

May 19, 2024  
As You Are Going: A Stiff-Necked People  
Acts 7:1-53  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Intro: Theme – Have you ever woke up in the morning with a stiff neck? Nothing is more annoying than waking up and feeling that painful “crick in the neck,” as we used to say down south, knowing that you have to go the rest of your day dealing with it, especially having to look over your shoulder while driving. Because of the annoyance that comes with a painful, stiff neck, it has become a way in which we describe people that are just plain hard to deal with, we say they are a “pain in the neck.” Did you know that over 20 times in the OT, God describes Israel as a “stiff-necked” people? This doesn’t mean the Israelites were all walking around with stiff necks, or even that they were a pain in God’s neck, even though that’s closer to the idea. No, the term meant something entirely different. It was originally used to describe an ox that refused to be directed by a farmer. When a farmer harnessed a team of oxen to a plow, he directed them by poking them lightly with a sharp spike, known as an ox goad, to make them pick up speed or turn. An ox that refused to be directed by the farmer was referred to as “stiff-necked.” A stiff-necked animal, or a person, is one who refuses to change direction, in order to, take a different path.

Now, we’ll see this idea play out in the scripture today. Our text this morning is too long to read all the way through and have you all stand, so I invite you to turn to Acts 7:1-53, and we will work our way through this passage, reading a few key verses and trying to understand why Stephen said what he said. I encourage you to read the entire chapter at some point this week in preparation for next week.

As you make your way there, let me remind you of what is happening here. You all remember Stephen. He was one of the deacons appointed in Acts ch.6, and we read last week how he had been seized by a group of Jews who belonged to the Synagogue of the Freedmen because of his “Christian” influence that he was having on the people as he is described in Acts 6:8, as being “full of grace and power,” and he “was doing great wonders and signs among the people.” And when they couldn’t win an open debate with him, in their anger, they instigated some people to bear false witness against Stephen and said that they “heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and the law and against God and his Temple.” After they seized him, they brought him before the council of the Jewish leaders, known as the Sanhedrin, and it’s important for us to remember, this is the same council which oversaw the trial of Jesus and the same group Peter and John stood before in the couple occasions we have already seen in the Book of Acts in chs. 4 and 5.

So we pick up where we left off last week in Acts 7:1 and right away we see the high priest gives Stephen a chance to defend himself when he asks the question, “Are these things so?” And Stephen does the same thing we have already seen Peter do in his sermons found in Acts, he tells the story of the history of Israel. He starts with Abraham in vs. 1–8. Then in vs. 9–16 he speaks of Joseph and how the Israelites came to Egypt. Then he spends a longest amount of time on Moses in vs. 17–44. And he closes with a brief reference to Joshua and David and Solomon in vs. 45–50 in reference to the movement of the Tent of Meeting and the building of the Temple. Finally, he draws his conclusion from this history in Acts 7:51–53 when he says directly to the council, and I’ll call your attention here as kind of our theme verses for the

morning, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

So, what was Stephen's defense exactly? He had been charged with speaking against Moses and the law, and against God and the temple. His defense is the truth, that the history of God's dealings with Israel proves the exact opposite of the charges against him. It is Israel as a people that have stiffened their neck against God and resisted the Holy Spirit. They persecuted the prophets of God, and they killed Jesus the Son of God. They are the ones who need to give an account, not Stephen. Now you can imagine how this went over with the council and we will look at their response next week.

But for our purposes this morning, I think there are two main truths in Stephen's history lesson or message if you will. First, we should be encouraged by the truth of God's patience with a rebellious people. That God is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and forgives iniquity and transgression and sin" as we read in Exodus 34:6-7. He is not eager to punish, but he is eager to forgive the sinner who repents. The second truth is a warning, the truth that there is an end to God's patience. There is a resistance to the Holy Spirit that goes so long that God hands a person over to it. We see this in vs. 42 of this chapter, "God turned and gave them over to worship the host of heaven." The truth is that we can resist him so long and want other things so much more than we want him, that he finally turns away, stops convicting, stops giving the gracious feelings of guilt, and hands us over entirely to our sin like is described in Romans 1 where we're told on three separate occasions that, "God gave them over to the lusts of their hearts, to dishonorable passions, and to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." Remember that both the promises of God's patience as well as the warnings of his judgment come out of his grace. As we're told in 2 Pet. 3:9, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

Now, with those two truths as the backdrop of our passage, let's work our way through Stephen's defense and look at the encouragement and warning from Israel's history where we see not only their resistance and rebellion, but also God's mercy. He begins his defense in vs. 2 where he says, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'" And according to vs. 4, Abraham makes it half way to the promised land and settles in Haran. But God is merciful and does more than just tell Abraham to go on to the promised land, he actually moves him. Look at the end of vs. 4, "And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living."

Stephen's point is that God's mercy begins with choosing their father Abraham out of all the peoples on the earth to inherit the promised land. And God's patience is displayed in Abraham's life as God moves him to the promised land when he had stopped half way in Haran. How often do we sense God's calling on our lives to do something only to stop half way when things get hard and say to ourselves, "this is good enough." (ex. Abraham & Hagar) But God will have the final say and bring us to what he has called us to, even with all the struggles, according to his good purpose and plan.

Stephen then turns to Joseph and tells how he came to Egypt from the promised land in vs. 9, "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt." So, here is another instance

of resisting and rebelling against the will of God. If we're honest, we can see this same attitude a lot of times in our own lives. Joseph's brothers were jealous that God was speaking to them through Joseph and even implying that they would someday bow down to Joseph. But Stephen goes on to point out in vs. 9-10 that, "God was with him 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." In other words, through the jealousy and resistance of Joseph's brothers, God was patient and merciful, and kept on working for their rescue. They rejected God's word in Joseph's dreams, but God, instead of judging them, used their very sin to bring rescue to them when they ran out of food and had to come begging to Egypt and their hated brother. This is captured well in Joseph's words to his brothers in the familiar verse Gen. 50:20, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." What a good and merciful God we serve.

Stephen spends the most time, in this the longest sermon recorded in Acts, on the story Moses. Most likely because one of the charges against him was that, "he had [spoken] blasphemous words against Moses and the law." He tells us that God raised Moses up as a deliverer for his people in Egypt, but when he makes his first appearance to help his people, they resist him, as they did Joseph. (killing the Egyptian & breaking up the fight) And so Moses flees into exile in the land of Midian and he remained there for 40 years. But because of God's patience and mercy, and because he is always faithful to his promises, he sends Moses back again to his people. Look at vs. 34. Stephen records God's words to Moses, "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." And in vs. 36 we see Moses, the one whom they had rejected, is the same one God used to save his people: "This man [Moses] led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years."

But, in spite of all of God's patience and mercy, vs. 39-41 Stephen continues with another sad part in Israel's history as he tells of their idolatry at the foot of Mt. Sinai as Moses went up to receive the Law from God. "Our fathers refused to obey him [Moses], but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 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.' And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands." Stephen is pointing out that for many of the Israelites, God's patience came to an end at this point. Again, the verse I mentioned earlier, vs. 42 says, "God turned and gave them over to worship the host of heaven." In other words, since they rejected the true worship of God and wanted idols made with their own hands, God gives them over to their own desires and everything that comes along with it, namely, judgment.

But even then, in the midst of this warning, Stephen points out that God did not stop showing mercy to all of them. In vs. 45 it says that the Israelites "dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers." So even after their unfaithfulness in the wilderness, God, again in his faithfulness, fought for Israel and gave them the promised land through the conquest of Joshua.

Then Stephen concludes his snapshot of Israel's history by bringing up the temple, the other accusation against him. He points out that King David asked, but that his son Solomon was the one who built God a house in v. 47, the temple they prized so dearly and he says in vs. 48, "Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" [Read]

And right here we get to the heart of Stephen's warning to not only the Sanhedrin, but for us as well. What was the root sin in all of Israel's resistance and rebellion? Why did they resist the Holy Spirit as he says in vs. 51? There is a parallel phrase in vs. 41 and vs. 48 that I don't think is a coincidence. In vs. 41, Stephen says that they offered sacrifices to the golden calf and "were rejoicing in the works of their hands." And in vs. 48 he says, "The Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands."

The root sin of many in Israel was that they got their joy and fulfillment from what they could achieve with their own hands, namely as Stephen points out here, the temple. They got their joy from themselves and not from God. The temple in Jerusalem had become for many in Israel a symbol of what they could achieve, the work of their hands, really it had become an idol. And, therefore, the worship there had become a subtle form of self-worship, just going through the motions. They were very religious and they said and did all the right things, but it all came from uncircumcised hearts and stiffened necks.

When Jesus said he would destroy the temple and build another in three days "not made with hands" (Mark 14:58), not only did he mean his body, but through his death and resurrection he would expose and destroy this kind of fake religion. Stephen saw this clearly and calls the religious leaders to task for failing to see the error of their ways. We too, need to see through the façade of this type of fake religion, just simply going through the motions, and strive to live our whole lives in direct obedience to God and his Word.

Now we just covered a lot of material, but looking at it from this point of view I think we can find a few points of application that Stephen was trying to get across to his hearers. First, we should rejoice in God's mercy toward sinners. God continually pursued Israel even when they weren't pursuing him. And this is the third time recorded for us in Acts that the Sanhedrin themselves had heard the gospel and had an opportunity to repent. They heard Peter preach after they arrested him and John in ch.4. They again heard Peter and the apostles offer them repentance and forgiveness of sins in ch. 5. Now, again, here in our passage today they hear Stephen describe God's gracious dealings with Israel in spite of their resistance and rebellion. If God had given them just one chance to repent after crucifying Jesus, he would have been abundant in mercy. But to give them three opportunities, at least recorded opportunities, shows us just how patient and merciful he really is with us.

All of us who have experienced God's salvation know that it was in spite of, not because of, anything in us. Like Abraham, if God had not sovereignly called us by His grace, we would have lived and died in a pagan land, separated from a Holy God. This same grace is seen throughout all the examples given in our passage today. The question is: Do you rejoice daily in God's grace and mercy to you, a sinner? If you do, then the mission that we have been talking about should become a priority and you will want to share with others his grace and mercy toward them whose eyes are still blinded to see it.

Second, we should guard against taking God's grace for granted. In agreement with Stephen's sermon, the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 10:6-10 that Israel's history should be a warning to us not to long for evil things, or to be idolaters and to grumble as they did. It is a misunderstanding and misapplication of God's grace to think that we can go on sinning and just keep on claiming his grace. Paul puts it another way in Romans 6:1-2, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be!"

Yes, God is gracious and merciful to us, but this isn't a license to sin. The Israelites felt that because they had God with them, symbolized by the Temple, that they could live as they pleased and God would always take care of them. They had forgotten his promises that if they

disobeyed the law he had given to Moses that he would hand them over to their enemies in judgment. Sin has consequences. But even then, God brought them back again and again. But there is coming a time, when Jesus comes again, when those who continue to reject him with no longer have the opportunity repent.

Thirdly, we should guard against going through the outward motions of worship. Israel was God's chosen nation. They had His covenant promises, the law given at Mt. Sinai, the tabernacle, and then the temple in all its splendor. God had driven out the pagan nations and given Israel the promised land. Yet in spite of all this, their hearts were far from God. They had a history of resistance and rebellion that led them to kill the prophets God sent to them, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Like Israel, God has given us so many things. We live in a nation founded upon biblical principles. We have the Bible in our language in multiple translations. We have freedom to worship without persecution. We can hear the Bible taught to us not only in person, but through social media, podcasts and other platforms. And yet it is so easy to simply fall into the trap of going through the motions of Christianity: coming to church, singing the songs, and even reading our bibles, but not living it out in our daily lives. The point Israel had missed, and we far too often miss as well, is that the building that we meet in is not God's house, as in it's the only place where God is located. The teachings of Scripture is that our bodies are the temple of the living God, and so we must walk in holiness before the Lord, taking what we learn together here out into a world that needs to hear the good news.

Finally, and this is kind of an aside but worth noting here. We should be more concerned with the truth than about our protection. Notice, Stephen does not defend himself with this sermon even though his life is literally on the line. His approach is to let God's truth speak for itself come what may. He identifies with them repeatedly throughout the sermon. Eight times he refers to "our fathers." But when he gets to the application at the end, he shifts to "your fathers." He wants them to feel the guilt of their sin of resisting and rebelling against the will of God, specifically, in the murder of Jesus. Only when they have been convicted in their hearts will they see their need for God's forgiveness and salvation.

And while we should treat each person we speak to with dignity and grace, and certainly follow the biblical principle of speaking the truth in love, we also should not be so focused only on the love of God, to the point that the person never comes under conviction of sin. In the words of John Piper, "Until a sinner feels the weight of their guilt before a holy God, salvation is a nice idea, but it's not a necessity." Often, we don't talk about the hard parts of the gospel because we don't want to offend people and we want them to like us. But if we avoid the topics of our sin and God's judgment, we have not proclaimed the gospel, we have simply comforted folks with a lie.

The truth is that God is a God "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, showing faithfulness to thousands and forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." He does not turn from us or stop pursuing us because we have sinned once or twice or ten times or seventy times or seventy times seven times. If you can still repent, he is still pursuing you. But the flip side of that coin is a merciful warning, do not follow Israel's example of resistance and rebellion. Do not be like a snuff-necked ox, refusing to be directed from your path of sin that leads to destruction. But follow the loving calls of your merciful Father to the path of righteousness that leads to eternal life. Let's pray.