

Stephen: Losing the battle, winning the war

Acts 6:8-8:1

At the time of the Roman Empire and before, many different gods were worshipped. Many nations or cities would have their own local god, so when the Roman armies invaded a nation, they would add the local god to the collection of gods that they worshipped.

To some extent you can see similar patterns in Hinduism and Sikhism today. The Sikh faith really centres around the north of India and has mainly stayed in Panjabi culture, rather than spreading across cultures and nations.

As you read the Bible, it can seem similar – God choosing and blessing and making His Covenant with a People – Israel.

But actually our God is the Creator of everything and the God of all nations.

His Plan has always been to bless all nations.

Adam was told “[Fill the Earth](#)” (Genesis 1:28)

Abraham was promised “[I will bless you and give you a son – and through you all nations on earth will be blessed](#)” (Genesis 18:18, 22:18)

In Psalm 2 God says to His Son “[ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.](#)” (v.8)

And in Isaiah, God, speaking again to his “[Servant](#)” (Jesus) says

["It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.](#) (Isaiah 49:6)

When God gave David the plans for the Temple, there was a large area in it called “[The Court of the Gentiles](#)” or “[the Court of the Nations](#)”, where anyone could come and worship God – because He is the God of the whole earth.

Sadly, through the history of Israel, they mainly heard the “You are my chosen people; I will bless you” part and missed the “And through you all nations on earth will be blessed” part.

So through the history of Israel, although the Israelites were scattered through the nations by exile and invasion, the only one of the prophets to actually go to another nation by choice was Jonah; and he didn’t go willingly and he went angrily because he feared that God might spread the blessing of Israel to other nations – their enemies” Which is exactly what God wanted to do.

By the time Jesus was born, there was a beautiful temple in Jerusalem – built to God’s design; but the Court of the nations had been turned into a market place, because all the expectation and hope that God’s blessing would be shared had gone; “I thank you Lord that I am not a dog, a woman or a gentile” was the prayer that was prayed!

So Jesus overturned the tables and cleared out the market – “My Father’s House will be a house of prayer **for all nations!**” He said.

And He reminded everyone of God’s Plan – “For God so loved **the world** that He gave His only Son...”

And then Jesus left the Great Commission:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Then as He promised, He sent the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and all the nations there saw the power of God, responded to the Gospel and were baptised.

...But then, after these 6 chapters of Acts, they are receiving the amazing blessing of God (alongside persecution) – the sick are healed; many are added to the Church; clearly God’s blessing is on His People...but they are all still in Jerusalem. They haven’t gone! They are beginning to make the same mistake

as the Israelites – enjoying the blessing of God, but keeping it to their own people.

And as John preached on last week, some problems with racial divisions begin to appear inside the Church – the Hebrew widows are cared for; the Greek-Jewish widows get missed out.

And so the Apostles appointed the seven – men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom – a multicultural team to take care of this problem: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch.

Jon mentioned that these were men to get on and do the stuff that needed doing – making sure everyone was fed – ‘waiting on the tables’.

But actually this was a much bigger responsibility. They had to be wise and full of the Holy Spirit for a reason – you don’t need lots of godly wisdom to dish out food!

‘Hungry widows’ was just the symptom.

They were actually dealing with deeper and potentially damaging issues of racism that could have easily torn the new Church apart right down the middle! They had to bring authority and leadership to the situation on behalf of the Apostles; they probably had to apply Biblical truths to people, graciously teaching and addressing the problems behind this issue.

It was a massive job that rescued the Church. It’s still a massive job we need to be committed to and we desperately need all the people we can get who are “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom”!

And so Stephen was one of the stars of the Early Church – he was someone who “got it” – who saw the big picture; he was an outstanding man who was able to speak God’s Word clearly and boldly, backed up with signs and wonders; he was able to deal with people who were opposing the Church in such a clear way that it says “they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke” (Acts 6:10)

When the Jews he had debated with realised they had been beaten in their arguments, they plotted against Stephen and got people to tell lies about him, saying that he had blasphemed and had spoken against Moses.

So the Jewish leaders hauled him before the court – and it says that as he stood there “his face was like the face of an angel.” (Acts 6:15)

They asked him whether the charges were true – and he used his defence speech to preach one of the best sermons in the New Testament.

His preach covers the whole of Chapter 7 and, although I’m not going to go through it all because of time, I recommend that you read it through because it presents a big picture of the whole of the Old Testament, leading to Jesus.

He talked about:

- The **Covenant** God made with Abraham
- God raising up Moses to lead His People **out of slavery** in Egypt
- God’s **Covenant** with Moses
- The People’s **rejection of the Covenant** – “in their hearts they turned back to Egypt” (v.39)
- God called David and gave him the plans for His **Temple**
- The Jews then made the **Temple the most important thing**, making it the centre of their worship, rather than God
- God raised up **Prophets** who pointed to the coming of Jesus
- The People **rejected the Prophets**
- **Jesus** came
- They **rejected** Him too.

He ends up turning to and directly challenging the Jewish leaders:

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- you who

have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." (v.51-53)

This is not Stephen getting carried away; this is one of the clearest sermons in the Bible. This is a fearless preach, bringing a prophetic confrontation and testimony to the Jews – with Stephen being fully aware of the likely effect of his words – he knew them and their track record.

But in the hope that it would lead them to repentance and faith, he says it anyway – and the consequences are as he expected:

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. (v.54)

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (v.55-56)

You might remember that through Acts, it says many times that Jesus is **seated** in the Highest Place, at the right Hand of God; but here Stephen saw Jesus **standing**.

People have written about this, saying that what he saw was Jesus standing to applaud and welcome him into Paradise – Jesus is so overjoyed at Stephen's faith and obedience that He couldn't just sit and wait.

And with that amazing vision of Heaven open before him, Stephen went to his death:

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. (7:57-8:1)

Humanly speaking, this was a dreadful day and a massive blow and “defeat” for the Church – one of the best men horribly, brutally executed.

And worse still:

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (8:1)

No more meetings publically in the Temple Courts – now they are not protected by the law and they know that their persecutors will stop at nothing and no-one is safe.

And it’s easy to think “Why would God allow this to happen?”

In the 1860’s something similar happened. Apart from a few Catholic missionaries 100 years earlier, the Gospel had never gone to Korea, which was one of the most closed nations in the world.

Then a brilliant, young Welsh man in his mid-20’s – Robert Jermain Thomas, and his new wife Caroline decided to go.

They arrived in China, and in 4 months he became fluent in Mandarin – then his wife died of a tropical illness.

He decided to go anyway and got a lift on an American ship with 500 Bibles.

Before the ship could land, the Koreans sent boats and set it alight – Robert Thomas’ clothes were alight, but he jumped overboard and swam ashore with all the Bibles he could carry.

He was immediately arrested but kept on handing out Bibles as he was taken to the Royal palace.

As soon as he arrived, he was sentenced to death and was knelt down for the executioner to stab him in the heart with a spear.

The last thing he did was give the last Bible he had to his executioner.

All the Bibles were rounded up and destroyed.

Like with Stephen, the battle was lost...

...From a human perspective.

But then an amazing thing happened.

The destroyed Bibles were gathered up, and the paper was used as wallpaper in several houses – meaning that verses from the Bible were visible.

Them, coupled with respect for the way Robert Thomas died, led a number of people to faith in this most closed country.

And the Gospel spread!

Near the place where Thomas died, there are now the two biggest churches in the whole world – the biggest of which is Yoido Full Gospel Church, which according to Wikipedia, had 830,000 members in 2007 – and is still growing!

When Stephen was killed:

- ➔ The Gospel spread & the Church got back on course with the Great Commission – Judea, Samaria
- ➔ Paul, the man overseeing the stoning was raised up to take the Gospel to the ends of the Earth.

When we look from our point of view, suffering, setbacks, opposition, lost battles; and the many other difficulties we often face, look bad – and they are hard.

But God's Purposes are unstoppably being worked out and advancing!

If our focus is on us, then we'll be shaken by trials and our effort will be aimed at avoiding trials and suffering;

If it's on God, if we can have His perspective, then we will know that whatever happens to us; come what may, we will see and be part of the Great Victory of Jesus.

Our eyes need to be on Jesus, the Risen One, standing at God's Right Hand – encouraging us to keep on going – because our light and momentary sufferings are achieving an amazing, wonderful reward that lets us see our trials and persecution in their real context.