

## THE NOT-SO-WINSOME GOSPEL

### ACTS 7:1-54

Last time in our study we were introduced to a disciple named Stephen who is described in chapter 6 as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5) *and* full of grace and power (6:8). Stephen was a member of the Jerusalem church, and his specific assignment was to work with six other men to ensure that Greek-speaking widows were being cared for.

But Stephen's ministry was not limited to that specific assignment. He had made himself available to be used by the Holy Spirit for *whatever* the Spirit wanted to say or do through him, which meant that he had unlimited potential. Consequently, we are told that he did great wonders and miracles (6:8), and that he spoke the Word of God with astonishing clarity, courage, and conviction.

But Stephen's extraordinary service for Christ got him into big trouble with some religious leaders who felt that his ministry was undermining their authority, eroding their influence, and invalidating their interpretations of Scripture. So, they tried to silence Stephen by engaging him in theological debate. But we are told that they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke (6:10).

Completely frustrated, they brought false charges against Stephen accusing him of blasphemy and of profaning the temple, accusations that, if proven, were punishable by death. As he stood before the ruling council listening to these false accusations, Stephen's countenance began to change right before their eyes, causing the members of the council to stare at him. And we are told that, "*all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel*" (6:15).

This is yet another evidence of Stephen being full of the Holy Spirit. And as the pressure mounted, as the persecution increased, the Holy Spirit was manifesting *more* of Christ in Stephen until the glory of Christ became his most prominent feature.

The story continues in chapter 7. **Verse 1.** *And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"* Remember, Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin—the highest court in Judaism. The high priest (or the chief justice) asks him to answer the charges, and in the next 52 verses, Stephen gives his defense.

**Verses 2-8.** *<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' <sup>4</sup> Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. <sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. <sup>6</sup> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. <sup>7</sup> 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' <sup>8</sup> 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.*

Stephen begins his defense by paraphrasing the biblical story of Abraham, a story with which every person in that courtroom would have been very familiar. Stephen's emphasis is on the *promise* God had given to Abraham, which is the cornerstone of Jewish identity. God had promised Abraham that He would make him the father of a great nation and that He would give him a land for that nation to live in, even though that promise was never fulfilled

in his lifetime. But Stephen also wants to emphasize that God was still active, still revealing Himself, still accomplishing His purposes even before the promise was fulfilled.

So far, Stephen has said nothing controversial. He was merely telling the story of Abraham like it is. He did not put his own spin on it; he did not misinterpret or embellish it in any way. He simply stated what every person in that courtroom would have affirmed.

He goes on. **Verses 9-38.** <sup>9</sup> *“And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. <sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, <sup>16</sup> and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.*

<sup>17</sup> *“But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt <sup>18</sup> until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. <sup>19</sup> He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. <sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God’s sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father’s house, <sup>21</sup> and when he was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.*

<sup>23</sup> *“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ <sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ <sup>29</sup> At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.*

<sup>30</sup> *“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’*

<sup>35</sup> *“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. <sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the one who was in the*

*congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.*

God's promise to Abraham seemed to be in danger of derailment when Jacob's family ended up in Egypt for four hundred years. Yet God was there, preserving His people through Joseph, and then rescuing them through Moses. That rescue was accompanied by a number of miraculous signs and wonders in which God demonstrated His generous love for His people. Once again, this shows that God's presence and God's provision are just as important as the promise itself. God did these things *before* they settled into the Promised Land. In fact, one of the most important ways God made Himself known to His people occurred in what we might call "no man's land" when He gave His law through Moses on Mount Sinai.

Again, everyone who heard Stephen recount these biblical events would have agreed with what he said. These were the stories that had been ingrained into their hearts and minds since infancy, and Stephen's recitation of them was indisputable.

He continues in **verses 39-43**. <sup>39</sup> *Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,* <sup>40</sup> *saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'* <sup>41</sup> *And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.* <sup>42</sup> *But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:*

*"Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? <sup>43</sup> You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'*

Until now Stephen has been emphasizing God's promises and God's faithfulness to His people. But here he focuses on their forefathers' history of rejecting God's representatives. Joseph was rejected by the patriarchs (v.9), and Moses was rejected when he tried to intervene in a quarrel between two Jews (26-29). But Stephen reminds his listeners that even Moses' contemporaries, who saw profound evidence of God's power and presence and provision through Moses, rejected him and erected a golden calf instead.

Do you remember the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32? En route to the Promised Land the Israelites were camped at the base of Mount Sinai which was covered in smoke because the Lord had descended upon it in fire. Moses went up on the fiery mountain to receive the law of God, but he was gone for some time, and the Israelites got impatient and said to Aaron, Moses' brother, "We don't know what has happened to this fellow Moses who brought us out from Egypt, so make us gods who will go before us" (32:1). And so they collected their gold jewelry and melted it and made a golden calf to be their god.

Why would Stephen mention the incident of the golden calf? It's because the faithlessness of the Israelites in that story is so hard to believe. We read it and say, "How could those people do such a 'one-eighty'? How could they transfer their allegiance and worship to an idol when they could look up at the fiery mountain and see evidence of the One who was truly worthy of their allegiance and worship?"

And that is precisely Stephen's point, as we shall see later. The Jews' tragic pattern of rejecting God's provision for their salvation and replacing it with something that cannot possibly save them is a theme that runs throughout the entire Old Testament Stephen's audience agreed. As he recounted Israel's faithlessness, they would have nodded in

agreement. But they would have also thought to themselves, “That’s not what we would have done had we been there! We would have remained faithful and steadfast, no matter what!”

Isn’t it true that when we read stories in the Bible about Israel’s failure or faithlessness, we think to ourselves, “How could these people do that after all that God has done for them?” And then we think, “I would never do what they did! If I was in that Israelite camp as the base of Mount Sinai, I would have stood up and said, ‘Hey everybody, lift up your eyes to the hills. Where does our help come from? Our help comes from Yahweh, maker of heaven and earth.’

“If I was one of the twelve spies who went into the Promised Land, I would have sided with Joshua or Caleb who said, ‘We most certainly *can* take possession of the Land. Let’s trust God and go for it!’ I would never react like those ten scared spies who said, ‘There’s no way! There are giants and fortified cities and too many obstacles and we’re going to get wiped out.’

“If I lived in the days of the prophets, I would have supported them and listened to them and obeyed their messages, rather than ignore them or persecute them like so many of our forefathers, because devotion to Yahweh is steadfast.”

It’s hard for us to imagine ourselves being faithless or being deceived or being dead wrong, and we certainly cannot imagine ourselves being on the wrong side of God.

But that’s where Stephen is leading his audience in all of this. Before we get there, however, he covers one more area in the Israel’s history that leads Him to do some theological reasoning. **Verses 44-50.** <sup>44</sup> *“Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So, it was until the days of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. <sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, <sup>49</sup> “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? <sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?’*

God directed Moses to build the tabernacle, the portable dwelling place of God. He commissioned Solomon to build the Temple, which was far grander in scale and beauty. But, of course, God cannot be confined to a building. The infinite God of the universe is far too big for that.

Again, Stephen’s theological reasoning, supported by Scripture, would have been affirmed by all those present. In his speech he has very succinctly identified the most salient points of Jewish history and theology and woven them together to prove to the Sanhedrin that he was not some gullible cultist who got caught up in the Jesus movement and was brainwashed by the disciples. He wasn’t some fly-by-night heretic that was trying to make a name for himself. He was a student of the Scriptures just like them. All the characters they knew and loved—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and David—he knew and loved. All the things they viewed as sacred—the covenant, circumcision, the Law, the tabernacle, the Temple—he viewed as sacred. His theology was orthodox, his testimony was credible.

But Stephen isn’t finished yet. He was asked to answer the charges about whether or not he committed blasphemy against God or Moses, and whether or not he profaned the temple, and so now he is going to connect the past with the present. **Verses 51-53.** <sup>51</sup> *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you*

*have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*

In 1936, Dale Carnegie wrote a best-selling book called, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It's a book about how to avoid confrontation, how to make difficult people like you, and how to change people without offending them. Here are some of his premises and principles:

1. Never criticize or condemn.
2. Make the other person feel validated.
3. *Never* say, “you're wrong!”
4. Let the other person save face.

Evidently Stephen had not read the book! He violated all of Carnegie's rules! *And* he broke all the rules of constructive conflict resolution, the very first of which is don't ever begin a sentence with the word, “you,” then follow it with an inflammatory statement.

The second rule is that you don't use pejorative terms that would arouse anger. Stephen calls them “stiff-necked,” which is a term used frequently by God in the Old Testament of rebellious Jews who made Him very angry, like when they erected the golden calf (Ex.32:9). Then Stephen tells them they have “uncircumcised hearts and ears.” For a Jew, and especially a member of the Sanhedrin, there is nothing more offensive than to be called “uncircumcised”.

The third rule of constructive conflict resolution is to never say “always.” Yet at the end of verse 51 Stephen says, “You *always* resist the Holy Spirit”. Then he goes on to identify them, not with the good guys in the Old Testament, but with the bad guys. They are the descendants of the ones who persecuted and killed the prophets who predicted the Messiah, and they are even worse because they killed the Messiah Himself! And then he closes his speech by telling them—the very ones who prided themselves on being the keepers and custodians of the Law—that they had completely mishandled it, misinterpreted it, and disobeyed it. Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 53, “You had God's law handed to you by angels—gift-wrapped!—and you squandered it!”

Verse 54, then, is no surprise. <sup>54</sup> *Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.* Why were they so furious? For one thing, they were offended that some non-credentialed, theological peon had the audacity to rebuke them, the spiritual Who's Who of Judaism. But I suspect they were also furious because what Stephen said hit the bullseye. He exposed them for who they really were—prideful, spiritually bankrupt, religious windbags. Yet they were not about to admit it, so they got defensive. They became insanely angry. We'll talk more about that next week.

It raises some questions, though, about Stephen's method. Why did he use this kind of language and why was he so direct? Was he *trying* to provoke them? Was he just a poor communicator? Did he secretly have a death wish?

No. The reason Stephen spoke the way he did is because, verse 55, he was full of the Holy Spirit. The words Stephen used were words given to him by the Spirit, and the manner in which he spoke those words was *directed* by the Spirit. This is precisely what the Spirit wanted to say to these men, and this is precisely the way He wanted to say it, even though it did not result in their repentance—even though it resulted in Stephen's death.

Some of us have been taught that when sharing the gospel, it is important to present it as winsomely and as inoffensively as possible. So, we don't start out by saying, “God is mad at you because you have sinned and fallen short of His glory.” We say, “God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life.”

But as we read accounts in the Book of Acts of Spirit-filled servants of Christ preaching the gospel, there is often a confrontational element to their presentations, which is why I entitled this message "The Not-so-Winsome Gospel". The gospel is good news, to be sure, but it *does* address the audience's sin...always...because sin is *the* issue that separates us from God. Therefore, the gospel *is*, by its very nature, confrontational, and those who proclaim it must be prepared for an unfavorable response.

## **The Not-So-Winsome Gospel**

### **Acts 7:1-54**

Main Idea: The gospel is confrontational, and those who proclaim it must be prepared for an unfavorable response.

Context of this Confrontation (Acts 6:8-15)

Stephen's Speech (1-53)

Old Testament Survey (1-50)

God's Promise to Abraham (2-8)

God's Faithfulness in Egypt (9-36)

Preserving His People through Joseph (9-16)

Rescuing His People through Moses (17-38)

Israel's Faithlessness (39-43)

God's Dwelling Place (44-50)

Stephen's Rebuke (51-53)

Is this really the Gospel ("good news")?

Is this a prescriptive for us?

Chaos in the Courtroom (54)

Application: What this account reveals to us about the gospel

**Application Questions**  
**“The Not-So-Winsome Gospel”**  
**Acts 7:1-54**

Have you ever experienced an unfavorable (or even hostile) response when you have shared the gospel with someone? How did it make you feel? Were you tempted to “tone-down” your message next time?

What are the most notable features of Stephen’s presentation of the Gospel? Do you think his presentation was effective? Would you ever share the Gospel like this? Why or why not?

There was a hostile reaction to Stephen’s presentation of the Gospel. Do you think he should have presented it a different way? Why or why not? How does the first part of verse 55 influence your answer?