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## **Is Led by Courageous Proclaimers of Christ Acts Chapter 7**

What is the book of Acts about? Anybody know? Yes, it is the beginning of the church. It is showing us the foundation of the church. Also, “acts” refers to the acts of the apostles. Another way that we would describe the word acts would not as much be an action but rather the business of the apostles. What is the business of the apostles? What is their job? What are they trying to produce? What we know is that God is establishing the foundation of the church. We have been going over God’s foundation points of the church within the Book of Acts. As we have gone through the different Chapters, one thing is very clear, especially in Chapter One. Christ is to be proclaimed by the church as its hope. We are waiting for Christ to come again. We believe that Christ is going to fix everything, not us. We believe that, as Scripture tells the church, we are to occupy the earth until Christ comes again. As 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 conveys to us, the church, by virtue of the Spirit of lawfulness, the Spirit of Christ in us, is holding back evil. We know according to 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 that the day is coming when the Spirit of God will be taken out, His saints will be taken out, the lawful ones will be taken

out, and the lawless one will then reign over the face of the earth. Therefore, we are a staying power; or, as Christ would say, (Matthew 5:13) “You are the salt of the earth...”

God has given us to be light in the darkness, and the day is coming when we will be taken out. I look forward to that day, don't you? Scripture gives us an interesting passage in 1Thessalonians chapter 1. There are a number of references to this. But I like the way that Paul puts it, especially to the church that is having difficulty with their hope. Paul says,

(I Thessalonians 1:8) “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.”

(I Thessalonians 1:9) “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,”

Watch verse 10.

(I Thessalonians 1:10) “and to wait for His Son from heaven, who He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

That is what we are waiting for. The way that Paul puts it in 2 Timothy chapter 4 is

(II Timothy 4:7) “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;”

(II timothy 4:8) “in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

Also, since you are right close to First John, he tells us this

(I John 3:2) “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see him just as He is.”

(I John 3:3) “And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself just as He is pure.”

In Acts chapter One, Paul states this

(Acts 1:8) “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

(Acts 1:10) “And as they were gazing intently into the sky while he was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them.”

(Acts 1:11) “They also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,

will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

The church is looking for that blessed day. Then Revelation chapter 19 tells us

(Revelation 19:1) “And I saw heaven opened up, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and true, and in righteousness He judges and wages war.”

(Revelation 19:16) “And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, ‘King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.’”

I mean, what a glorious thing. You are not going to miss it. Nobody is going to miss it. In Acts chapter 1, I think that what is clear is that Christ has called the church to proclaim the hope of Christ. That is where we have anchored. We have a hope both sure and steadfast, an anchor for our soul who is Jesus Christ, our righteous One. Then in chapter 2, we understand that the church is empowered by the Spirit of Christ. It is the Spirit of Christ who breathes upon us. There is an interesting reflection in the Gospel of John where Jesus breathes on His disciples.

(John 20:22) And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

In that one action, we understand and comprehend where the Holy Spirit comes from. It is the Spirit of God's Son. He is the Spirit of God's

Son. We see this very clearly in Galatians, in Peter, and in First Corinthians; He is the Spirit of God's Son. How then is the church empowered? How is the church enlivened? What causes the church to breathe? It is the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God came upon the church, and the church became a living organism. He is the power of the church. If we are not walking in the Spirit, then we really cannot call ourselves the church. We are dead in the water. There is no life. Unfortunately, I think many will want to call themselves the church; but they are not walking according to the Spirit. Greg and I were talking about this earlier. What exactly does that look like, and how does that happen? Hopefully, you (Greg) will give us an answer before long.

Going on, chapter 3 then talks about the worship of the church and, ultimately, the service of the church. Worship and service really are synonymous. What we understand is that the worship and the service of the church are always in the name of Christ. They are always done in the name of Jesus. We are always pointing to Him, no matter what service we give. This is very important. It is very important that the church does not become a social institution just doing good deeds. It is very important that the church, like the church of Sardis in the Book of Revelation 3:1-6, does not desire a name for itself. It is important that we go in the name of Christ and that we are pointing to Him. As we begin to take on His persona or His name, if the focus goes on us,

we have failed our Savior. We have failed what we are about. The church is the body of Christ. He is the head, and we are always pointing to Him. If the church is not doing this, then it is not doing things in His name. What is clear in chapter 3 is that the disciples are saying, “Look, not us. We did not do this. Jesus did this.” That is what the church always does. That is what true worship is. It is very important when we sing. It is very important when we give testimony. How do you give testimony? John says it pretty simply.

(John 3:30) “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

He must increase. The testimony of the church is, “Not to us, oh Lord, not to us, but to You.” If you step down from your testimony and people have heard about Jesus, then you did your testimony well. If you step down from your testimony and people heard you, you did not do too well.

Chapter 4 tells us that the church is confident in the authority of Christ. That is to say that the church is moved and takes orders from one source, Jesus Christ. We do not take orders from the government. We do want to submit to the government in as many things as we can. We are not trying to be unruly, but we take orders from Christ. There are going to be times, and I believe within our lifetime, that we are going to have to take a stand. You may be visiting me in jail. (I like Diet Coke, so I am putting my order in early.) You can clearly see in Chapter 4 the confidence that is there. In fact, if you look with me,

let's read this wonderful passage. They are telling Peter what he cannot do. Peter just fundamentally says, "Look, what do you think? We did this in our own power? We are following orders from the name of Christ.

(Acts 4:8) "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers and elders of the people,'"

(Acts 4:9) "if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well,"

(Acts 4:10) "let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health."

To whom was Peter speaking? The very next phrase tells us who they are. They are the rulers and the elders. These are the bosses, the people who you are not supposed to go against.

(Acts 4:11) "He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief cornerstone."

(Acts 4:12) "And there is salvation of no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Look at the very next verse.

(Acts 4:13) “Now as they observe the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”

Confidence. This is the same confidence that we see in the whole church in chapter 4 as we drop on down to verse 31.

(Acts 4:31) “And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Where does that boldness come from? We take orders from Christ. Someone says, “You cannot use the name of Jesus here.” You reply, “Excuse me. I will not take orders from you. I want to talk about Jesus wherever I go.”

Chapter Five tells us that the church is to guard the truth of Christ. The chapter opens up with the incident of Ananias and Sapphira. As you read through the chapter, it conveys the guardian of the truth of Christ. We are the pillar and support of the truth. The church is the pillar and support of the truth. If we are not speaking the truth, if we are not holding true to the truth, who is? Sometimes that means that we might come across as being a little critical. I do not think we should go around criticizing the brethren, but I do believe that we

ought to take stands that say very clearly what is wrong and what is right. The church is the pillar and support of the truth.

Then in Chapter Six, it talks about deacons; it is about management within the church. The church should be managed by those who are filled with the Spirit of Christ. The men who are filled with the Spirit of Christ are the ones who manage the church. Why is that so important? They are thinking about the souls of men rather than business deals or positions or whether or not they are liked or not. The one thing about a parent is a parent cannot be thinking about whether his kid likes him. If that is the way you function, you are going to be in trouble; and your kid is going to be in worse trouble. God has called you to love them in a way that often will take very strong stands and will be uncompromising because you love them. Because we love the truth, because we love those to whom we minister, we should not compromise. The men of God should be filled with the Spirit. As we have already seen in chapter 4, those who are filled with the Spirit are pretty bold. Men who are following what Christ said should be very dogmatic. There are a thousand and one things like moving the [location of our] cross. The Bible tells us to submit to one another, and that area I will submit to [relocating] the cross. We moved our cross. Right? We moved our cross. I submitted to Ellen. I submitted to Ellen [who suggested we relocate it]. But when it comes to dogma, when it comes to the truth, when it comes to the

word of God, the men of God should not compromise. There are a lot of things that we should be willing to yield on. By the way, I think it was a great idea [to relocate the cross]. Looks great, doesn't it? Connie was thinking that we probably would not have been able to fit everybody on the side over here [for the Easter Sunrise service]. It was not the right time. Someone else was filled with the Spirit. At the end of chapter 6, we are told about those who were chosen to lead the church. Stephen comes out as one of the leaders. The Scripture almost immediately focuses on Stephen for a reason. There are other men who are mentioned in the text; but if you look with me, it starts off listing him first. It is interesting in verse 5.

(Acts 6:5) “The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,...”

The verse goes on to list the others. Then the passage almost immediately focuses on him. If you go down a little bit further to verse 8,

(Acts 6:8) “And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.”

It is because of this that the elders get stirred up and bring him before the Sanhedrin court. We close chapter 6 with Stephen brought before them.

(Acts 6:15) “And fixing their gaze on him, all who were in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.”

Now as we come into Chapter Seven, he stands before the high priest and

(Acts 7:1) “The high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’”

The accusations that we see in verse 11:

(Acts 6:11) “Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’”

You ultimately see him start focusing on Moses. He will talk about Moses and say, “You know, I agree with you about Moses on so many things.” They were seeing a messenger of God. The angel meant messenger of God. I think the purpose of it is that the Scripture is letting us know that there was no doubt in their minds that this man was from God. It is sort of like Nicodemus who comes to Jesus at night and says, “I perceive you have been sent from God. I mean, nobody can do what you have done.” The evidence was very clear, and those who rebelled against his message were going to be rebelling against what they knew to be true. I personally believe that the reason why God had so ordained that he had to be seen this way by them is because they were so visually focused. Remember, the Jews always seek for a sign. Therefore, God says, “I am going not only to give you a sign, but I am going to preach the message to you so

that you cannot deny the source.” Of course, they did. That became the greatest indictment against them. As we come into Chapter Seven, what we see once again is a man who has been chosen to be a leader within the church. We are seeing the beginning of the church’s formation. We will call them bones. The bones of the structure of the church begin to form. The leader is now arising before us, and Stephen is standing with great boldness. I believe that what Scripture is telling us within this passage is that the church needs to be led by fearless proclaimers of truth. This is one of the reasons why 2 Timothy 2:2 says that pastors cannot be lovers of money. Church leaders cannot love money. They cannot be dissuaded. They cannot be moved. If in fact at any point in time his life is more dear or his possessions are more dear—if anything is dearer than the truth, then he should not be in the office. He needs to take a stand. He needs to be willing to watch his family leave him for the sake of the truth. That is one of the things that Jesus was saying in Matthew 10:35-37. He says, “Look, you have to love me so much that it looks like hatred, even hatred toward your family. If you are going to follow Me, that is what you need to do.” The passage is very strong here as we see this leader take his position. It truly is a fearless position. When you go to Revelation, it reminds us, in case you forgot, there are no cowards in heaven. If you are saying, “I am having a little trouble with that fear thing. I am going to read again in Revelation that there are no cowards in heaven.” We come to Acts chapter 7, and we see what to

me is one of the greatest messages that is recorded in Scripture. Also, let me say this. The fact that the sermon is recorded is significant. There are not a lot of sermons that are recorded. Yet we have this whole sermon as he stands before the Sanhedrin, and it is recorded in some detail, probably in all detail. It is an amazing thing. It is conveying to us a number of things. One is that we know very clearly according to the text and according to the setup that Stephen is filled with the Spirit when he is preaching this; this would make the message of this sermon a lot better than even Pastor Gary's. This guy gets filled with the Spirit--we know that. We know that what he is proclaiming is a Spirit-filled truth. It is a powerful message. I would say as you look at this message, begin to ask yourself, "Why does he proclaim the things that he does in the way that he does?" We will be talking about some of these things and some of the aspects and some of the characteristics of this sermon that I would say should be characteristics in almost every message that we preach. We will look at some of them. We must be fearless in establishing the truth and in proclaiming it. If you look in the passage, it begins in 7:1 as the high priest begins by asking him to defend his stance. Stephen's answer is: (Acts 7:2) "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,"

Now what is interesting is that Stephen is standing before his accusers. We also know that they have induced men secretly to lie about what he has been saying. He is in a vicious place, a very hostile surrounding. This is not a good place to be. But one of the fundamentals that he is showing us is what Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 which is

(II Timothy 2:24) “The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to all, able to teach, patient with all,”

You cannot have a vendetta against people. You need to speak the truth, and you are going to need to preach it unapologetically. You are going to need to preach the message passionately. If there is a line that is being crossed, you need to even get angry about it. However, you cannot be hateful and vindictive against the people. It is an interesting balance. So there has to be that sense of not budging on this. But brethren, you sense that this man really has no agenda except to tell them the truth and to bring them to that truth. Within the passage, he is obviously reaching out to them. He is going to get pretty intense within the message. Yet in every message that you preach, you are going to have to think that you want them to be your brethren. You are not willing any more than Christ is willing that any should perish. So he cries out to them and says,

(Acts 7:2) “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,”

I like the fact that he brings Abraham into the message. One of the characteristics of a good message is to speak of things with which the audience is familiar. This is one characteristic of a good message. When you are speaking to an audience, it is pretty important that you speak to them about things with which they are familiar. The woman at the well was familiar with the well. So what did Jesus talk about? He talked about living water. He talked about this water in which she is interested. This is where our focus is. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Jesus pulls out the Old Testament and talks about the serpent that is on the stick. Then He turns to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and says, “Come on now. You catch up with Me because you know these things.” He almost rebukes him for not being up to snuff with him. If you look at the Book of Acts chapter 17 where Paul goes into Athens, remember that at almost every corner there was a god stationed. When Paul came to the Areopagus, there were gods and idols all over the place. They had this one place in the middle of the Areopagus that was devoted to the “unknown god.” So how does Paul talk with them? He was not talking to Jews, so he could not talk about Father Abraham. Right? So what does he say? He says,

(Acts 17:22) “So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.’”

That is how he starts off. “I observe that you are very religious.” That is obvious.

(Acts 17:23) “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘To An Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”

Let me tell you about Him because this is the One you do not know about. This is the One who created heaven and earth. He actually quotes one of their poets. Your poets have said, “In Him, we live and breathe and have our existence.” See? So he begins to talk from a venue with which they are very familiar. When you see Paul, for instance, in Acts chapter 13, he goes into the synagogue; and right away, what does he do? He opens up the Torah and starts reading from it. He begins to teach from and about that with which they are familiar. Jesus would do the very same when he was with the multitudes. For instance,

(Matthew 6:28) “...Observe how the lilies of the field grow”.

The people are very familiar because they are sitting on the grass and can see the lilies in the field. You can talk to Him. He talks to the fishermen. He says,

(Matthew 4:19) “And He said to them, ‘Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.’”

He is going to use examples from the things with which they are familiar. It is one of the reasons why the whole concept of shepherding is incorporated. That was what His people were very familiar with from the early days. Even Adam and Eve were covered by animal skins. We do not know exactly who the first shepherd was, but we do know that Abraham was the great shepherd. As you consider the patriarchs, they were all shepherds. It just makes sense that even the place where Jesus is going to be born is Bethlehem which is a shepherd's town. The point is as we come back to Stephen's sermon that he is going to be talking about not only things with which they are familiar and things about which they know, but he is going to be talking on a level to which they can relate. This is one of the characteristics of his message. In order for me to go through this whole chapter, I am going to hit upon some highlights. What you see at the very beginning when he refers to Abraham is that he wants to let his listeners know that their whole nation really started off with one guy who left his home for one reason. That reason was to follow God. He had to leave his home. He had to become independent. In other words, following God was more important to him than anything. In a way, this is going to be part of the theme of this message. Part of the theme of this message is that you must love God

more than you love everything around you. You do not need the affirmation of those around you because peer pressure makes it impossible to breathe. God is going to let him know that his faith is fundamental. We just follow God. That is what we do. We do not look at man. God states in verse 3,

(Acts 7:3) “and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives and come into the land that I will show you.’”

Then God continues

(Acts 7:6) “But God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.”

(Acts 7:7) “‘And whatever nation to which they shall be in bondage, I myself will judge,’ said God. ‘And after that, they will come out and serve Me in this place.’”

I do not know if you are seeing the word or not, but it starts off with “depart” in verse 4. In verse 6, he mentions aliens, and then he ends in verse 7 with ‘come out.’ What are you hearing? It reminds me of

(II Corinthians Chapter 6:14) “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness.”

As he says in that verse, “Come out from among them and be separate.” He is establishing a fundamental principle. It is a

characteristic and should be a characteristic of every message when you begin to talk to people that you want to talk on a level that they can comprehend. It is like the women who are teaching children. You have to be able to talk to them on some level that they can comprehend. You cannot compromise the truth, but you want them to understand. So you begin to share with them in a way that they can relate. As you are relating, you are also establishing the basics of what you are wanting to explain. Stephen is establishing some very strong fundamentals that are very, very different. In one respect, what he is doing is a little bit of trickery. It is like Paul said in Second Corinthians 12:16--who wants to quote it for me?

(II Corinthians 12:16) “...nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.”

I took you in by deceit. What does he mean by that? He does not mean that he was lying. He just means that he was being wily. Scripture tells us to do that. So what is he doing? He is starting off with all the things that they would agree on. Often, we start a conversation or we start preaching, and we almost immediately start jumping on all the things on which we disagree. That is bad preaching. It is bad witnessing. Start by something like, “I see that you are religious.” See? “I see that you are thirsty.” Find something that you can agree on. Here again, I go back to 2 Timothy chapter 2.

(II Timothy 2:23) “But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.”

(II Timothy 2:24) “The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged,”

(II Timothy 2:25) “with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth,

(II Timothy 2:26) “and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”

So, you are you start off with something familiar. I can see Stephen as he is standing there. He is going, “Okay. You know that our father Abraham was an alien. He was a stranger.” I can see him. Amen! The world did not like him. The world does not like us. I could just see them agreeing. He will continue with this:

(Acts 7:8) “And he gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.”

(Acts 7:9) “The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,”

Any Orthodox Jew would turn to you and go, “That was wrong. They should not have sold their brother.” Any Orthodox Jew. They know

that story. Should they have sold him? Should they have betrayed him? “No! That was wrong. They should not have done that.” He is laying an interesting foundation because he will turn the tables by saying, “You are the one who sold us out.” He is not going to say it now. He is just going to get them in agreement with him. It is wrong to sell people out, isn't it? They should not have done that to Joseph. But God blessed him anyway, didn't he? “Yes, God blessed him anyway.” Verse 14:

(Acts 7:14) “Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob (after the famine), his father, and all of his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.”

God used him. Joseph's words to his brothers were:

(Genesis 50:20) “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

You can see the Council members agreeing. All the while, Stephen is throwing in this promise of God.

(Acts 7:17) “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,”

What is the promise? He just kind of “peppers” that in there.

(Acts 7:18) “until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.”

This new Pharaoh started being mean and began to oppress the Israelites. I can just see the elders. "Yes! They oppressed us. We do not like people oppressing us." Obviously, they were not happy with the Romans who were oppressing them.

(Acts 7:19) “It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers to that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.”

The Council members are all on the same page with this. (Acts 7:20) “It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home.”

Moses. Stephen is going to show how he feels about Moses. He goes, “We will talk about Moses now. Moses was born for the purpose of rescuing our people who were oppressed. He rescued them.” They agreed, “That is why we like Moses so much.” That is why they liked Moses so much. He got them out of bondage. We are all on the same page here. Stephen goes on to ask, “Do you remember that story about Moses defending our people?”

(Acts 2:24) “And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.”

Remember that? I can see him saying that he remembers that. Was Moses not a good defender? That is why God called him. You begin to see him laying a foundation for the Messiah as well. The Messiah, like Joseph, is forgiving. The nature of God is forgiving. The Messiah, like Moses, is a defender. He is a deliverer. He is a reconciler. This is the character of God. This is the character of the Messiah. He begins to talk about these things.

(Acts 7:25) “And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.”

The whole reason he was called was so that he would rescue them. He supposed that his brethren would understand this.

(Acts 7:26) “On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren; why do you injure one another?’”

It is the Spirit of God who reconciles the brethren. He tried to reconcile them saying, “Brethren, why are you fighting against one another, injuring each other? Why would you do that?”

(Acts 7:27) “But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us?’”

Now why do you think he is bringing this up? Go ahead. (Audience comments) He has them all on the same page in that they are against

the oppressors. At this point, he turns and says, “But have you noticed that sometimes we fight against each other?” That is kind of like throwing a “monkey wrench” in the whole thing. But they have to admit it. That is the story of Moses. They cannot deny it. Did you notice that the people got angry? The people got mad at Moses who was sent to deliver them. “Yeah, that was not right.” See how he is laying the foundation? It is pretty interesting how he is doing it. Stephen continues by explaining that Moses had to go away for forty years in the wilderness. I do not want to go into a whole lot of detail because, like I said, we will not be able to finish chapter 7. What is interesting to me about verse 30 is that

(Acts 7:30) “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush.”

What is that in the flame of a burning thorn bush? Did you ever ask yourself that? You ought to. There is an interesting passage in Ecclesiastes 7:6 that talks about the laughter of the foolish which is like the crackling noise of a thorn bush. His point is that the foolish make a lot of noise but they do not provide any heat or any benefit to anybody. When you put thorn bushes in the fire, there is a lot of noise. Have you ever seen stuff like that burn? He says that this is the way that the foolish are. They are very noisy but bring no benefit to anybody. Jeremiah 17:5-8 says that if you are going to trust in the things of the world and are not trusting God, you are going to be like

a bush, a thorn bush, in the desert. The point of the matter is that God does not like “thorn bushes.” This is a very interesting point. God’s anger is against “thorn bushes.” But this is exactly who Israel is. As Lamentations 4:11 says, it is by the grace of God that you are not consumed. It is by the grace of God that He does not simply consume you because of how easily a thorn bush is consumed. By His grace, even though His wrath is upon the thorns, He will not consume you. He dwells on this, and you have the picture of Habakkuk. You have the picture of wrath and mercy in one setting. God is telling Moses that this is holy ground.

(Acts 7:30) “But the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’”

God wants you to know that it is a miracle that He did not consume them. It is the greatest of miracles. Even greater, He will crown Himself with a thorn bush, and He will wear His people as a crown. It certainly is by the grace of God. He goes on to tell them that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses says God called him. There is no doubt about it. God called this Moses. Here again, Stephen is bringing them along with him. They are understanding Stephen because Moses is their favorite. I mean, if they had a celebrity, it would be Moses. He is the one that they would celebrate. Moses. But what do you think they did to Moses? They disowned him. Watch how he gets them to agree with this.

(Acts 7:35) “This Moses whom they disowned, saying ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’, is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer, with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.”

Moses, whom they disowned, as they said, is the one whom God sent. Is it possible? Is it possible that they could have missed the one that God sent to deliver them? Of course it is. This man led them out.

(Acts 7:36) “This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.”

(Acts 7:37) “This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.’”

How did you know that Moses was the one to deliver them? He performed wonders and signs just like Jesus did. Stephen claims that this same Moses whom they loved so much was saying that someone like him would come in the future to deliver His people. “What do you mean when you say someone like you, Moses?” Someone that they will disown like they disowned me.

(Acts 7:38) “This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.”

Once again, the repetition of angel is the evidence that the angel was the one who ordained the laws. In fact, if you look in

(Acts 7:53) “you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

It was evidential. The point was that it was obvious that he was sent by God. And yet, could it be that though our fathers had all the signs that were so obvious, they would still reject the One who was sent to deliver them? The One that they could see very clearly? This one is coming down from the mountain. They are saying, “We heard the voice of God.” Moses comes down from the mountain and says, “I was talking with God.” They answer, “You were talking with God.” Moses tells them what God had said, but they ignored it. Is it possible that you would reject somebody whom you knew came from God? This is going to be his point. He talks about the fact that they began to rejoice in the works of their own hands instead of following the laws of God. This is the problem not only in the sense of making an idol, but also in making anything man produces. Whether it is an organization or a method, it is the work of man's hands. As they began to worship the laws whether it was the Talmud or the additional laws they were adding--the Midrash, the Mishnah, the Gemara. All the laws that they had become commentaries; the stories became more important. I think it is a lot like today in that many of the books that are written by spiritual leaders are more widely read

than the Bible itself. He goes on to say that they began to love these things. He gives a lot of detail. Besides these, they began to worship the god of Moloch and Remphan. He says this in verse 43. Then in (Acts 7:44) “Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.”

They had every feasible kind of evidence that was there; yet, they obviously rejected everything that was there. He then goes on:

(Acts 7:46) David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.”

(Acts 7:47) “But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.”

(Acts 7:48) “However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:”

Both of these men speak to us, gentlemen. We know that God does not dwell in things made with human hands. So whatever you have conjured up, whatever you have fabricated, whatever you have produced, it cannot be God. We have to turn to one that was not made by human hands.

(Acts 7:50) “Was it not My hand which made all these things?”

Up to this point, Stephen has been more than amiable. Up to this point, he has been more than agreeable. Unfortunately, by this point,

many pastors would end their message. But you have to be willing to make enemies, especially when you see injustice, when you see unrighteousness, when you see that which goes against the truth. Therefore, he turns to them and says, “You know how ticked off you are at your fathers for doing everything they did against Moses? They are just like you.” It reminds me a lot of the Old Testament, Second Samuel 12. King David had sinned with the whole act of Bathsheba, then had her husband murdered. Nathan the prophet goes to him and says, “David, let me tell you a story. David, there was a guy who had sheep and another guy who had just one lamb. It was his only lamb. The one guy that was very wealthy decides that he wants that one, too. Therefore, he kills to get it. David, what do you think someone ought to do to that guy? David goes, ‘Man, he ought to fry.’ Nathan goes, ‘That is you.’” There has to be in every message a “that is you” moment. There has to be. Conviction, change, repentance, all part of a God-ordained message. Stephen continues:

(Acts 7:51) “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just like your fathers did.”

At this juncture, he has already gotten them to admit that what they did was wrong. The evidence is undeniable. He has hung them, so to speak, just like Nathan had hung David.

(Acts 7:52a) “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?...”

It is as though Stephen goes, “You see a pattern here?” (Acts 7:52b) “...They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;”

(Acts 7:53) “You who receive the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

The indictment against you is that you do not keep the law. You say it is so wonderful. It is like having one of those big Catholic Bibles on display on your table, but you never read it. You know? I have been in homes where a large, beautiful Bible is openly displayed. I ask, “Have you read it?” “Oh, we do not read that one.” You can just feel the vibes coming from the people. You received the law as ordained by angels, yet you did not keep it.

(Acts 7:54) “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.”

(Acts 7:55) “But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into the heavens and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;”

This is key. This whole message has been Spirit-filled with an indictment in it, which is telling us that the pulpit should not be full of

preachers who are making people feel good. There should be some days when you walk away just really not liking me at all. But that is good because that is the Spirit of God convicting you. I am good with you being mad at me. But I pray that you listen to the Spirit. Listen to the Spirit. Is there some truth in what the Spirit is saying? The very fact that some people take it personally—“You were talking to me”—is telling me that the Spirit was talking to you. I really do not have any (audio devices) “bugs” in your bedroom.

(Acts 7:55) “But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into the heavens and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;”

I just want to say that this is where the eyes of every preacher should be. Gazing intently at Jesus, the author and perfecter of my faith. I only have one person I need to please today. You only have one person you need to please today. There could be times when you are going to say things that are very offensive to people. I understand that. But you need to walk away saying I did exactly what Jesus wanted me to say. Just keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. Just fix your eyes on Him.

(Acts 7:56) “and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

(Acts 7:57) “But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.”

This is proof positive that not all messages are going to be received well. They rushed upon him with one impulse.

(Acts 7:58) “When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man by the name of Saul.”

(Acts 7:59) They went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the name of the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’

I love this text because it reveals to me what it is going to be like, first of all, to step into heaven. I do not see St. Peter. There is no gate. I see Jesus. I do not see Him sitting down nonchalantly. I see Him standing up for me. Scripture says that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, but today He is standing up, and He is standing up to welcome Stephen. I will get a personal welcome from Jesus, too. That is what I am looking forward to. What a wonderful picture that you have here.

(II Corinthians 5:8) “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

There we are. We are right there. That is where we want to be – at home with the Lord.

(Acts 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.”

How do we know Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit? These are the same words of our Savior. We see the same heart of our Savior. He did not preach that message because he hated those people. We are to love all of those around us. Do you understand that? According to First Corinthians 13, love always rejoices with the truth. It is a great passage and, hopefully, gives you a clear outline on how to share that gospel in the power of the Spirit.

### **Prayer:**

Father, we give You thanks for this man that You called and ordained that he would be filled with Your Spirit and proclaim Your message. Lord, help us to be sages as we preach and speak to others. As Paul says in

(Colossians 4:6) “Let your speech always be filled with grace as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”

Give us that word that would cause our language and our speech to be salty, to be that which brings a pleasurable taste. Lord, help us to bring what is true. Help us to bring what is real. And, Lord, help us to love those to whom we are proclaiming the message. But God, help

us to love ourselves and love them enough not to compromise that truth. Lord, we just thank You for the men whom You have raised up within the church to lead us in this direction. May we continue to do so until you come back. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.