

**Text:** Ac 7.51-60

**Proposition:** The word of God hammers away at stony hearts; some break open in repentance, others break out in defiance.

In our last two messages, I've drawn the titles from the text: "This Moses," and "This Place."

Today's message likewise has a text-based source for our title:

## You Men

With these words, Stephen turns in his sermon to direct application. No doubt as he worked his way through Israel's history and its relationship to its leaders and its place of worship, there was growing tension as his hearers guessed what he was driving at. At this point in the message, he makes his point abundantly clear.

"The final portion of Stephen's speech could be described in classical rhetorical terms as the 'peroration,' where the speaker applies the lessons learned from the previous material in his speech in a direct, frequently emotional appeal to his hearers to act."<sup>1</sup>

Stephen's purpose is to call for repentance, not simply to antagonize (though he no doubt was well aware of the risk of antagonism).

There really is a lot in our text, probably enough for a sermon and a half at least, but since this is our last Sunday in November and we will start our Christmas series next week, we are going to cover it all.

Read Ac 7.51-60

In this sermon, you should consider how you respond to convicting messages from God, whether in a sermon, on the printed page, or in a personal conversation. We see in this account the *worst* possible way to respond when God convicts.

**Proposition:** The word of God hammers away at stony hearts; some break open in repentance, others break out in defiance.

### I. The charges laid (51-53)

A. You men are always resisting the Holy Spirit (51a)

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 205.

## 1. Their condition

### a. Stiff-necked

- 1) The image is of someone who has an inability to turn his head to see
- 2) The idea is that the inability isn't the cause of an injury but because of will – they will not turn to see
- 3) The accusation is as old as the Exodus, when God exposed the stubbornness of Israel

**Exodus 33.5** For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an **obstinate** people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I shall do with you.'" [KJV – "stiffnecked"]

### b. Uncircumcised in heart and ears

- 1) They were incapable of heart and will response to God because of the callouses over their "spiritual organs" as it were
- 2) They were very proud of their physical circumcision, but Stephen (and God) are saying they are just like Gentiles [in effect, they were unclean]

"No epithet could have been more galling to these Pharisees than to be turned 'uncircumcised in heart' (Rom. 2:29). They had only the physical circumcision which was useless."<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Their attitude: resistance

"His entire historical sketch has illustrated this point, the consistent pattern on Israel's part of rejecting its leaders."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A. T Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 7.51.

<sup>3</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 205.

- a. This is the condition of men today – go out into the street and try to talk to them about the Lord and his salvation
- b. But note, this resistance is not hopeless
  - 1) One of them would later respond to God’s grace (Saul)
  - 2) The Lord said to him on that occasion, “It is hard to kick against the goads” (of conscience)
  - 3) Surely this message was God’s grace to each one who heard it – a goad to conscience, a prick on the heart
  - 4) Most of them resisted: grace is always present when the gospel is preached, but grace is also resistible

B. You men are doing exactly what your fathers did (51b-52)

1. You are imitating your fathers (51b)
  - a. They resisted Joseph
  - b. They resisted Moses
2. Your fathers persecuted the prophets (52a)
3. Your fathers killed those who announced the coming of the Righteous One [Messiah] (52b)
  - a. Hebrews describes some of this persecution

**Hebrews 11.37-38** They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated <sup>38</sup> (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

- b. Tradition says that Isaiah was sawn in two by the Jewish king Manasseh
4. You yourselves murdered the Righteous One (52c)

The drift of Stephen’s sermon becomes abundantly clear: like fathers, like sons.

### C. You men received the law, but did not keep it (53)

1. They are puffing themselves as guardians of the law and protectors of the temple
2. Yet they are failing the whole point of the law, and missing the One who fulfilled it all

## II. The proof displayed (54-58)

### A. Severe spiritual reaction prompts a heavenly vision (54-56)

#### 1. The incensed audience (54)

##### a. They were “cut to the quick”

- 1) The image is of being cut by a saw

“Here Stephen had sent a saw through the hearts of the Pharisees that rasped them to the bone.”<sup>4</sup>

- 2) They are directly confronted in the most blunt possible way with their sinfulness

This is exactly what Jesus promised would happen when we preach “sin, righteousness, and judgement.”

The Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts

##### b. They were “gnashing their teeth”

- 1) Grinding their teeth
- 2) Reduced to incoherent rage, acting like animals

#### 2. The faithful witness (55-56)

- a. In the midst of the uproar, the Lord himself appears to Stephen
- b. Stephen calls the vision to their attention, “Behold...”
- c. What does it mean that Jesus is *standing*?
  - 1) Much discussion in the commentaries, some think it is meaningless

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<sup>4</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Ac 7.54.

- 2) Others think it is a sign of our Lord's approval of Stephen, as he stands to welcome him into heaven
  - 3) One more idea: Jesus is standing as if in the heavenly court, as a witness for the defense – Stephen's Paraclete
- d. One more item of significance: "I see ... the Son of Man"
- 1) The reference is to Daniel 7, where "one like the son of man" approaches "the Ancient of days" and is given a kingdom
  - 2) Jesus himself prophesied to the Sanhedrin that they would see him coming in his kingdom at the right hand of God
  - 3) In the very same place, Stephen confirms his vision of the Son of Man standing exactly where he prophesied the Council would one day see him

I think it is this last item that pushes the crowd into a frenzy. They were angry before Stephen reported the vision – they go thermo-nuclear here!

## B. Heavenly vision enrages the crowd and prompts execution (57-58)

1. Outcry, surge forward, taking him by force (57)
2. Drive him out of the city and commence stoning him (58)
  - a. Again, the commentaries have a lot of discussion: Was this mob action or the conclusion of a formal trial?
  - b. There are elements of both here, but as the text reads to me, it is the frenzy of a mob, but with some irrational attempts at legitimacy (the witnesses at the execution)
3. The mention of Saul is a sidebar
  - a. It serves to introduce us to Saul
  - b. It proves that Saul heard the sermon
  - c. It explains much that follows in the life of the church and for Saul also

When it comes to resisting preaching, however, this has to be one of the most dramatic conclusions to a sermon ever.

Most of the time, people don't react this violently, but they resist just as determinedly.

### III. The martyr prayed (59-60)

#### A. To the Lord: "Receive me!" (59)

"These words are reminiscent of our Lord's final utterance on the cross: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46).<sup>105</sup> But there is a striking difference: whereas Jesus commended His spirit to the Father, Stephen commended his to Jesus. This is surely an early, if tacit, testimony to the Christian belief in our Lord's essential deity."<sup>5</sup>

#### B. For the crowd: "Preserve them!" (60)

Both prayers are answered, at least in his case, and the case of Saul.

### Conclusion:

I began the message with this proposition:

**Proposition:** The word of God hammers away at stony hearts; some break open in repentance, others break out in defiance.

You can see that on this occasion, it looked like all the granite was intact. After earlier sermons in Acts, the report is of many confessing Christ.

The only one reported confessing Christ after this sermon is Stephen.

But we know that Saul eventually heard – he couldn't keep resisting the hammer blows from the Holy Spirit.

I want to make application to our situation, however.

Today you are hearing about a dramatic moment in the history of the church. The purpose of telling the story is to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ who is over us all.

There are many who hear this message and resist. They don't want Jesus to be over them.

- If that is you, I urge you; submit to the hammer blows today!

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<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 171.

Those of us who have experienced the rock breaking already, and have come to faith in Christ, is it not true that our hearts resist the ongoing conviction of the Holy Spirit when he confronts us about our ongoing spiritual failings? We resist, we excuse, we justify...

- Would it not be better to simply receive God's word for us and let him mold and make our life?