

## Don't Go There – Acts 6:8-8:3 (Part 1)

Before we get going, I want to share a post-baptism testimony from the Register last week, written by one of the guys who was baptized.

*Saturday night I was baptized here at Harvest and I just wanted to take a minute to say thank you to everyone involved with the baptism. The amount of love that was felt was overpowering! For that I am thankful. Praise God for that.*

*I didn't realize how big of a deal baptism was going to be in my life until I was standing in the water. It just hit. What a milestone in my life. I am thankful I was able to share it with you. I cannot wait for what God has in store for me in the future. Amen.*

What a privilege to have a ringside seat to see God at work.

➤ **Acts 6 (Intro).** We're on a journey through the book of Acts, where the church was exploding and problems were surfacing.

Like the one at the beginning of chapter 6 where people were falling through the cracks. So the Apostles chose 7 men to help them, including Stephen.

A man *full of faith and the Holy Spirit* it says in v5.

And everyone lived happily ever after. Or not.

Because v8 says . . .

*[8] And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. [9] Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) [probably comprised of slaves who had been freed], and [the synagogue] of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians [both from North Africa], and [the synagogue] of those from Cilicia and Asia [Southern Europe], rose up and disputed with Stephen [over theological matters as we'll see]. [10] But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

Truth is like that, isn't it? It's overwhelming and compelling. Especially when spoken with *wisdom and the Spirit*.

*[11] Then they secretly instigated men [prompted them, egged them on] who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." [12] And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council [the Sanhedrin, the religious and quasi-political seat of power], [13] and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place [the temple] and the law [the Law of Moses], [14] for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us [in the Law]." [15] And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. [Stephen's godliness was unmistakable.]*

And their words were partially true.

The Law was no longer the means by which people got right and stayed right with God.

A guideline for living, yes. But not a means of justification.

And the temple was no longer the primary place of worship. Or the place of God's presence. We worship him in spirit. Independent of place. (Jn 4:23-24)

So their words were *partially* true, but taken out of context and rendered blasphemous.

Part of a sinister plot to oppose Stephen's witness and shut him down.

Which brings us to our first take away:

**Don't be surprised at the lengths people will go to oppose your witness. (6:8-15)**

We've seen it before and we'll see it again. It's one of the reasons the book of Acts was written. That we might marvel at how God *worked* in the face of opposition . . .

And persevere in the face of our own.

➤ The worst of which, is shootings in places of worship. Like the one that just occurred in the synagogue in Pittsburg.

They may not know *Jesus*, which should burden our heart to no end, but an attack on *one* place of worship is a threat to *all* places of worship. Ours included.

And we not only need to pray for the families and friends of those who remain, especially that they would *turn* to Jesus and embrace him as their Messiah . . .

But we need to pray for God's protection. And stand up for one another.

Because anti-Semitism is on the rise again, and it's wrong. Sinful.

And doubly so for Christians. Hate for Jews is hate for Jesus. Hello.

➤ But it's not just hate for Jews that's on the rise, it's hate for Christians.

And the lengths people will go to *oppose* us is also on the rise. From suing us to shooting us.

Remember Sutherland Springs, TX? Where 26 people were killed in a small Baptist church last year? It was this weekend.

And what about believers in other parts of the world who suffer opposition *daily*?

I didn't plan this, but this is the *International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church*.

A day set aside to pray for oppressed Christians around the world. And they need it.

➤ I was listening to a podcast this week called *The World and Everything In It*, where they interviewed David Curry, the President and CEO of *Open Doors USA*.

Open Doors is a ministry that tracks the persecution and oppression of believers around the world, and ranks the countries from worst to best.

And among other things, he said that Christian persecution is increasing, and religious freedom decreasing.

Like Northern Nigeria. Where 10 Christians, plus or minus, are killed for their faith every single month. By adherents to radical Islam.

In parts of India on the other hand, it's *Hindu* extremism that opposes Christians and their witness. In China, it's Communism.

In North Korea, the worst in the world, it's the government.

Opposition to our witness is everywhere.

And we not only shouldn't be surprised, but we should remember and *pray* for those opposed. That's what **Heb 13:3** says.

*Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*

Since we too are part of the body of Christ, *connected* to them, we should pray for them.

➤ All that to say, and here's the bottom line, don't be surprised when *you* need the prayer.\*\*\*\*\*

Because people have been going to great lengths to oppose our witness for 2000 years.

And it's not going to stop until Jesus returns.

From the emotional and verbal opposition of v8-15, to the extreme opposition of harm and murder. It happened then and it happens now.

All part of the opposition to our witness that started with Cain, continued with Stephen, and happens to us.

Don't be surprised. Because truth offends, truth exposes, truth convicts.

And when it does, the claws come out. Along with innuendos spoken in secret and ill-motives imputed at will.

May God protect us, but we live in a fallen world. Where some people *hate* the things we stand for, *hate* the one we worship, and stop at nothing to oppose our witness.

Don't be surprised. That's the first take away from Stephen's experience. (**Summary**)

➤ The next 4, come from chapter 7. And to see them, you need to know where Stephen is *going* in his thoughts, before he gets there. You need to know his bottom line.

Which is difficult because of the *length* of this speech. And as you read it, it's easy to think that he's just waxing eloquent or something. He's not.

He's very intentionally making some very strong points, to support his main point in v51-53. So let's *start* there, and then come back and work our way through it.

➤ [51] *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. [52] 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, [53] you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."* You who knew better.

And yet you're just like them. V51 – *As your fathers did, so do you*. That's the point of his entire speech, his entire sermon.

"You're stubborn, sinful, deaf to the truth, and resistant to God." Talk about speaking the truth that convicts and offends.

"As your fathers were, so are you." *That's* where he's going. And that's the point he's making all along. "You're just like them."

➤ With that in mind then, go back to 7:1. Stephen is before the council . . .

[7:1] *And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"* [These accusations of blasphemy and falsehood?] [2] *And* [instead of saying "no" and leaving it at that, he leaned into the *core* of the problem, and addressed their heart.] *Stephen said:*

*"Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia [modern day Iraq], before he lived in Haran [modern day Syria], [3] and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' [4] Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans [Mesopotamia] and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. [5] 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.*

[6] *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 [referring to Egypt]. [7] 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after*

*that they shall come out and worship me in this place.'*

[8] *And he gave him the covenant of circumcision [the Abrahamic covenant; that he would bless him and make of him a great nation]. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day [he kept the covenant, by faith], and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs [the original leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel; to say that God was carrying *out* his promise of blessing].*

➤ Stephen's like, "You are so privileged. So blessed."

"You *have* what Abraham only dreamed of – a land to dwell in and a place of worship."

"You're the very recipients of what was promised."

"And yet you're missing the point. In your complacency, your presumption, your sense of entitlement because of your *bloodline* connection . . .

You're missing the fact that you are blessed to *be* a blessing. And you're missing the key to it all – Jesus. Faith in Jesus. You're missing it!"

That's what Stephen's getting at. Because he recounts what Abraham *didn't* have, like in v5, in the midst of what the council *did* have.

Abraham was only *promised* a blessing, while they *received* it.

They *had* the land. They *had* the temple. They *had* a nation. Which put *them* in the catbird seat. The place of privilege.

And yet, they were complacent about it. Causing them to miss the *point* of their blessing – to *be* a blessing. To love the Lord and love their neighbor.

To live for him and him alone. That was the point. And they were missing it.

**Don't miss the point of God's blessing because you're complacent. (7:1-8)**

That's the second take away. Which applies to *every* area of our lives, but especially to our salvation, our life in Christ.

Just because you're saved, doesn't mean you can be complacent. Doesn't mean you can treat it like fire insurance and do whatever you want.

Or drift along and do nothing at all.

➤ We took a rafting trip last summer that had a few level 4 rapids in it. Meaning we were tossed about like rag dolls on a few occasions. And a couple of us nearly fell out. We found very quickly that level 4 rapids were nothing to fool around with.

But *equally* dangerous, were the lesser rapids that we took for granted. And ended up going through *backwards* on one occasion, because we were a bit complacent.

We let our guard down in the smooth water and entered the rough water a bit off.

The result of which, is that we got stuck in one of those eddy currents on the downstream side of a big rock, and couldn't get out.

We were paddling like crazy, water was pouring over us, and we didn't budge for about 30 seconds. And I was thinking, "This is it. Game over, man. Game over."

All because we were complacent.

We'd been on the river for several hours, and kind of had the unspoken attitude of, "We got this. It's not a level 4." And it nearly got us.

The point being, don't miss the point of God's blessing in giving you a raft of life. Of saving your soul and making you whole.

Don't miss the point of that blessing. Especially in *smooth* water. Smooth times.

You still have to paddle. You still have to navigate. You still have to pay attention.

➤ Are we safe and secure from all alarm? Absolutely.

But we still have to be sober and vigilant. Because the days are evil, shootings and all.

We still have to be watchful, because there's more to come. More days *and* more evil.

And we still have to be intentional. Because when things are good we tend to get complacent, don't we?

We tend to relax, let our guard down, take God for granted.

Which is a recipe for disaster because the Christian life is not a walk in the park or a lazy river. It's a journey. A battle. A race.

Where we *train* ourselves for godliness. Intentionally, faithfully, constantly.

So that we *win* each day instead of lose. Move *ahead* instead of fall back. Conquer instead of *be* conquered. Complacency is not an option in the raft of salvation.

➤ I'm reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* right now, that allegory of the Christian life written by John Bunyan in 1678 . . .

And I love the example of "Christian" and Hopeful," the two main characters.

Because they're just like me.

When things are good on their journey to the Celestial City, they tend to be complacent, taking the blessings they receive for granted.

And often times learn the *hard* way, that they were missing the *point* of those blessings.

That God doesn't save us to make life all about ourselves, but about *him* and others.

Loving him and loving others. Living for him and *servicing* others. Just like the council should have done.

So whatever you do, don't go there. *Count* your many blessings. Name them. One by one.

Over and over again in the course of your life.

And be sure to include the blessing of your salvation. So as not to be complacent, miss the point, and make shipwreck of your faith. **(Summary)**

➤ Don't be surprised at the lengths people will go to oppose your witness, and don't miss the point of God's blessing because you're complacent.

Be sober, be vigilant, and *be* a blessing.

Pray – Lord, forgive us for taking you for granted. Forgive us for presuming on your grace. And forgive us for forgetting our brothers and sisters around the world who suffer opposition. Watch over them. Give them great joy in believing and strength to persevere. And comfort those in Pittsburg. Draw them to yourself through faith in Jesus. And keep us from complacency. We don't want to miss *you*, and we don't want to miss the point. Every blessing you pour out, we'll turn back to praise.