as it was for Peter's audience on the day of Pentecost. It wasn't repentance. It was wholesale rejection.

Luke described their response. **[54]...they were infuriated, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.**

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

The First Christian Martyr (7:54-60)

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

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

Almost always, whenever there is a reference in Scripture to the post-resurrected Jesus in Heaven He is *seated* at the right hand of God, indicating that His redemptive work is finished.

Here, He was standing to receive His faithful servant.

...then stoned to death (vv. 54-59)⁷

[7:59] They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" [7:60] Then he fell on his knees and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.⁸

⁷ Harrison holds 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 more lenient than Pilate had been, and who gave the Jews the authority of capital punishment. Perhaps, but even if Caiaphas and Pilate were still in control, 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.

⁸ Again, we see here a man doing exactly the right thing and suffering for it.

He died just like Jesus did - commending himself to God AND forgiving those who killed him.⁹

Following Stephen's death, there was a dramatic shift in the whole experience of the church.

Luke tells us that a major persecution arose after this first Christian martyrdom. This persecution was spearheaded by a young man who had been standing on the sidelines while Stephen was being stoned. (See 7:58)¹⁰

The young man's name was Saul (whom we will soon come to know as the Apostle Paul). And Saul moved from bystander to first-string persecutor.

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

[8:1a] Now Saul approved of putting Stephen to death...

Then, skipping on down a bit, we read, **[3] But Saul ravaged¹¹ the church, entering house after house; and he would drag away men and women and put them in prison.**

Saul became the face of the opposition to the church.

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.¹²

Wholesale persecution is a terrible thing on many levels. It is a completely disruptive thing.

⁹ 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."**

¹⁰ Saul is mentioned here (just like Barnabas was mentioned in chapter 4) to foreshadow his growing role in the chapters to come.

¹¹ The word used to describe Saul's efforts (**"ravaging"**) is used elsewhere in Greek literature to describe a wild boar ravaging a vineyard.

¹² Note Jesus' prediction that people who killed His disciples would be thinking that they were correctly offering sacrifice to God. (John 16:3)

You can just imagine how it would impact your life if, all of a sudden, it 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.

But, after a while, as we are seeing happen in the Middle East today with the flight of refugees leaving their home countries, you might consider the possibility of leaving. It would be too hot to stay.

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.

Suffering and Scattering (8:1b)

[8:1b]...And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem,¹³ and they were all scattered¹⁴ throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for 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.”***¹⁵

The word that Luke chose here - *scattered* - was an agricultural term. When the disciples left Jerusalem, 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! (Acts 8:4)

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

The disciples leaving Jerusalem were like seed pods carrying seed, not as refugees, but as ambassadors.

Up to this point in Acts, we have been mostly seeing the apostles take the lead in evangelism. They were preaching sermons, teaching from house to house in the context of the church *gathered*.

Now, it was the church *scattered* that became the evangelists. Every Christian became a missionary.

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 great evangelism.

Conclusion:

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

¹³ Stephen's speech prompted the opposition of Pharisees (Saul was a Pharisee) in addition to the already committed opposition of the Sadducees to Christian faith.

¹⁴ The Greek word for ***“scattered”*** here is *diaspeiro*, the word from which we get the English *“diaspora”* which refers to a population displaced from its homeland.

¹⁵ 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.”*

This episode of life in the early church has been life-changing when I am in need of an “attitude adjustment” due to disappointment, frustration, anxiety, resentment, fear, or bitterness.

Like when I am tempted to cop a bad attitude about friends leaving San Antonio - and especially about them leaving Northwest - this story reminds me that the biggest game in town is never getting my way. It is never either the size or the smooth running of our church.

Something else is bigger and infinitely more important.

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

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

But, as those disciples got scattered, the gospel spread.

Over the years our church has been here, there are lots and lots of people who have been nurtured, have matured, and have been equipped for ministry at Northwest who are now making a difference for Jesus elsewhere.

It’s all good. The departures might be a bit painful to us who are left behind, but they are kingdom-of-God wins.

I’ve learned that God can and will use the disruption of a move - and many other things that I would not prefer - to move His purposes forward.

Today, we can broaden the application of the Acts story beyond what one near-sighted, left-handed, San Antonio pastor has needed to learn about “dear departures.”

We can live with the great expectation that God will be at work in life’s small and big disappointments and challenges and disruptions.

If He was willing to use the suffering and the persecution of His people to ignite a spark that spread the Gospel outside of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, won’t He also use the tough things going on in my life and in your life to accomplish His highest purposes?

Maybe today’s “next step” for all of us 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 Jesus’ gospel.