



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Unfinished

Part 13: Lifetime Achievement Award

Acts 7:1–8:3 | Tim Badal | December 3, 2017



In our series we call “Unfinished,” we’ve been looking at the ups and downs of the early church. Last week we began our study of a man named Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew who, along with six other men, was one of the first deacons selected by the church to oversee the distribution of food to the church’s widows. Stephen was filled with the Spirit, a man of strong faith, of whom the Scriptures have nothing bad to say.

At the end of Acts 6, we learned that Stephen returned to his old synagogue. He had been a Christ follower for about a year, and has gone back to his home town to tell them that Jesus Christ—the very Man the synagogue hated—was now his Lord and Savior. This resulted in an uproar. We’re told that his countenance was like that of an angel, but apparently the people were not drawn to him.

In fact, the people hated him so much that they brought in dishonest witnesses to accuse him with false stories, insinuating he was worthy of punishment by the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of the day. As they questioned him about his beliefs and teachings, we see again the pattern we’ve seen throughout Acts. First the people of God were threatened, but they responded by continuing to proclaim Christ. Sometimes they were beaten or imprisoned, but they would also return to preaching the gospel.

But this time, the unbelieving world became so angry at the message of the cross that they not only threatened, mocked and beat Stephen, but this is the first time in the New Testament record that a disciple of Jesus who is boldly proclaiming His name will be cut down. Stephen was taken outside the city and stoned to death because of his faith in Christ. Sadly, he has been joined by many others over the years and in our world today. Thousands, maybe even millions of believers have spoken the good news of Jesus Christ, only to be put to death. We may think our culture is advanced because of all our technology, but amazingly people still oppose the gospel.

Our news is filled with reports of ISIS fighters who take present-day Stephens along seashores, have them kneel, and because they will not deny Christ, behead them. In places like northern Iraq and Syria, thousands of people have fled from the horrific attacks of radical Islamists. Why are they treated so cruelly? Because as followers of Christ, they will not bow the knee to Allah. Present-day Stephens are living and dying for their faith.

This is a reminder that today, even as it was in the times of Acts, the goal of a Christian is not to do things that cost nothing. Rather, God requires that we be willing to stand, speak and if necessary, sacrifice our lives for the cause of Jesus Christ. Each of us needs to ask ourselves, “Am I willing to do what Stephen did?”

As we’ll see, Stephen did not walk into this situation kicking and screaming. He spoke God’s truth with great peace in his heart, eventually forgiving the very men who were killing him. He loved them while they were hating him. Our text today shows us the very best of what it means to be a Christ-follower and what it sometimes takes to change lives.

I will tell you that Stephen’s sermon is the longest sermon in all of Acts, and we are only touching the highlights. The book of Acts could also be called “The Book of Sermons.” There are 15 different sermons preached in Luke’s record called Acts, but this one is the longest.

So we should ask why was Stephen killed? Was it because of how he looked or what he was wearing? Was it the football team he rooted for? No. It was Whom he believed in and spoke about that brought him to his death. What we will be reading today is what I would call “gospel-centered preaching,” which is a dangerous venture in our day even as it was in Stephen’s. Because this sermon is long, I’m only going to highlight the first 50 verses. Stephen is explaining the reason he has left the synagogue and is now following Jesus Christ. The first part of his sermon traces the history of Israel as a nation. He speaks of Abraham’s journey from Mesopotamia to Israel. He speaks of the mistreatment Joseph received from his brothers. He speaks of how Moses delivered God’s people from the rule of Pharaoh and how he was rejected by those same people even as he was leading them to the Promised Land.

Stephen also speaks of the tabernacle during the Israelite’s time of wandering and of Solomon’s magnificent temple. He then talks about the temple that was present in that day in Jerusalem—the temple of Herod—and why all those structures are not as important as a person’s actual relationship with Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Then Stephen tells them that they were no different from the men of old. Beginning in Acts 7:51, here is what he says:

<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 not your fathers 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.

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep [died].

<sup>8</sup> And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

One of the greatest chapters in all of Scripture is before us, containing one of the greatest messages ever preached by anyone outside of Jesus Christ Himself. Stephen models both Christian preaching and Christian living. There’s a word both for me as a preacher and for you as hearers. Stephen died because of what he preached.

Preaching is an important part of the church and of Christian worship. I hope one of the reasons you’re here is that you are hearing the gospel faithfully preached by me and others. But while preaching is still done in churches in our day, the Apostle Paul warns us in 2 Timothy 4:3 that *“the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears...”* they seek words that will make them feel good. Not all preaching is equal. We are to proclaim Christ’s good news. We must call people to turn away from their sin and rebellion, instead following Jesus in repentance and faith. But as people gather in churches all over our fine country this morning, many of them will hear sermons that are anything but the gospel.

Let me mention a few types of preaching that are not gospel-centered as Stephen modeled for us. First, there is politics-centered preaching. These sermons focus on current events. You don’t need a Bible but a newspaper or newsfeed. They speak of what’s going on in Washington rather than in our hearts. Politics-centered preaching in this season might talk about the battle for Christmas and whether or not we should say “Merry Christmas,” or if there should be a nativity scene in the town square. They might be about whom we should vote for or what Washington is doing. The point of these sermons might be for us to stand up and take back America. While that may rile up a group of people, it is not the gospel. While it may fire up a political base, it will not do anything for our walk with Jesus Christ. It is politics-centered preaching.

The second sort of preaching I call advice-centered preaching. This is happening all over the place. Even in evangelical churches, the pastor—instead of thundering, “Thus saith the Lord”—puts on a sweater and does his best “Dr. Phil” act. He tells people how to be better spouses and parents, how to do better at work, how to eliminate stress, how to live a happier and fuller life—apart from Jesus Christ.

This advice might be good and helpful, but it simply “Christianizes” the point of Dickens’ story about Scrooge. Essentially it says, “Let’s be a little nicer. Let’s show a little more Christmas spirit. Let’s say kind things to one another.” That’s not the gospel changing our hearts; it’s just us fixing a few things. It tells us the gospel is “Chicken Soup for Our Souls,” and not the knife that cuts between

bone and marrow (Hebrews 4:12) and shows us our sin and our need for Jesus Christ. Advice-centered preaching can be fun and helpful, but it's not the gospel.

Next there's evangelism-centered preaching. This sounds great—after all, isn't the gospel about evangelism? But if all we ever hear from the pulpit is a salvation presentation, then essentially we're saying that once you come to know Jesus Christ, you don't need the gospel anymore. It's the start of the Christian life, but once you have that, it no longer has any purpose. There are many churches that keep pounding that first step of conversion as the key to eternal life. But the gospel is more than this—it's the key to everyday life. We need it in every aspect of our lives. Even the most mature and longest-serving Christian in our midst is a person who needs the gospel each day so they can walk upright and holy for the glory of God.

Finally, there's what I call virtue-centered preaching. This sort of preaching rolls off the tongue. It's dynamic. The sermons might have titles like "Dare to be a Daniel." Or we'll hear about David's fight with Goliath and be challenged to fight the giants in our lives. Or we'll be told to build leadership skills like Nehemiah had. Essentially these sermons take Old Testament stories and moralize them, presenting ideas of how we can rise above our own dysfunctions or struggles. And yes, while the Old Testament does give us life lessons, it points at every turn to the coming Messiah.

Not all preaching is equal. Stephen reminds us this morning that if preaching is going to be gospel-centered, it must be Scripture-saturated. It must reach to the depths of Who God is and who we are as flawed and broken people. We are sinners in need of a Savior and Stephen nails this truth every step of the way.

So if you ever find yourself away from this church, or evaluating this church, or (God forbid) replacing me as the primary teacher here, ask the question, "Am I hearing gospel-centered preaching?" And listen, Village Bible Church: accept nothing else.

Now let's look at Stephen's message. He is a model preacher and a model Christian. I have found five characteristics of his sermon that demonstrate it to be gospel-centered.

### **Gospel-centered preaching commemorates God's record of grace.**

Stephen opens his sermon with the call of Abraham in Acts 7:2–8:

<sup>2</sup> "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."

Why does he begin with Abraham? He specifically mentions that Abraham heard from God while he was in Mesopotamia. Then he moves to Joseph, saying in verse nine, "*And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him.*" Later, in verses 17–22, he tells us that Moses was a man who was raised up by God and that God was with him both in Egypt and in Midian.

What is Stephen trying to communicate through these stories? It's simply this truth: God loves His people, is gracious with them, and pours out His blessings on different kinds of people, like Abraham and Joseph and Moses, each of whom had different backgrounds and different life circumstances.

God's record of grace goes to all people in all places—but His grace was not given based on who these men were. Some of them were prosperous; others were at times in great poverty. The Old Testament is a record of God's loving grace to an undeserving people—and that's true for us as well. We must never forget where He found us and how far He's brought us through the work of Jesus Christ. God loves every one of us and because He loves us, He's changed us.

We need to realize that this kind of preaching would have irritated the people in the Sanhedrin who are listening to Stephen speak. We should notice that the love he speaks of is everywhere except Israel. Abraham experienced the love of God in Mesopotamia (which is modern-day Iraq). Joseph knew God's grace, not in Israel, but in Egypt. And then Moses heard God speak to him through a burning bush in the wilderness of Midian (which is modern-day Saudi Arabia). In other words, Stephen is pointing out that God's presence is not just to be found in Israel, but rather in the far-flung places of the world and in the presence of our enemies: Egypt, Midian and Babylon. The enemies of God are experiencing the grace of God and will come to know Who God is because He meets people in all places and at all times, showing His love to them.

And today, God wants those of you who have never bowed your knee to Him to know that He loves you. He loved you so much that He sent His Son to die on your behalf so that you might have eternal life. Gospel-centered preaching commemorates God's record of grace to us.

## **Gospel-centered preaching challenges man-made religion.**

In Stephen's day, the priests and religious leaders had made following God very difficult through an extensive list of rules and regulations. Even Jesus, Who was perfect, couldn't keep all their laws, nor did He need to, as many of them were bogus commandments that often made little or no sense.

Stephen was deliberately challenging these religious errors, which can be grouped in three categories. First, there was the error/idol of land. Second, there was an error/idol of liturgy. And third, there was the error/idol of the "law of Moses." Land, liturgy and law.

In Acts 6:14 we are told that Stephen was being accused of blasphemy by changing the customs of Moses, which made the religious leaders angry. Stephen was proclaiming the goodness of God in Christ while speaking bad about the land, declaring that God was showing His grace and mercy to people in foreign lands. These leaders believed God was only concerned about the people of Israel who lived in God's Promised Land. What had been intended to be God's gift was now an idol, and the Israelites even saw their status of being chosen as a mandate to oppose those in other nations.

We in America have also been greatly blessed by God, but this "land theology" can hurt us as well. We can believe we're the only nation God loves, the only nation He has blessed. We're experiencing favor beyond anything the world has ever seen, which can lead us to think we're the greatest nation. And yes, this is a wonderful nation, but God loves all nations just as He loves ours. He is moving in other countries in ways we don't realize. If we allow our patriotism to move beyond our theology, we may end up in the same trouble as the Sanhedrin.

Second, their liturgy was also a problem. In Acts 7:44–50, Stephen said:

<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?"

These leaders believed they had the only place where God resided—a temple they had built with their own hands—and they were now telling people who could and could not come into that temple. While it's true that the temple was given by God to be a blessing to Israel, they had made it an idol.

Stephen reminded them that at one point the temple was simply a tent that was carried around by the people of God and in which God's presence dwelled. God's presence was also in Solomon's temple and in Herod's temple. But that presence is not consigned to a certain building—it is rather found in the hearts of men who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. No longer is there a place that can be called holy—rather, our hearts themselves have been made holy. We are the temple of the living God. God goes with us wherever we go, which is why we no longer need a physical building called the temple where we must make sacrifices to God. Jesus became the perfect and final Sacrifice on our behalf and now His Spirit resides in every child of God.

The final error in man-made religion was the law. They had made the law into something it was not intended to be. The law was supposed to protect and guide God's people, but it had now become the litmus test by which it was determined whether a person was or was not eligible for God's grace. If people did enough and prayed enough and gave enough, then God would be pleased and grant them eternal life. But the law was never to be that.

So whether it was the land, the liturgy or the law, these are all God's gifts to us so we might experience His blessing. But instead of worshiping Him and thanking Him for these things, we turned them into gods. Stephen's words to us in our day aren't so much because we struggle with a land theology or liturgy or law issues. Man-made religion is, as Martin Luther says, a factory that makes idols. We have taken other good gifts from God and have gradually elevated them to idol status in our lives. Stephen reminds us that man-made religion is challenged and shut down by the gospel.

Why is this so important? God's gifts remind us that even though we enjoy giving and receiving gifts at Christmastime, Jesus is the real Gift. That's why the advancement of the gospel is our true goal and focus. No matter how great something is in this world, nothing can substitute for the gift of Christ this Christmas.

### **Gospel-centered preaching calls out man's rebellion.**

After speaking of Abraham, Joseph and Moses, Stephen then introduces another figure in verses 51–52: Jesus Christ. He tells his audience that in each case, the person was rejected. Since the Fall, there hasn't been a single day when humans have not rejected God for their own desires. Instead of embracing God's purposes, each of us have told God, "I can do it better myself."

The religious leaders believed they loved the patriarchs and prophets, but Stephen reminds them that as good a son as Joseph was, the patriarchs wanted him dead. Seeing that God's grace was on him and that he was favored by their father, his brothers trafficked him into Egyptian slavery.

Then how could we say a bad thing about Moses? Stephen writes this, beginning in verse 20:

<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.

We know the story of how Pharaoh's daughter found Moses in the Nile River and adopted him as her own son. But somehow Moses knew he was an Israelite:

<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.

Stephen then says about Moses that God had given a deliverer to Israel—a son of Pharaoh. What greater deliverer could there have been? And what did the people of Israel do? They said, "We don't want you. Get out of here." Then, after living for 40 years in the Midian wilderness, Moses heard God speak this from a burning bush: "*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.*"

Stephen continues in verse 35, "*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.*" But when Moses arrived in Egypt, he was again rejected by the people. He eventually led them out toward the Promised Land, but again the people rejected him with grumblings and murmuring.

Stephen reminds his audience that no matter whom God sends to His people, they reject His messengers in unbelief. He describes them in verse 51 as a "*stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, [who] always resist the Holy Spirit.*" He then asks them, "*Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?*" You persecuted all of them! That's why we call Jeremiah the weeping prophet—because every time he opened his mouth they beat him up.

It's one thing to reject a prophet, but these people had rejected Jesus—, "*the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered*" (verse 52). And there are some today who are rejecting the very message I'm preaching. Humanity in its sin rebels against God, rejecting the gospel every time. We need God's Spirit to do a miracle in our lives.

### **Gospel-centered preaching causes various reactions.**

Gospel-centered preaching also usually yields varied results. Stephen preached the same gospel Peter did in Acts 2 and Peter's message brought 3,000 people into glory. Stephen preached the same gospel Philip will preach in Acts 8 that brings myriads of Samaritans to Christ and in another instance leads an Ethiopian eunuch to salvation. In fact, Luke tells us that when Philip preached, it brought joy to the city. But when Stephen preached it, no joy was found. They were enraged, grinding their teeth.

What does that look like? Some of you may remember when your pastor was invited to pray in a special session of the Illinois General Assembly in Springfield. Before I went up to pray, the speaker of the house said to me, "I see you're an evangelical pastor. I want to make things abundantly clear. I'm Jewish and I think it is wrong for you to share the name of Jesus in your prayer. It's offensive to me." I said, "Well, that's too bad. Your boss, the governor, invited me, knowing who I am and what I believe. I'm sorry, but I will preach, and I will pray, and I will proclaim the name of Jesus when I pray."

As he stood behind me, you could audibly hear him grumbling while I was praying. He was effectively gnashing his teeth—why? Because he hated the very mention of Jesus. I looked back at the written prayer I gave, and I spoke Jesus’ name 27 times.

When the name of Jesus is proclaimed, some will get angry. Some will pick up stones. Some will inflict harm on us. Then sometimes and in some moments—if we’re faithful—we’ll even be put to death. Stephen, with great faithfulness, was willing to die for the gospel.

We must also realize that the gospel changes lives. Notice the mention of Saul, who *“approved of his execution”* (Acts 8:1). He was holding the people’s jackets during the stoning, then later would ravage the church. He heard Stephen’s message and saw his life, but one day, on the road to Damascus he would bow his knee to Jesus as well. The gospel changes lives.

### **Gospel-centered preaching celebrates when people respond in faith.**

As Stephen is being pelted with rocks, he looks to heaven and sees a glorious picture. He doesn’t see Jesus seated, as the New Testament says is His place at the Father’s right hand (Hebrews 8:1 10:12, 12:2). Rather, He is standing. Why? My scholarly answer is this: I don’t know.

But we can imagine why He stood. Why did people stand in that day, and why do we stand now? It’s to honor those who have done something well. I could be wrong, but I believe Jesus Christ stood because He was saying, “Stephen, well done, good and faithful servant.”

When we boldly stand for Jesus, when we boldly proclaim His name—whether He’s sitting or standing—we can believe that Jesus and the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us (Hebrews 12:1) are celebrating our faithful courage. This should spur us on to preach the good news of Christ this coming week. Are we preaching gospel-centered sermons? That’s the first question.

But even more importantly, are we living gospel-centered sermons? I found a poem that will close this well. It wasn’t just Stephen’s oratory skills that brought him to this victory, but it was also the life he lived.

#### Live Your Creed

I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day  
I’d rather one should walk with me than merely point the way  
The eye is a better pupil, more willing than the ear  
Fine counsel is confusing, but examples are always clear.  
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds  
For to see a good put in action is what everybody needs.

[by Edgar A. Guest]

This is a reminder for your preacher today, that I should always be faithful to preach gospel-centered sermons. But there’s an application for each of us to live this out in the comings and goings of our lives, whether in public or in our private lives. May we live like Stephen and preach like Stephen, then one day, like Stephen, may we be celebrated for the good work we’ve done.

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