

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 27, 2010)

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Sermon manuscript

### Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

## **The Limits of Orchestration**

(Acts 6:9--8:4)

Study #10

### Introduction: A resentful good-bye or two...

I first remember “the attitude” creeping up on me a few years into my time as a pastor. I wish it was an attitude that I could say I’ve conquered. But, to be honest, I still struggle with it from time to time.

I had been meeting with a few men for Bible study and prayer and support in a Discipleship group on Saturday mornings at 6am. We had a great time together and all of us were growing in our faith and in our faithfulness to Jesus.

We had been meeting for quite a while when one of those guys moved away from San Antonio. I was sad. I knew that I would miss him and his family. Then another of the men moved away. Then a third. And that’s when the attitude hit.

I had been meeting with these men for a couple of years. I had invested time and energy into them. I wanted them to grow as Christians AND I wanted them to become leaders in the church I was pastoring.

As they moved away I saw my efforts at leadership training going up in smoke. I struggled with bitterness and resentment. I wondered what in the world the Lord was up to. I griped (in a spiritual way, of course) about the trail of families leaving our church on the grounds of such flimsy excuses as, “*The military is PCS-ing me.*” or “*The company is transferring me.*” or “*I’m going away for additional schooling.*”

Over the years, Care Group leaders have left. Elders have left. Sunday School teachers and Deacons have left. A secretary left because her husband got a job in Dallas. What was she thinking? Flimsy excuses indeed when I had a church to run!

I don’t know if you have ever wrestled with similar emotions. I know some have. I even know of one family who told me that they stopped attending Northwest because so many people left due to job transfers that it was too emotionally taxing to stay. Sheesh!

But after a while I discovered something that helped me deal with the trauma of these departures.

It is a truth that lies at the very heart of the passage we are exploring this morning. And when I recall this truth I’m equipped to do more than just endure disappointment. I get genuinely excited about people leaving. (No, not for THAT reason!)

Last week we watched the church put wise management skills to good use to meet pressing needs. Their efforts to manage the work of caring for widows resulted in effective service and an ongoing vibrant witness in Jerusalem.

The ministry was led by seven godly men, all Hellenists, who were chosen by the congregation and commissioned by the apostles.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning at verse eight, Luke zeroes in on one of the seven table-waiters, Stephen, a man who was chosen because he was “*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.*”

Listen as Luke goes on to further describe Stephen’s character as well as his ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> In the passage before us there is tremendous tension in the juxtaposition of the reference to priests coming to faith in Christ (Acts 6:7), and the account of Stephen’s insistence that the Temple order was now superseded by Christ.

## Ministry Leads to...(6:8-14)

### Stephen - a Powerful Witness (v. 8)

*[6:8] And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.*

When we read that he was “*full of... power*” and that he was performing “*great wonders and signs*” we picture a man who was involved in healing ministries, perhaps also exorcisms.<sup>2</sup>

We also picture an exceptionally loving man. What else could “*full of grace*” refer to other than to a man with a gracious spirit? He was like Jesus, a loving, kind man who showed all the fruit of the Spirit.

Recognized as a servant-leader in the church even before he was selected to be a leader of the **HELLENISTIC AND NATIVE HEBREW WIDOWS TABLE SERVING MINISTRY**, Stephen’s ministry began attracting attention.

He was noticed by those who appreciated his ministry and his message. And he was noticed by those who took exception to his ministry and message.

### Stephen - Reviled and Opposed! (vv. 9-14)

*The opposition (v. 9)*

*[6:9] But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.*

*The Synagogue of the Freedmen* was a group made up of Jews who had been released from slavery by their Roman owners.

In the first century it was common for Jews with similar backgrounds to gather in Jerusalem at the Temple for worship.

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ other kind of miracle included “nature miracles” - walking on water, stilling storms, etc... Were these kinds of miracles performed by the apostles and others, like Stephen?

When this group of former slaves came together for worship, they heard Stephen’s Christian message - and they didn’t like what they were hearing!

*The opposition’s charges (vv. 10-14)*

Now, I’m sure that Stephen had been talking about Jesus. But the men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen accused Stephen of some of the most serious charges you can imagine leveling against a Jew.

*[6:10] But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. [11] Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” [12] And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. [13] They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; [14] for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”<sup>3</sup>*

They accused him of speaking against Moses, the great Lawgiver, against the Law that God gave Moses, and against the holy temple, the place of worship.

Luke tells us that these were all trumped up charges. But the men who were circulated these rumors by false witnesses were doing so to lessen his credibility among those who heard him speak about Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

And the opposition didn’t just level their charges and leave. They “dragged” (note already the undertone of violence in their treatment of Stephen) him to the Sanhedrin.

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus had been similarly misrepresented. He had said that if “His temple” (meaning His body) were to be destroyed, He would raise it up again in three days (speaking of resurrection). His enemies twisted that comment and accused Him of saying that He was going to destroy the Herodian Temple and rebuild it in three days.

<sup>4</sup> You’ll notice that this is exactly what had been done against Jesus, throughout His life and especially at His trial. This is not the only similarity we will see between the Jesus and Stephen stories!

But as the confrontation begins, Luke draws our attention to Stephen's face.

*[6:15] And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.<sup>5</sup>*

There was something about his face that let everyone know that Stephen had been with God. Whether his face actually glowed with a supernatural radiance (as Moses' face had glowed when he came off the mountain after having met with God), or Stephen glowed with excitement about his opportunity to talk about Jesus to the Synagogue of the Freedman and to the Sanhedrin is not clear.

But all eyes were definitely on Stephen as the High Priest began the proceedings with a simple question to Stephen.

### **Stephen Invited to Speak (7:1)**

*[7:1] The high priest said, "Are these things so?"*

Given that invitation, Stephen launched into his talk. What follows is the longest message recorded in the book of Acts, which indicates that Luke saw Stephen's speech as hugely important.<sup>6</sup>

But, as I have done with the other messages in Acts, I'm not going to spend much time in my sermon explaining Stephen's sermon.

Sure, I want to make sure that we get the "point" he is making in his message. But the message to us this morning is not so much the message Stephen preached, but the message he lived.

And he launched into a sermon that captured the interest of his hearers from the opening, "*Hear me, brethren and fathers!*"

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<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Greek word for "angel" is also the word for "messenger." It may be that Luke is telling us that the Council saw that Stephen was a messenger sent to them with a message from God.

<sup>6</sup> Luke's interest in Stephen was probably due to his grasp of the strategically significant fact that this man emerged just as the church was being called on to undertake a new stage of its mission to the world - the Samaritan advance (an intermediate step before the full advance to the Gentile world).

Now, given the charges leveled against him, you might expect him to give a defense. He doesn't. In this speech before the Sanhedrin there is no attempt to exonerate himself. Had he hired himself as an attorney, he could have self-fired for malpractice because this message is nothing like a self-defense.

Stephen simply wasn't interested in clearing himself. He was, however, very interested in speaking to his audience about Jesus.

Much of the point of Stephen's message was to drive home to the Sanhedrin the idea that, "*YES, we believers in Jesus are saying that God is doing something new. We are teaching that the way to approach God is now NOT tied to Jewishness. But listen, relating to God has never been so tied to Jewishness as you think...*"

And for the most part, the talk he gives is nothing more than a history lesson, taken from some of the key events in the lives of a few key Jewish leaders.

As Exhibit A, Stephen mentions Abraham, the father of the Jewish people.

### **Message Leads to... (vv. 2-53)**

#### **About Israel's Heroes (vv. 2-38)**

*Abraham's story (vv. 2-8)<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> *[7:2] And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, [3] and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.' [4] "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. [5] "But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him. [6] "But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. [7] " "And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge," said God, 'and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.' [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.*

Abraham came out of his own land (the land of the Chaldeans) to the land God showed him (Israel/Canaan). He answered God's summons. God told him to leave his home, and he left. Abraham was a man of faith, who believed the promises God gave him.

Abraham lived a life of high adventure. He left the past behind in Babylon. And throughout his long life he was always ready to drop what He was doing to follow God's lead.

And everything Stephen mentions about Abraham's life has to do with his life **OUTSIDE** of Palestine.

- He mentions God's call to Abraham while he was living in Mesopotamia.
- He mentions that Abraham never received even a foot of ground as a personal inheritance.
- He reminds the Sanhedrin that Abraham's offspring lived in a foreign land (Egypt).

And yet, with so few ties to the land of the Jews, Abraham enjoyed a covenant relationship with God. Amazing!

Stephen next mentions one of Abraham's grandsons and one of his great-grandsons.

*Jacob's and Joseph's story (vv. 9-16)*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [7:9] "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, [10] and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. [11] "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. [12] "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. [13] "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. [14] "Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. [15] "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. [16] "From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

The grandson was Jacob. Jacob came to know God outside of Palestine, while he was living with Uncle Laban. And Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, spent almost all of his life in Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

So, again, here are examples of God's blessing and involvement in people's lives **apart** from the land of Israel, **separate** from the Temple (which hadn't been built), and **before** the Law (which hadn't been given)!

Stephen's point? God had never been tied to only working through land and temple and Law - and he uses three giants of Judaism to prove his point.

Next, he speaks about Moses, the great Lawgiver he is accused of dissing.

*Moses' story (vv. 17-38)*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen's mention of Shechem at the end of this paragraph is very interesting, since in the first century Shechem was the center of **Samaritan** life (there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans). By emphasizing Shechem, he is foreshadowing the soon to come advance of the Gospel into Samaria.

<sup>10</sup> [7:17] "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, [18] until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. [19] "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. [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. [21] "And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. [22] "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. [23] "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. [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. [25] "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. [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?' [27] "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? [28] 'You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?' [29] "At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. [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. [31] "When Moses saw it, he

Now, the book of Exodus ignores most of Moses' early life, especially his education. But Jewish tradition includes legends to show how brilliant, precocious, and well-rounded Moses really was.

And where was he raised? Not in Israel. Moses was raised in Egypt.

Stephen tells us about Moses' intrusion into the affairs of his fellow Hebrews, and how he rescued one of his brethren by killing the Egyptian who was beating him.

It was because of that act that Moses was forced to flee Egypt and become a lonely figure in Midian where he herded sheep in the desert for forty years.

And then, significantly, Stephen includes God's remark to Moses at the burning bush, [*Exodus 3:5*]...***“Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”*** And yet, that holy land wasn't Canaan's land. That holy land was Midian's land!

Stephen's audience could hardly have missed the point, too, that this Moses, who was such a heroic figure and was used so mightily by God, lived his entire life **outside** of the Promised Land. He never set foot in Israel!

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*marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: [32] ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. [33] “But the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. [34] ‘I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.’ [35] “This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a 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. [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. [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.’ [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.*

SO, based on the life stories of Abraham, Joseph, Jacob and Moses - there's four heavyweights! - Stephen could say that God was not restricted to working with people only in the land of Palestine, or only along the lines of the Law of Moses, or only within the confines of the Temple.

Then Stephen turned a corner. He's making a point. And that point is to say, *“Hey, guys, if you'll remember, our national history isn't all that shiny, anyway.”*

### About Israel's Worship (vv. 39-43)

*That golden calf thing (vv. 39-41)<sup>11</sup>*

He reminded the Sanhedrin that throughout Israel's history, she had been guilty of idolatry - dating all the way back to her worship of the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses was getting the Ten Commandments from God.

*The worship of other gods (vv. 42-43)<sup>12</sup>*

And that wasn't just a mistake made early in her history. Hundreds of years later God's people were STILL practicing idolatrous worship as Stephen demonstrates by quoting the prophet Amos, who complained that the practice of worshiping that-which-is-not-God was alive and well in his day, too.

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<sup>11</sup> [7:39] *“Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, [40] saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what happened to him.’ [41] “At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.*

<sup>12</sup> [7:42] *“But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? [43] ‘You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.’*

That comment probably went over like a lead balloon - likely about as well as his next comment about the Jerusalem temple. (You'll recall that the Synagogue of the Freedmen had accused him of speaking against the temple.)

### About God's "house" (vv. 44-50)

*Tabernacle vs. temple (vv. 44-47)*<sup>13</sup>

The plans for a Temple had originated with King David who felt badly that he himself lived in a cedar paneled home of grandeur in The Dominion, while God was "housed" on the other side of the tracks.

And, in fact, God commended him for this desire to build a Temple. While David himself was not allowed to build the Temple, his son Solomon was, and God did fill the house with His glory, a glory that is referred to by the word "*shekinah*."

Still, even Solomon recognized that his Temple could not house God. On the day that he dedicated the Temple, he made that clear, just as Isaiah did in the verses Stephen quotes here in Acts 7 (vv. 48-50).

*Will you "house" God?! (vv. 48-50)*

**[7:48] "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:  
[49] 'Heaven is My throne,  
And earth is the footstool of My feet;  
What kind of house will you build for Me?' says the Lord,  
'Or what place is there for My repose?  
[50] 'Was it not My hand which made all these things?'**

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<sup>13</sup> [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. [45] "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. [46] "David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. [47] "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.

Stephen's message was, "*Hey, at least the tabernacle in the wilderness was built according to God's plan. He commanded that the Tabernacle be built. But the Temple, which you are sooooo concerned about - is YOUR idea, not God's.*"<sup>14</sup>

And that which should have been a great boon to worship - the Temple - had become instead, a stumbling block to the Jews because they paid more attention to the Temple than to the God it was built to worship!

And now for the punch line. And Stephen does deliver his conclusion with the force of a mighty blow.

### About YOUR Hearts! (vv. 51-53)

**[7:51] "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. [52] "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; [53] you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."**

This kind of preaching is not the way to win friends and influence people. But, without question, it is the way to make an impression.

There was probably anger in Stephen's voice, but there was no doubt sorrow, too. He points out that the rebellion of Israel has been consistent since Day One.

From the persecution of all the prophets of God, to a chronic resistance of the Holy Spirit they have always rebelled. But now they have taken their rebellion to the absolute and have murdered the Righteous One - the Son of God!

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen was probably emphasizing the dynamic nature of the tabernacle vs. the static nature of the Temple. The tabernacle - a tent well suited to life in the desert for a nomadic people - pictured movement. It spoke of going along with God under His direction, vs. being satisfied with the *status quo* that made the nation unresponsive when God did something new.

Sadly, Stephen never even got to mention the Name of the One who prompted the opposition's opposition. He never got to call his audience to faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross, or even to say the word, "resurrection."

Certainly, he may have intended to say more than he did, but what he had said to this point so inflamed his audience that he didn't have a chance to finish.

The response of the Jews to such stinging words could have been one of two. They could either REPENT - as did Peter's audience on the day of Pentecost - or, they could REJECT.

Luke describes their wholesale rejection. Grace shines through the scene, though, as God dealt very graciously with Stephen.

#### **Persecution (7:54--8:4)**

##### **Stephen - the First Martyr (vv. 54-60)**

*An inviting vision... (vv. 55-56)*

***[7:55] But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; [56] and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."***

Stephen got to see the glory of God! And He saw Jesus, in Heaven - standing! That is striking.

Almost always, whenever there is a reference to Jesus in Heaven He is "seated" at the right hand of God.<sup>15</sup> Here He is standing. Why? I think there can be no doubt that He was standing to welcome Stephen home. Stephen's homegoing is recorded in all of its violence.

<sup>15</sup> The significance of this is that His work is finished.

*...then stoned to death (vv. 54-59)<sup>16</sup>*

***[7:54] Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him...[57] But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. [58] When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him;<sup>17</sup> and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.<sup>18</sup> [59] They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"***

At the very end of this ugly scene, as Stephen was dying, we see him for the follower of Jesus he was.

*Stephen's Christ-like love (v. 60)*

***[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.***

He died just like His Lord did! In fact, it is hard to ignore the many similarities between Stephen and Jesus.

- They both performed wonders and signs.
- They both spoke irrefutable words.
- They both were filled with the Spirit.
- They both died under a charge of blasphemy
- They both prayed that God would receive their spirits.

<sup>16</sup> Harrison suggests that Caiaphas was no longer the High Priest, having been replaced by a man named Jonathan, and that Pilate had been replaced by Vitellius, who was much more lenient than Pilate had been, and probably gave the Jews the privilege of capitol punishment. Perhaps, but our knowledge of the chronology is not precise. Even if it was still the Pilate-Caiaphas show, capitol punishment could have been enacted. It just would have been risky, a risk the Sanhedrin was evidently willing to take in the present case.

<sup>17</sup> The formal method of stoning in Judaism was as follows: The criminal was taken to a height (cliff) and thrown down. The witnesses had to do the actual throwing down. If the fall killed the man, well enough. If not, boulders were hurled down upon him until he died. It is not at all clear that Stephen was stoned according to this practice. It appears that he was simply taken to a level place outside the city, where people threw rocks at him until he died.

<sup>18</sup> In placing their robes at the feet of Saul, is Luke foreshadowing that the "mantle" of Stephen was to fall on Saul?

Stephen followed Jesus' example to the very end and to the extreme. Just as Jesus prayed for those who were responsible for His crucifixion, Stephen prayed for those who were chucking rocks at him.<sup>19</sup>

This is what it means to be conformed to the image of Jesus - to love, even our enemies, even those who are doing us dirty.

Following Stephen's death, there is a dramatic shift in the book of Acts. Contrary to Luke's normal practice through the first seven chapters, he does NOT now transition back to look at the inner workings of the church in Jerusalem.

Instead, he tells us of a major persecution that was sparked by this first martyrdom, a persecution spearheaded by a young man who had been watching over the robes while Stephen was being stoned.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Saul - a Prime Persecutor (vv. 1a, 2-3)**

*[8:1a] Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death... [2] Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. [3] But Saul began ravaging<sup>21</sup> the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*

Saul was mentioned in chapter 7 just in passing. Now he is a central figure, the most prominent opponent of the church. He firmly believed that Stephen's treatment was just. Stephen deserved to die - and so did all the others who professed faith in this Jesus.

So, Saul (later to become the Apostle Paul) set out to wreck havoc on the church. He began a fierce, violent tirade against all Christ-followers, and threw all of his energy and influence into an effort to destroy the church.

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<sup>19</sup> This is precisely what Luke meant earlier in this passage when he told us that Stephen was not only "performing great wonders and signs among the people" but that he was also "full of grace."

<sup>20</sup> Saul is mentioned here, just as Barnabas was mentioned at chapter 4, to introduce him and to foreshadow his growing role in the chapters to come.

<sup>21</sup> The word used to describe Saul's efforts are used to describe a wild boar ravaging a vineyard.

Now this kind of a thing - persecution - is not the kind of thing that leads to a stable church environment. We can imagine that the imprisonment of the members of the church could conceivably have had a somewhat negative impact on attendance at Sunday morning worship services.

In fact, the Hellenistic believers who had been hanging around for the past several months following Pentecost were soon members-in-absence from the church. Luke tells us why.

#### **The Church - Scattered, OH NO! (vv. 1b)**

*[8:1b]...And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem,<sup>22</sup> and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

In the midst of the persecution, the apostles stood fast and stayed in Jerusalem. They likely wanted to remain there to shepherd the Christians who were not yet imprisoned.

But, the Hellenists split. The death of Stephen - a Hellenist - signaled the outbreak of persecution and compelled the Christians to "scatter" and to seek safety in the remoter regions of the country or to simply go back home.

But, in describing the departure of Christians from Jerusalem, Luke used an unusual word. He could have used a general term for scattering, dispersing. But instead, he chose to use an agricultural word which means to "scatter" as seed is scattered.

Why THAT word? Because as they were scattered, they dropped the seed of the Gospel everywhere they went.

#### **The Gospel - Spreading like Wildfire (v. 4)**

*[8:4] Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.*

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen's speech has now prompted the opposition of Pharisees (Saul was a Pharisee) in addition to the already intransigent opposition of the Sadducees to the Christian message.

The people went out from Jerusalem as seed pods carrying seed, not as refugees, but as ambassadors.

So far, it has been the apostles in the context of THE CHURCH GATHERED who had given the lead in evangelism, in defiance of the Sanhedrin's violence and threats.

Now, it was THE CHURCH SCATTERED that took up the evangelistic task, with every Christian becoming a missionary.

And Satan (who is at some level behind all persecution) overreached and outsmarted himself. His persecution of the church had the opposite effect of what he intended. Instead of smothering the Gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it.

So...

- Stephen's martyrdom brought about a great persecution.
- The great persecution led to a great dispersion.
- And the great dispersion resulted in world-wide evangelism.

### **Conclusion:**

From the first time that I "got" this story of Stephen and suffering and scattering and mission, it has had about as great an impact on me as any story in the Bible. It is particularly helpful when I am in need of an "attitude adjustment."

When I am tempted to be angry or resentful about people leaving San Antonio - and especially about people leaving Northwest Community Church - this story reminds me that the biggest game in town is not the size of our church or my enjoyment of comfort with good friends.

At any given moment, the biggest game going on is always the progress of the Gospel and the work of God.

Lots of people who have been equipped for ministry at Northwest are now making a difference for God's Kingdom elsewhere. It's all good.

But we can broaden the application of this powerful story beyond a near-sighted pastor's parochial concerns. We can all take to heart the idea that any inconvenience, any challenge, any suffering, trial, loss, or pain that may come our way are all worthwhile because we know that God is using it all to move His purposes forward.

He used the persecution of the early church to move Christians out of the cocoon of a safe Jerusalem and enjoyable church life to spread the Gospel.

Would the early church ever have chosen to pursue the Great Commission's "Go!" using this method? Would they have ever come up with this plan, including the martyrdom of Stephen, to catalyze them into taking the message of salvation to the remotest part of the world? I seriously doubt it.

All the planning, preparation, orchestration and strategizing in the world would not have resulted in this scheme for evangelism.

And yet, there is no denying that God used the threat of imprisonment and death to force believers out of Jerusalem and into the Great Commission.

Brothers and sisters, there is a legitimate place for our planning, preparing, and strategizing. Scripture commends the wisdom of planning our work and working our plan. And it was great last Sunday when we saw the church using wise and caring management to serve widows.

BUT there are limits to what can be accomplished by our careful orchestration of life. God is far more creative at advancing His Kingdom purposes than we are. We can trust Him to use every bump in the road and every wrinkle in OUR plans to further HIS plans.

Relax. And be expectant. God has everything under control. And go ahead and plan. But, don't put your trust in your plans. And don't allow the disruption of your plans to disrupt your trust in God. He is bigger than your plans.

***And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.***  
***(Romans 8:28)***