

12-13-20 Mirror, Mirror on The Wall

Acts 7

When you pass by a mirror do you check yourself out? Do you quickly move away? Do you ignore it?

When we try something on, get new glasses, new hair cut we must see it for ourselves in the mirror.

The Word of God is mankind' Spiritual mirror. It doesn't show us what we look like on the outside, it shows us what we look like on the inside. Our heart, motives, intent, where we stand with God.

Last weekend we were challenged in chapter 6 to follow Stephen's example by cultivating our character, choosing to have the courage to carry on.

The religious leaders stirred up the crowd and secretly instigated false witnesses to testify against Stephen as they accused him of blasphemy against the Moses, God, the temple, and against the law.

What Stephen does in Acts 7 is masterful as he retells the history of God's people, drawing a line from Abraham to the present day. He quotes extensively from the Old Testament to show how far they had fallen. This is the longest sermon in the Book of Acts and is saturated with Scripture.

This sermon proves Stephen is not a blasphemer – rather, the Jewish leaders have blasphemed God by their behavior.

Let's lean in and watch how Stephen holds up a mirror so they can see what is right next to them. Warning, issues are closer than they appear.

Look at **verse 1: "Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"** He's basically asking this question: "How do you plead?" Literally, he's giving Stephen a chance to defend himself, but it's a set-up. If he answers "yes," he is obviously guilty. If he answers "no," they'll accuse him of lying. Interestingly, Stephen doesn't really defend himself, but rather gives a detailed exposition of Scripture that will cause them to come unglued when he's finished.

Verse 2: "And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen:" The word "brothers" would cover his peers and any spectators in the audience and "fathers" is a respectful way to address the members of the Sanhedrin.

The request for them to "listen" is the word for "hearken." It's as if he's saying, "Listen to me. Give me your attention."

Stephan goes on to remind them:

I. God Revealed Himself to Them.

- **Verses 2-8**
- The "**God of glory**" is a title of great reverence, with glory indicating the sum total of all His attributes. It literally means, "heavy, weighty and honorable."
- Note Stephen includes himself with his listeners with the use of "**our father Abraham**,".
- God revealed Himself to them (as a nation) outside of Israel, to Abraham when he was an idol worshipper, a pagan. God is not limited to one land but is at work in every land.

- Stephen is saying something like this: “You take so much pride in your land but remember your father Abraham did not own even one foot of ground in Israel.”
- Joseph was an exile in Egypt. Moses lived in Egypt and then did laps in the wilderness. Esther resided in a palace in Persia. Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were deported to Babylon. God’s presence is never limited to just one zip code.
- It wasn’t anything special about them, it was always about God. He chose them and revealed Himself to them, to reveal His power, and His grace. The Jewish leaders had grown to a place of feeling they deserved God’s favor. They were a chosen people because they were better than everyone else.
- We know it’s quite the opposite, God chooses to use the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak things to put to shame the mighty.

1 Corinthians 1:27, “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;”

- I have learned that whatever God does in and through anyone’s lives, has nothing to do with their worthiness, or their specialness. It has all to do with His power, His grace, His glory, and His plan.

Stephan goes on to remind them:

II. People Always Reject God’s Leaders

- **Verses 9-43**
- **“And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt.”**
- The brothers of Joseph, who became the patriarchs, rejected their sibling Joseph out of jealousy, selling him into Egypt. Stephen is saying, “You take pride in the patriarchs but they’re the ones who ambushed Joseph and sold him into slavery.”
- I love the rest of **verse 9, “But God was with him.”**
- God used this evil deed to great purpose, protecting Joseph the prisoner and promoting him to be prime minister, saving the Israelites from certain starvation. In verse 17 we see the people **“grew and multiplied in Egypt.”**
- Then Stephen explains how Moses was born and rescued. In **verse 22 we see he “was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and deeds.”** I find it fascinating how much space Stephen gives to Moses, perhaps in response to the charge that he blasphemed Moses. His name is used nine times in the sermon.
- Stephen’s summary divides the life of Moses into three 40-year segments. I like what D.L. Moody said about Moses: *“Moses spent 40 years thinking he was somebody; forty years learning he was nobody; and 40 years discovering what God can do with a nobody.”*
- After recounting the experience Moses had with the burning bush, Stephen points out how God sent Moses as a deliverer in verse 34. In verse 35 we see how the people responded when they rejected Moses: **“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’”**

- In **verse 37** links what Moses said in **Deuteronomy 18:15**, is to Jesus.

Deuteronomy 18:15, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear,”

- Jesus referenced this in **John 5:45-47**

John 5:45-47, “Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you— Moses, in whom you trust. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”

- Stephen is saying something like this: “If you say you follow Moses, then believe what Moses said about Jesus and follow Him.”
- God’s people persistently rejected the deliverers God sent to them.
- **Verse 38 & 39** prove this. Their fathers were given the **“living oracles”** and **“would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt,”** Their own forefathers were fickle and unfaithful.
- On top of that, they turned to an idol according to **verse 41: “And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.”**
- While Stephen’s accusers hold up their allegiance to Moses, Stephen reminds them in **verse 43** how their ancestors worshipped idols, even offering their own babies and children to Molech, the god of the Amorites. Because they had turned their backs on God and turned to idols, God sent them into exile in Babylon.

Stephan reminds them:

III. God is Honored Everywhere (44-50)

- The Jewish leaders were locked into the temple as the only place where God was to be worshipped. Stephen reminds them in verses **44-45** how God was worshipped outside Jerusalem in the tabernacle while they wandered in the wilderness. Solomon later had the privilege of constructing the Temple as a more permanent point for worship.
- In verses **49-50**, Stephen quotes from **Isaiah 66:1-2** to show the Most High cannot be contained in one building, no matter how beautiful it was:
- The sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent, Most High God who made the world and all that is in it, cannot be contained within the constraints of a building. No holy place can house His holiness because God can’t be put in a box.

Stephan is done reminding and now he moves onto the personal application points. Stephan clears the mirror and shows it to them.

This began with Stephen on trial before the Sanhedrin and it ends with the Sanhedrin on trial before Stephen. The prisoner has become the prosecutor. They are guilty of blasphemy!

Notice, Stephen moves from pointed exposition to personal application by switching from “our” to the second person plural “you” and “your.” He does this seven times in three verses.

1. YOU have ALWAYS Resisted the Lord.

- While they celebrated their special relationship with the Lord, Stephen points out how they are perpetually defiant and disobedient. **Check out verse 51:**
- They were so stiff-necked they didn't turn their heads to check their mirrors. The phrase "stiff-necked" referred to stubborn oxen who refused to surrender their necks to receive the yoke.
- Moses records similar words in **Exodus 33:3: "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."**
- We bend our wills to Him -or- God breaks our wills before Him.
- To call them "**uncircumcised in heart and ears**" was the ultimate insult because they took great pride in circumcision as the mark of their covenant relationship with God. They looked down on the uncircumcised Gentiles, even calling them dirty dogs.
- Stephen was saying they were "dirty dogs" because they were not set apart in their unclean hearts. Outwardly they might have conformed to the requirements of the Lord, but inwardly their hearts were more like the heathen. That can happen to each of us when we settle for religious ritual at the expense of relational reality.
- Stephen delivers another blow by saying, "**you always resist the Holy Spirit.**" The word "always" is emphatic, and "resist" has the idea of "rushing against in active rebellion." They had persisted in faithlessness, just like their fathers had done: "As your fathers did, so do you."
- Stephen still has more to say. In **verse 52** he reminds them their fathers in the faith persecuted the prophets who were sent to them.
- He goes for the jugular in the last part of **verse 52: "And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers."**
- Their fathers killed the prophets who announced the coming of Christ and they murdered the Messiah when He came. The title "Righteous One" referred to Jesus.

2. YOU have Rebelled against the Law.

- **Read verse 53**
- Stephan says, "You have received the law, and have not kept it. You are guilty of not only murder but blasphemy."
- If you go back to **Acts 6:13**, you'll see the religious leaders had charged Stephen with speaking words against the law of Moses. Stephen wants them to know their sins are closer than they appear.
- They received the law, but they rebelled against it. They boasted about the law but broke it all the time. Paul puts it like this in **Romans 2:23: "You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law."**
- Rather than allowing the Law to point them to their need for a Savior, they saw their lame law-keeping as good enough to please God.

After dismantling and destroying their false faith in land, leaders, and location during his pointed exposition, Stephen agitated them with personal application related to their relationship with the Lord and the Law. Now they are livid!

In **verses 54-60** we see four powerful reactions – two from the Sanhedrin and two from Stephen.

1. Rage.

• Read verse 54

- The words “cut to the heart” means they were “sawn asunder”, enraged and sliced in their souls. They were convicted but instead of repenting, they reacted with rage.
- They were furious and “gnashed at him with their teeth” a phrase that was used to describe the noise made when a pack of hungry, snarling wolves started tearing into their prey.

2. Reverence

- In stark contrast to their rage, **verse 55** describes what Stephen did.
- We learned last weekend that Stephen was a “**full**” man – he was full of wisdom, grace, faith, power, and the Holy Spirit. The word “**gazed**” means he “strained and stretched as he steadfastly looked up.” His sermon began with the God of glory in verse 2 and now he sees the “glory of God.”
- He put all this into words in **verse 56**: The word “**Look**” is used to get their attention. As he gazed at the glory of God, he described two amazing truths.
- The heavens are open. The word “**open**” is idea of unrolling. I’m reminded of what Jesus said about Himself in **John 10:9**: “**I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.**” The tense here indicates the heavens are continuously open.
- The Son of Man is standing at the right hand of God. The title “**Son of Man**” is used to describe the Messiah in **Daniel 7:13-14** and Jesus refers to Himself this way in **Matthew 26:64**: “But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”
- In this and other passages like **Ephesians 1:20** and **Hebrews 1:3**, Jesus is seen as seated at the right of God to indicate His work is finished.
- Why did Jesus stand?
- To receive Stephen’s testimony. (**Revelation 20:4**)
- To applaud and cheer for him. (**Matthew 5:10**)
- To usher him safely to Heaven. (**2 Corinthians 5:8**)
- To vindicate and honor him as we see in **Psalms 116:15**: “**Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.**”

- To welcome him home with a **“well done, good and faithful servant.” (Matthew 25:23)**
- To advocate before the Father. **Luke 12:8 says, “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.”**
- To give him the crown of life. Stephen’s name means, “a victor’s crown.” **Revelation 2:10 says, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**
- To judge those who were persecuting Stephen. **Isaiah 3:13: “The Lord has taken his place to contend; He stands to judge peoples.”**

Rage, Reverence...

3. Removal

- **Read 57-58**
- They covered their ears in an effort to avoid the truth of what Stephen was saying. Not wanting to bloody their sacred spot, they forced him outside the city and began throwing large boulders on him. To not impede their pitching arms, they took off their coats and dropped them at the feet of Saul, who eventually became known as the Apostle Paul.

4. Requests

- **Read 59-60**
- While the boulders were bouncing off his chest and sharp rocks were slicing into his scalp, Stephen made two incredible prayer requests:
- **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** This is similar to what Jesus prayed from the cross in **Luke 23:46: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”**
- **“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”** When Steven cried this out, he dropped to his knees in reverence. Jesus made a similar request in **Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”**
- After making these two requests, we read, **“And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”**
- There’s great Christian theology in these closing words. Because of the resurrection, death is like sleep for a Christian. **1 Corinthians 15:20: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** I’m reminded of what Jesus said about Lazarus after he had died in **John 11:11: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”**
- If you know Jesus Christ through the new birth, you will fall asleep here and wake up in Heaven. Jesus made this promise in **John 11:25-26: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”**

Conclusion

Gaze at God's glory...it will help you hang on. **1 Corinthians 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."**

Heaven is open...enter now before it's too late. There is a Heaven and Jesus is the only way there. Don't cover your ears or harden your heart. Surrender your stiff neck to Him right now. **John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me."**

Forgive those who have wronged you...no matter what they've done to you. If Stephen can forgive while stones were being flung into his flesh, you and I can do the same. **Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."**

Live like you're dying...because you are. Live boldly for Christ and live each day as if it were your last. And when it's your time, picture Jesus standing to welcome you home. **Psalm 90:12 says, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."**

Let's stand and prepare to sing our profession of faith. I invite you up front if you need to do business with God.