

Title: The tragedy of an unexamined life
Text: Acts 7
Theme: The eternal tragedy of an unexamined life/belief
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: When you examine the faith and see that it is worth dying for, you are now ready to live.

Read Text

This address that Stephen delivered is fascinating. It is the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts, it is packed with Old Testament passages, many of them direct quotations from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos and Isaiah. It also draws from other OT books such as Leviticus, Numbers, Joshua, 1 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Jeremiah and Hosea. There is an organization, flow and a development of argument which I find very interesting. The logic, thematic development, history, and evidence that he brings to bear is powerful, but at the end of the story, Stephen is dead because it did not appear that he persuaded anyone. But, before we look at some of that and find ourselves blessed by this brother's example and heritage, I think we need to ask ourselves a question that his audience didn't. What if I am the one who is wrong?

In our text, Stephen, a relatively new leader in the early church is basically accused of treason by the leaders of Israel. They charged him with speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God (serious charge) and with speaking words against "this holy place" (the Temple) and the law. Jesus predicted this when he told his disciples that what was going to happen to him was going to happen to many of them. So, the similarities between Stephen and Jesus are obvious. Luke makes that very clear. Now, it is natural for us to identify with Stephen since he is the good guy in this story. But, the bad guys thought that they were the good guys. At the end of the day after they had stoned Stephen to death, most of these guys probably went home, played with their kids and had dinner with their families and perhaps some refreshments with neighbors and friends. They were not involved in human trafficking and drug cartels. They were, in many cases, moral and upright. How could they be so devastatingly wrong?!

The men who were in positions of power were wrong. They had degrees, titles, and plenty of accolades to appeal to in an effort to substantiate their authority. They were Jews. They had the law. They knew the law. They had the pedigree. They lived in the land. They were sitting in seats of authority in the Temple on the very site where Abraham had offered Isaac, where David had purchased for the site, where Solomon had built about 950 years before and where now Herod had rebuilt. They were right about many things, but were wrong about the most important one. They missed it! They missed the point! If these men could miss it, is it possible that some of you/us could miss it? There are three points to this sermon and they relate to the two audiences or sides in this text. The one is the council and the second is Stephen.

I. **Be willing to examine your faith.**

These men appeared to be standing in the line of Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. They believed that they were and therefore, anyone who disagreed with them was disagreeing with the patriarchs and God. However, they were off point. They were so off point that they crucified God's Son

and were attacking and murdering his followers. How did they get to that point? It is not that they conscientiously decided one day to hate God and do everything in their power to rebel against him. They did not believe that they did. History is full of people who were and are very devoted to their cause. Devotion, sincerity and sacrifice does not make the cause right.

For example, many of you, grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition. And you know that there are a lot of people in that tradition who are very sincere and very devout. It seems to have history, tradition, ritual, meaning, structure, order and for many, since this is all that they have known, it appears to be right, until you start examining it. And when you start examining it and you start asking questions like, “how come we worship Mary?” And “when did that start, because I don’t see anything about that in the Bible?” And “why do we call priests father when Jesus explicitly said not to do that?” and “why can’t a priest get married? Who thought up that?” And who started baptizing babies and said it washes away original sin? How come I can’t find any of that in the Bible? But some of you know what happens when you start raising those questions – you get ostracized. You get labeled. You are not supposed to examine the faith, just do what you are told to do. The same thing is true if you are from a Buddhist background, or were raised in the Hindu or Islamic religion or even in the atheist religion. If you question things, you fear getting labeled.

But, if we sit here this morning and say, “well I am not like the Pharisees who missed the point and made up their own rules” and I am not like the Roman Catholics who misinterpret the Bible and make up their own rules” we are in trouble. Have you examined what you really believe and does it line up with God’s Word?

Is your faith, the faith? Is your understanding of the faith the same as what God says? Have you ever done this? What are your cherished beliefs? What if your cherished beliefs are wrong? Do you really know the truth? Are you willing to re-examine how you were raised? What if you have believed a lie? What if you just assumed that what you have been told is true, but you never really examined it carefully?

There are a lot of dogmatic people in this world and if you are the kind of person who tends to be unsure about things, particularly unsure about yourself, it can be comforting in a strange way to identify yourself with people who are dogmatic and who always know what is going on and always have an answer for something and can always tell you what to do. That is strangely attractive because you do not have to do the heavy-lifting of thinking, you just follow them. I know that I can be a dogmatic sort of person. Ask Cathi, she will tell you. I may not always be right, but I am never in doubt. And perhaps you believe what I believe because I believe it. That is not good enough. You need to examine God’s Word so that you can believe it for yourself.

It was one of those long summer evenings that you wished would never end. I was about 10 years old and my neighborhood was full of kids, and I think that every one of them, (several dozen) were all together playing “kick the can.” I remember where I was standing in my next door neighbor’s front yard looking at all these kids and thinking, we don’t all believe the same way. We don’t go to the same churches and have the same values. Am I right and some of them wrong? Maybe some of them are right and I am wrong? All I know is what my parents have told me. I need to examine this for myself.

If you are here this morning for the purpose of examining what it means to follow Christ, I am thrilled. We are not going to seek to sway you with manipulation, emotion or intimidation. We will lay out the facts of Christianity as they are and while we want you to follow Jesus, and pray that you will, we will not be your enemy if you don't. If you were raised

Here are some things that we need to remember from this account.

- Just because you were raised with some good traditions, doesn't mean that what you believe is right.
- Just because you know the stories of the Bible, doesn't mean that you understand it.
- Just because you are respected for your titles, degrees and accomplishments, doesn't mean that you get it.

Have you ever been courageous enough to really examine what you believe? If your attempt at defending yourself is to showcase the things that you have done because in your heart you think that proves that you are better than others, or more right than others, you are in danger of missing the entire point. How do you know if what you believe is right? Well, I go to Sunday School, I volunteer at the soup kitchen, I was raised going to church and attended a religious school. I was involved in this event, and helped with this. I doubt that any of us have an involvement resume more impressive than these men in this council, and they killed Jesus. Just because you are raised with many advantages doesn't mean that you get it. One of the things that I did as I studied this text was note the many places where Stephen used terms that demonstrated his affiliation with these men. After all, they were all Jews. Look at them (review text). What was the problem. These men had the same history, but they were identifying with the wrong characters. The council assumed that they were right but when they were exposed as being wrong, they had no defense. They had no argument. They could only resort to threats, anger, and hateful violence. The ironic thing is that this is exactly what Stephen was pointing out. You are so stiff-necked like your forefathers, that you are repeating their sins and in fact you are not only doing what they did to the prophets, but you are fulfilling what the prophets said would happen. Here it is. Here you are in the Bible that you claim to believe, but you won't accept it.

Stephen went from information (2-50) to application beginning in v.51. This is when things really began to heat up. Luke mentions that they were enraged and were grinding their teeth at him (they were out of control – and he was under the control of the Spirit). And his concluding statement was that he saw, in that moment as he looked up, that “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” And at this point, all hell breaks loose. They could not stand it any longer. Screaming, plugging their ears, rushing upon him, they cast him out of the city and stoned him. It was mob violence. Trial by emotion, sentencing by fury, execution by haste. They trampled truth. The men who attacked and killed Stephen believed that what they were doing was right, but they were dead wrong. Just because they believed that they were right, did not make them right. Would God send someone to hell who was sincere? Yes! Examine your faith and make sure that it is the faith. If they were willing to really listen, they would have heard Stephen give them a very reasoned response to their accusations.

II. **Be willing to explain the faith.**

This address by Stephen is Stephen's attempt to answer their accusations. They accuse him of being wrong. Stephen is making a clear argument as to why he is actually right and he does a masterful job. They accuse him of speaking blasphemous words against God and Moses. So, he responds by asking for an opportunity to give an explanation: "Brothers and fathers" hear me. There is a lot of humility and compassion in that opening, isn't there? He begins speaking about the glory of God and he concludes speaking about the glory of God. There are 6 sections to this speech, the first being about God and Abraham. His point is very clear. Abraham's call, and the promise of this very land was all God. Abraham was the recipient of God's actions. God was not responding to Abraham's faith. Abraham believed in response to God's initiative. That means that this very land that we live in is from God's mercy and his plan. We are not the ones who are great, it is God. Our identity as a people and what we have is ultimately from God. Stephen is obviously not saying blasphemous things about God.

After speaking about Abraham, Stephen transitions to Joseph. He throws a little bit of shade on the patriarchs here. The patriarchs (v.9) were jealous of Joseph and were not paragons of virtue and faith. There is no disputing this. They sold him into Egypt as a slave and of course later on, the entire nation became slaves ironically. The men on the council would want to identify with Joseph, but Joseph is the one who suffered unjustly at the hands of his brothers (like Jesus and now like Stephen). Stephen is building his case, which sets the stage for Moses.

But of course, it was God who delivered them through Moses. So now, Stephen gives a lot of attention to Moses. Stephen has thought this through. He has studied this well. He is not reading off of a prepared manuscript. The dude knows his Bible. He knows from the OT, that the story of Israel was more of a story of unbelief, obstinance and rebellion than it was faith. This is how he explains it. And Moses? Moses was repeatedly rejected by the Israelites. They "thrust him aside" (v.27) and "thrust him aside" (v.39). The seemingly unstoppable pull of idolatry was already on display in a few short days after Israel crossed the Red Sea. Stephen figured out that just because you were raised in a religious tradition did not mean that you were automatically ok. In fact, these men in the council were acting just like the people who rejected Moses. Which, sadly has been a consistent theme of the nation of Israel. So, they knew the history, but they failed to interpret it correctly.

Then as far as their accusations about Stephen disrespecting the Temple are concerned, Stephen points out that God cannot be contained by a Temple. This was Solomon's point when he dedicated it. The Temple was of no protection for a disobedient people. The issue was and is not, do you have the Temple, but, are you faithful to God? Having the law and the Temple is useless if you reject the One that they point to. And both the law and the Temple all point to Christ. Christ is the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb, the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, the sin and guilt offering. Christ is God dwelling with his people. He is the ultimate Temple. This the point of the entire history of the OT. That is why it is maddening and agonizing to see Christ rejected even by his own people.

Up until verse 50, Stephen used the pronouns, "us" and "our". Beginning in v.51 he says "you" and "your". In his explanation of the faith, he applies it and he applies it correctly. Beloved, read

what he says. His language is clear, direct and strong. He is full of the Holy Spirit. What he is saying is what God would have him say.

III. **Be willing to die for the faith.**

Why was Jesus willing to die? Why didn't he fight it and scream out about the injustice of it all? He was willing to die, because he was right. He knew he was in the right. You witness the same thing in Stephen. He is accused of being a Christ-follower. That much is right. But, he can die entrusting his soul to God because he knows his soul rests in Christ. Notice how his death is described. The end of chapter 7 sounds very similar to the end of chapter 6. There are a series of intense verbs that describe a tsunami of reactions. They cried with a loud voice, stopped their ears, rushed together at him, they cast him out of the city and stoned him (and kept stoning him). In contrast to that, Stephen is described as praying, falling, forgiving and sleeping. The men who are "in charge" are out of control, while the man who was not in charge, was in control.

Years later after Saul was converted to Christ, he wrote a letter to a group of believers in Philippi who were facing persecution and he urged them to not be "frightened in anything by your opponents. This (that is, your lack of fear, your lack of panic) is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake..." (Philippians 1.28-29)

In v.56, Stephen says that he sees "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." The book of Hebrews makes a very big deal about the fact that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Jesus "*sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (1.3). The Father says to Jesus, "*Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet*" (1.13). Jesus is "*seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven*" (8.1). Jesus "*sat down at the right hand of God, waiting ...until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet*" (10.12-13). Jesus is "*seated at the right hand of the throne of God*" (12.2). Here, Stephen says that Jesus is standing up. I heard an old pastor one day explain this. He said, when you pick on one of his own, he stands and watches carefully. He knows. Therefore, there is no panic on the part of Stephen and no spitting in their faces, or attempts to damn them with his words. In fact, his response is supernatural. He loves his enemies. He does exactly what Jesus said to do. He prays for those who spitefully use him. He begs God to forgive them.

A life full of the Spirit may end in a premature death. Being full of the Spirit means speaking truth, even if the truth is hard to say and hard to hear. The Word of God brings the peace of God and the love of God even in the storm. Jesus stands up and takes notice of his kids getting picked on. What are you living for? Have you ever had the courage to really examine your life and what you believe? If you have never done that, you are not living, you are just dying. If however, you examine the gospel and you see how beautiful Christ really is, then you know and being ready to die means that you are now prepared to live. Examine your faith. Examine the faith. When they line up, be willing to die for it. It is right. Jesus knows. And your life and your sacrifice will help dismantle the kingdom of darkness. From his death came our life. From Stephen's death, came the conversion of Saul. From the life and death of Saul/Paul came the explosion of the gospel. You are going to die for something. It might as well be for what matters. His kingdom is forever.