



Explosive Impact • Maintaining An Eternal Perspective • ACTS 6:8-15, ACTS 7:54-60, ACTS 8:1-8 • 09/30/2018

Main Point

God calls us to maintain an eternal perspective on life so that we might boldly share our faith regardless of the consequences.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How do you think other people viewed you before you came to faith in Christ?

How are you different now than you were before coming to faith in Christ? How so?

Unbelievers seek worldly possessions and pleasures. Jesus wants us to avoid a mind-set fashioned after such a worldview. God calls His people to touch the world around them for Christ's sake. Because of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, we must stand firm for Him. To do this, we cannot seek the things of this world; we must keep an eternal perspective.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Have a volunteer read Acts 6:8-15.

What attributes of Stephen are evident in these verses?

What do you consider the decisive factor in Stephen's ability to best his opponents in this discussion /debate (v. 10)? What implication does this have for us?

Wisdom, faith, grace, power, and the Spirit's presence marked Stephen's life and character. Because of God's favor and power, Stephen consistently performed great wonders and signs among the people. To this point, only the apostles had performed such deeds. God was working through Stephen in unusual and powerful ways, but the synagogue's members tried to refute the gospel Stephen proclaimed.

Explain the false witnesses' contemptuous reference to Jesus and their charge against Him. How did this result in charges being leveled against Stephen?

The accusers said they heard Stephen speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. The penalty for blaspheming God was death by stoning. The noticeable change in Stephen's face (v. 15) gave him the undivided attention of the Sanhedrin. He proceeded to boldly witness concerning the gospel being for all people everywhere.

| Briefly Summarize Acts 7:1-53 using the commentary.

What were the three main points of Stephen's speech?

Stephen made three main points in his speech before the Sanhedrin: 1. God's acts in the world are evident in Israel's history (vv. 2-43). 2. God isn't confined to the temple, and people's worship isn't dependent on it (vv. 44-50). 3. Throughout their history, Israel rejected God and rebelled against Him. Jesus' death was one of those times (vv. 51-53).

How did Stephen prevent his opponents from putting him on the defensive?

Why do you think he bluntly leveled serious charges against them? What did he want to accomplish?

Stephen boldly took the offensive, describing his opponents as stubborn and rejecting the Spirit's leading. The religious leaders followed their ancestors' example by murdering Jesus, and they failed to keep the law they professed to revere. Stephen declared that God never had limited Himself to one land or to a particular place, such as the temple. He well may have been the first Christian to grasp clearly God's intention that Gentiles as well as Jews receive the good news of salvation in Christ.

| Have a volunteer read Acts 7:54-60.

How would you paraphrase the religious leaders' response in verse 54? What parallels are evident between Jesus' death and Stephen's death?

How is the Spirit's presence emphasized? What do you think was the purpose of Stephen's vision?

Enraged in general by Stephen's sermon and in particular by his charge that they had received but had not kept the law, the Sanhedrin members stoned Stephen, who responded by kneeling down in an attitude of prayer and worship of his Lord. After he had prayed, he died. The phrase fell asleep is a softer expression for dying. It also expresses the Christians' assurance of resurrection. Stephen died with a vision of His exalted Lord in his mind and immediately stepped into His presence.

| Have a volunteer read Acts 8:1-8.

Events surrounding Stephen's testimony and murder led to severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem. All believers except the apostles were scattered to nearby regions. Hence the persecution helped spread the gospel to surrounding areas such as Judea and Samaria.

Read Acts 1:8. What is the connection between Jesus' command and the events of Acts 8:1-4?

According to verse 4, what effect did the persecution and scattering of the early church have on the believers' faith? What can we learn from their example?

What do you know about Samaria from other sections of the New Testament (See John 4 and Luke 10)?

Popular opinion held that Samaritans were second-class citizens, a mixed race of Jews and foreigners who inhabited the land after the Assyrian conquest (see 2 Kings 17:24), and who were unclean and unfit for worship in the temple. Their "uncleanness" was thought to be passed through physical contact, so most Jews avoided them entirely. Philip's ministry to Samaria marked a significant step for the church, for it indicated that old biases had no place in Christianity, something Jesus Himself modeled.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Do you have difficulty being bold? Why? How do we balance boldness with humility?

Why is it often easier to see new circumstances as unwelcome changes rather than as opportunities?

Have any of your circumstances—job, family, friendships, etc.—changed recently? If so, what new opportunities might exist for you to spread the gospel?

Pray

Close with a prayer of encouragement for your group, challenging them to pursue boldness this week. Thank God for the examples of Stephen and others who show us how to live with zeal for the gospel.

Commentary

| Acts 7:1-53

7:2-53 Stephen recited how God had been at work from earliest times with His appointed people, Israel. The authenticity of his speech has been called into question because the ideas he expressed about the temple—that God was not confined to a single spot (v. 48)—seem to reflect later thought, especially that which developed after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. But there was a tradition extending from the Old Testament prophets (see vv. 49-50 citing Isa. 66:1-2, as one example) on to early Christian thinkers (e.g., Paul in Acts 17) that said God could not be confined to a particular location. Stephen's speech is similar to Paul's in Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41).

7:3 Stephen cited Gen. 12:1, in which God directed Abraham to leave his home in Haran and go to the land that God would give him. In essence, this was the beginning of Israel.

7:5 Though Abraham had no children at the time, God promised to give his descendants land as a possession. Thus it was fundamentally on an act of trust (faith) that the nation of Israel had its beginning.

7:6-7 Stephen recalled Gen. 15:13-14, where God foretold Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved in a foreign country (Egypt) before they would come out and worship in the promised land. Thus God's promise of blessing came with an equally sure promise of suffering.

7:21-22 Moses, though born to Jewish parents, was reared by Pharaoh's daughter and educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, becoming powerful in his speech and actions. When God called Moses (see Ex. 3:1-4:17), it was as if a non-Hebrew became a follower of the Hebrew God. Similarly, many non-Hebrews flooded into the early church, forsaking their pagan background (see Acts 10).

7:23,30 Moses' life is divided into three periods of 40 years each—40 in Egypt, 40 in Midian, and 40 in the wilderness.

7:27-28 The Israelites initially questioned Moses as their ruler (see Ex. 2:14). Perhaps Stephen brought this up to provoke reconsideration of Israel's assessment and rejection of Jesus. They had been wrong about Moses. Might they have been wrong about Jesus too?

7:32 God revealed Himself to Moses as the God of his forefathers (see Ex. 3:6,15) at a time when, as a fugitive and exile, he desperately needed a sense of belonging and continuity.

7:33-34 Stephen and the early believers must have drawn comfort from the fact that God does not sit idly by when He sees His people being oppressed (see Ex. 3:5,7-8,10).

7:38 The “living oracles” to which Stephen referred were the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses for His people.

7:40 Though God accompanied the Hebrews in highly visible, powerful ways during their journey out from Egypt, they defied Him and asked Aaron “to make . . . gods” for them (see Ex. 32:1). Much the same thing occurred when the nation rejected Jesus, who likewise came among them as God in highly visible, powerful ways.

7:42-43 Stephen’s citation of Amos 5:25-27 was perhaps intended to convey that just as the Hebrews rejected God in the desert, suffering exile and spiritual estrangement as a consequence, so too contemporary Israel was inviting similar consequences by rejecting Jesus.

7:48-50 Though God does not “dwell in sanctuaries made with hands,” He allowed a house to be built for Him by Solomon (see Isa. 66:1-2). God accommodates Himself to us in order to make human-divine relationship possible.

7:51 The descriptors Stephen used to condemn Israel for unbelief and disobedience (“stiff-necked people” with “uncircumcised hearts and ears”) were commonly used by Old Testament prophets (see Lev. 26:41; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:26; Ezek. 44:7,9). This language was also adopted by Paul (see Rom. 2; Gal. 5) where he said unbelieving Jews relied on outward signs rather than transformed hearts. Possibly Paul was influenced by Stephen’s speech since he was present (see Acts 7:58; 8:1), but the Old Testament was the more obvious influence.

7:52 Stephen’s words would either raise the ire of his audience or break their hearts, leading to repentance. The Old Testament prophets had delivered messages similar to his own, and your fathers, Stephen said, persecuted and killed them. Worse, his audience had made themselves the betrayers and murderers of the Righteous One whom God promised through the prophets.

7:53 Even though the Old Testament does not explicitly state that the law was given by angels, Stephen, Paul (see Gal. 3:19), and the author of Hebrews (see Heb. 2:2) stated that angels were involved in the process of law giving. This likely implied that the law was especially important since God entrusted its deliverance to angels.

Reading Assignment for next week

Acts 10:17-38