

ACTS 6:8-7:60

Stephen's Speech

Memory Verse

"And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'"

Acts 7:60

Real-life Problems

Doubt—Even as Christians who believe that Jesus is the Lord of everything, we often will struggle with doubt. We will go through difficult seasons—maybe the loss of a loved one or a disappointment in our personal lives—which make us question whether or not God is still on His throne, ruling over everything that happens on the earth. Sometimes that doubt is just a low-grade melancholy, but sometimes it's a much deeper, darker feeling.

The Good News

In this passage, we see Stephen recount all the amazing deeds and incredible faithfulness of God working among His people. During seasons of doubt, we can, with Stephen, look back at God's record of faithfulness to His people. We can also, with Stephen, look forward to seeing the glory of God in heaven, and later, in the new heavens and the new earth (Acts 7:55-56).

I. Introduction

OPENING QUESTIONS

Idea #1: What was the last thing you really looked forward to? Why were you so excited about it?

Idea #2: What was the last thing you doubted or felt cynical about? This could be as small as feeling like your favorite team wouldn't win a big game, or it could be something more substantial.

Idea #3: What is the coolest thing you've ever seen, in person, with your own eyes?

PRAY

Open your time together in prayer.

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL

What does gospel mean?

Good news

What's the good news?

Jesus died for my sins

Why did He die for your sins?

So that I can have abundant life in relationship with Him now and forever

What is grace?

God's undeserved love for sinners

REVIEW

1) Who wrote the book of Acts?

Luke wrote Acts as a history of the earliest days of the church.

2) Who was the original audience of this book?

The original audience of Luke, narrowly speaking, is Theophilus. More broadly, though, Luke has written Acts with elements that appeal to both Jew and Greek, so the ultimate audience appears to be any Christian from any ethnicity.

3) Why was the book of Acts written?

The book of Acts was written to record the works of God in the early church.

What's going on?

REMIND

We all are fundamentally sinful and selfish at our core, and God has to punish that sin to be just. For Christians, though, we won't experience that punishment for sin because Jesus has already experienced it on our behalf.

TODAY WE'LL LEARN

- 1) Who Stephen is and what he said.
- 2) How the religious elites responded to his speech.
- 3) What Stephen's speech reveals to us about God.

Read

Read **Acts 6:8-7:60** aloud in your group.

II. Questions for Discussion

A. WHAT?

1) How does Luke describe Stephen in Acts 6:8?

Luke says that Stephen is "full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people."

2) How did the Jews from the synagogue nearby react to what Stephen was doing and saying (vv. 9-14)?

They "rose up and disputed with Stephen" (v. 9), they "secretly instigated men" around them (v. 11), they "stirred up" the people (v. 12), and they "set up false witnesses" against him (v. 13). Finally, they charge him with blasphemy (vv. 13-14).

3) In Acts 7:1, the high priest asks Stephen if the accusations against him are accurate. How does Stephen respond?

Stephen responds by recounting much of the history of Israel, with an emphasis on Moses' life.

4) Where does Stephen say that God, "the most high," does not dwell (v. 48)?

Stephen quotes Isaiah in saying that God "does not dwell in houses made by hands."

5) What three things does Stephen accuse the Jewish leaders of in verse 51?

He calls them stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, and he tells them that they always resist the Holy Spirit.

6) According to verse 54, how do the Jews react to his accusations?

They become enraged and grind their teeth at him.

7) According to verse 58, what do they ultimately do to him?

They stone Stephen and kill him.

8) What does Stephen see and say as he is being killed (vv. 55-60)?

He sees the heavens open, allowing him to see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Additionally, as he is breathing his last, he says, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

B. SO WHAT?

1) Why do you think Stephen spends so much time talking about Moses in his speech?

First, Stephen seeks to establish some credibility for the points he's making. Along with David and Abraham, Moses is one of the most admired people in the history of Israel, and if Stephen can demonstrate that Moses agrees with him, he's on pretty solid ground in his argument. Second, Stephen is showing the authorities that they are the side of the calf worshipers and those who persecuted and killed the prophets, not on the side of Moses.

2) Read verse 40, and then read verses 51-53. What similarities do you see between the story of the golden calf and what's happening to Stephen here?

Stephen draws a direct line from the people who worshiped the golden calf to the religious authorities of the day. Just as Aaron and those who followed him after the Exodus could not be troubled to wait for the Lord's revelation to Moses, the Jewish authorities of the day couldn't be troubled to search the Scriptures and see Jesus in them.

3) Read verses 54-60 one more time. Do you get the sense that Stephen is experiencing any doubt at this point? Why or why not?

Answers might vary, but generally it doesn't seem as though Stephen has much doubt at all. That being said, Luke isn't writing from inside Stephen's head, so there's no telling what's going on in him emotionally. What we do know, though, is that Jesus prophesied that the Holy Spirit would supply the church and her members with all that they needed in these situations (Mk 13:9-11). Regardless of whether or not Stephen was directly experiencing doubt, it's clear that from the end of the passage at the very least that his trust is in Jesus, not in his own ability to get himself out of this predicament.

Eustace and Aslan

In C.S. Lewis's book, "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader," we meet a boy named Eustace whose skin is made of scales. Several times, he tries to remove the scales, but each time he tries to do this himself, the scales come right back. Finally, Aslan has to remove the scales for him. This is what Eustace says as he recounts what happened: "He peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again." Similar to Eustace, we might try to deal with the doubt and darkness in our lives all by ourselves, but we need God to direct us through those seasons, for God uses those difficult times to draw us closer to Himself.

4) The Jewish leaders experience doubt and react to it in a different way. Instead of looking to the Lord as Stephen does, how do they react?

There's a strong case to be made that the Jewish leaders aren't experiencing merely anger, but anger that comes from doubt. If Stephen is right about who Jesus is, then everything the Jewish leaders have given their lives to will crumble. They will lose their power and prestige, and their view of this world and the next is in trouble. As a result, they try in their own strength to eliminate Stephen and thus eliminate the threat to themselves.

5) As a result of his stoning in verse 60, Stephen dies. Most translations, though, will say that he "fell asleep." Why do you think Luke uses that phrase to talk about something much more permanent than sleep, namely death?

"Falling asleep" might feel like a euphemism for death (similar to the way people say "passing away" today), but in reality, it's a deeply true statement about what death is for the believer. For those trusting in Christ, death—awful and sad as it is—is only temporary. Jesus defeated death on the cross by rising again, and one day we will experience that ourselves as we are raised from the dead (1 Cor 15).

C. NOW WHAT?

1) From verse 54 on, things start to get really scary for Stephen. It certainly would have been easy for him to experience fear and doubt here. What does his experience in the midst of this scary situation tell you about God's care for His people, and by extension, for you?

Answers may vary. However, the Lord does not leave Stephen alone in this ordeal. In fact, as things reach a fever pitch, He gives Stephen a vision of something infinitely more glorious than this life has to offer—a view of the glory of God and of Jesus standing right next to the Father.

2) When you have gone through seasons that might produce doubt, have you found yourself acting more like Stephen or like the Jewish leaders?

Answers may vary, but there will be seasons where we respond in fear, similar to the Jewish leaders, and seasons when we respond in faith and trust, like Stephen. We should always be moving more toward the faith area of the spectrum and asking for the Lord's help to push us that way.

3) Experiencing doubt is natural in this sinful world. As a matter of fact, we see examples of biblical authors themselves doubting quite often (see Psalm 77, among others). What might this passage tell us about how to react to situations in which doubt might creep in?

Answers may vary, but at the very least this passage shows us that we should ask the Lord to give us a deeper and deeper knowledge of our eternal home with Christ to anchor us in seasons of doubt.

Main takeaway

Because God has only ever shown Himself faithful, we can trust Him to provide for us, even in seasons of darkness or doubt.

III. Closing

REMEMBERING THE GOOD NEWS

In this passage, we see Stephen recount all the amazing deeds and incredible faithfulness of God working among His people. During seasons of doubt, we can, with Stephen, look back at God's record of faithfulness to His people. We can also, with Stephen, look forward to seeing the glory of God in heaven and, later, in the new heavens and the new earth (Acts 7:55-56).

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Lord, You sent Your Son to die for our sins so that we might have a relationship with You. When we find ourselves doubting Your goodness or Your work, point our eyes to that event and speak to our hearts. Let us know that You are working all things for our good, just as You worked out salvation for us in Christ. Amen.

Supporting Resources

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Are there any areas in your life in which you're doubting God's ability right now?
- 2) Can you think of times when the Lord has provided for you in the past?
- 3) List all the reasons you have to trust the Lord.

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- 1) Can you think of a time when the Lord met you uniquely in your doubt?
- 2) Can you share a time when the Lord provided for you spiritually in a dark season?
- 3) As you've grown older, has it become easier or harder to trust the Lord? Why?