

The First Martyr

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

All right, Acts 7, verse 2. Stephen said, Brothers and sisters, hear me. 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 to the land that I will show you. 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. 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.

And God spoke to him to this effect, that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others who would enslave them and afflict them for 400 years.

But I will judge, this is the Lord, I will judge the nation that they serve, said God, and after that they will come out and worship me in this place.

[1 : 16] Verse 9, Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food.

But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit there. And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.

And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob, his father, and all his kindred, 75 persons-in-law. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers.

And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamar in Shechem. Verse 17, But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph.

He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so that they would not be kept alive. At this time, Moses was born. And he was beautiful in God's sight.

[3 : 07] And he was brought up for three months in his father's house. And when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

Verse 23, When he was 40 years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wrong, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian.

He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand. But they did not understand. And on the following day, he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them and saying, Men, your brothers, why do you wrong each other?

But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me like you killed that Egyptian yesterday?

At this retort, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. And when another 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush.

[4 : 26] When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. And as he drew near to look, there came a voice of the Lord. I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.

And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said, Take off the sandals of your feet. You remember this story? For the place where you are standing is holy ground.

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt now and have heard their groaning, and I come to deliver them. And now I send you to Egypt. 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. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years.

This is the Moses who said of the Israelites, God will raise up a prophet for you like me from your brothers. This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers.

[5 : 36] He received the living oracles, that's the law, from God that God gave to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside.

And in their hearts, they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make for us gods who will go before us. And as for this Moses who led us out of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him.

Verse 41, And they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to an idol and were rejoicing at the works of their hands. But God turned them over and gave them over to worship the host of heaven.

Jump down to verse 44. He says, Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness just as he spoke to Moses, directed him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it with Joshua who dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers.

So it was until the days of David who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was not until Solomon who built a house for him.

[6 : 49] Verse 48, But yet the Most High does not live in houses made by hands, as the prophet says. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house would you build for me? Says the Lord. Or what kind of place of my rest? Did not my hand make all those things? Verse 51, 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 ones whom you, or the righteous one whom you now have betrayed and murdered.

you received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. That is the authoritative and sufficient word of God.

May God bless the hearing and the preaching of his word. Now I know that was a lot and it is the longest sermon in Acts, so it's only going to go downhill from here.

[8 : 02] You know, you won't hear me read that long of a passage, but I trust God has it for us this morning. You know, I'll never forget our first miscarriage.

We had three, and they were all tough, but the first one flattened us. And it wasn't just the loss of this little life, you know.

This little life had begun to mean more to us than its size, or even in the days we knew about it, but it was the loss of our plans, our dreams, our hopes for this little baby, dreams of birthdays and nursery colors.

Now I didn't have any dreams of nursery colors, but the wife, Kim, did, you know, first steps, all the seasons of life. You know, I'll never forget my unemotional grandmother calling me on the phone to tell me that she too had had a miscarriage.

That's kind of the way we experienced it. It's kind of a sorority of women step forward to care for us. And my guess is that you've had quite a few of those I'll never forget moments as well.

[9 : 11] Maybe it was when that relationship suddenly ended. You weren't expecting it. You didn't want it, and it totally caught you off guard. Or maybe it was that gift that was suddenly taken away.

The new job you felt you were perfectly suited for. The friend that you'd grown close to in a short amount of time, but had suddenly no longer wanted to hang out.

You no longer talked to you. Your health. We're getting older, you know, your health used to be great. Every day you wake with a nagging pain.

I remember seeing Jeff the other day that said something like, I got hurt while sleeping. And that's what happens for old people. We didn't know we had a pain. Then we go to sleep, and it just shows up.

Maybe it was when a family member suddenly died. Often, it's not trouble that troubles. It's what trouble makes us let go of.

[10:15] Maybe of the past. Maybe of hopes and dreams. It's how trouble calls us to trust God and makes things new. This morning, we come to one of the most incredible passages in Acts, and I do say that every week, so forgive me.

This passage just covers the angry response of the Jews. Remember, a couple weeks ago, we were talking about the deacons, and so this is right after that. This is Stephen, one of the deacons, and it covers the angry response to Stephen, Stephen's long response back to them, and then his death.

There's so much we could say about this passage, but I just want to try to say one thing, and a word, is don't let what God has done in the past or what you hoped he'd do in the future cause you to miss what he's doing now.

Don't let what God has done in the past or what you hoped he'd do in the future cause you to miss what he's doing now. We're going to break it out.

Three points. First one is many of the Jews miss it. Many of the Jews miss it. Now, the Jews in this passage, they're angry because they had a way of doing things, and Stephen wasn't doing it.

[11:34] You know, they had a way. There was a known way of doing things in Jerusalem among the folks of the temple, and Stephen wasn't doing it. They would obey the law. They would worship in the temple.

They would offer sacrifices, and Stephen and the other band of disciples in Jerusalem were not doing that, and so they got angry, and like anger always goes.

Anger doesn't, like, stay inactive. It doesn't stay in our hearts. Anger goes out, and so that's what happens. They get angry, and if you wanted to look back when you get home today in that passage between verse 8 and 15 of chapter 6, it just tells about their anger, and they take Stephen, and this is exhibit A for who's not doing what he's supposed to do, and they take him before the council, and they bring him up on charges.

They say, this man should be tried. He should be convicted. Look down there in verse 13. It says what they bring him up for. They set up false witnesses, and then they bring him up for these charges, and I quote there.

This man never ceases to speak against this holy place and against the law, for we've heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered up.

[12:52] Essentially, what they're saying is this man, he disobeys God. he disobeys the law, and he disrespects the temple.

He disobeys God, disrespects the temple, and Stephen doesn't so much defend himself as he, or defend his innocence or something like that as he challenges them in this rather long passage, and in a word, he says, he says, firstly, you rejected Jesus Christ.

You rejected Jesus Christ, and in one sense, Stephen says what the apostles have been saying all along, you killed him, God raised him, and we saw him. Remember, we've talked about that formula that we see all throughout.

You killed him, God raised him, and we saw him, and Stephen says the same thing, but he says it in a different way. He says it, and he retells the history of the people of Israel, which we just read, and he retells it to say that point again.

He starts with Abraham. Now, we know about Abraham called from the Ur of the Chaldeans. He lived in Haran and Mesopotamia, but God was with him and drew him, and then he goes quickly to Joseph, so he goes to Abraham, and then Abraham's son, and then son of Jacob, Joseph, and his technicolor dream coat, you know, his jacket that he got that came with the promise, and Joseph, though he was one of, a son of Abraham's line was rejected.

[14:27] He was sold into slavery by his brothers, and we remember that story, but God was with him. He continued to progress him. Verse 10, which we just read, said God gave him favor and wisdom, so he found favor amongst the prisoners, and he found favor with Pharaoh, though sold into the slavery of his brothers.

Joseph becomes a ruler and rescues them. I love how this passage pointed out that it wasn't the first time that he showed who he was.

It was the second time. We know that from reading Genesis. Joseph so kindly revealed himself while he rescued the ones who sold him into slavery.

Then it continues with Moses. Moses, God was with Moses, too. Moses was beautiful in God's sight. Look down there with me. Verse 20, at this time, Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God's sight.

Down there, verse 22, he was mighty in words and deeds. That's just another way of saying God was with him. God anointed him. He was the one who was to bring salvation, verse 24, by his hand, and when he comes to his people, he finds it in his heart to go to him.

[15:39] He comes to his people, they thrust him aside. They reject him. He flees to Midian. But we saw a little tussle back and forth. After another 40 years, I guess, the Lord sends him back.

And here Stephen gets to the point. Look in verse 35. He says, this Moses, whom you rejected, remember, 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.

And then he just says it again and again. This man, this is the Moses. This is the one. He's saying, this Moses who spoke to the Lord on the mountain, this Moses to whom the Lord revealed the law, this Moses who's supposed to deliver you from Egypt and from slavery, you rejected.

You thrust him aside. Look at verse 39. Our fathers refused to obey him but thrust him aside. In their hearts, they turned back to Egypt.

Then Stephen points the finger at them. Look at verse 51. It says, you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.

[16:59] End of verse 52. You have now betrayed and murdered the righteous ones. You who receive the law as delivered by angels, you do not keep them.

He says, you say we broke the law. I say you break the law. You know, like suddenly realizing someone's talking about you. You know, you ever overhear a conversation, suddenly you realize they're talking about you.

You're suddenly awakened to attention. Well, that's what happened in this room. They were completely cool with the history of Israel but suddenly, Stephen pointed to the finger at them and it got their attention.

Stephen essentially says, you're doing what your fathers have always done. You're rejecting God's prophet. It's you who's breaking the law. You are uncircumcised in heart and ears. Who cares about the circumcision of the body?

You're uncircumcised in your heart and ears. You don't hear. You rejected the righteous one. You betrayed and killed Jesus.

[17:57] But Stephen doesn't just say that. He says, you're missing what God is doing. He says, you killed Jesus and you're missing what God is doing. Now, the Jews were all about the temple and so they charged Stephen with disrespecting the temple but Stephen confronts them by retelling the history of Israel and pointing them out about the greatest works were done outside of the temple and so there's this, there's this focus on geography that runs through this sermon and it is crucial to understanding this sermon of Stephen.

There's this focus on geography. He says, the God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. Later, he says, God was with Joseph in Egypt, made him ruler over Egypt.

After the people continued to increase and multiply in Egypt and encounter trouble, the Lord sent Moses to Egypt. It's painfully clear, Egypt, Egypt, Egypt.

Jerusalem is not in this whole sermon but Egypt is repeatedly and so Moses, then he fled and the Lord met with him in the wilderness.

Luke could not be more emphatic. Mesopotamia, Haran, Egypt, the wilderness, Egypt. Never once does he mention Jerusalem or the temple or any of these things, he's pointing out the greatest works of God in the history of Israel were done outside of the temple.

[19:26] And when the Lord finally does let Solomon build him a house, remember that, he says, build me a house but I won't live in it. Look in verse 48.

He says, Yet the most high does not dwell in houses made by hand as the prophet says. Same thing we hear Paul say in Acts 17. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

I mean, he, you know, without like totally denigrating the temple, he's trying to put the temple in proper perspective and he couldn't put it more starkly.

He's saying, Heaven is my recliner, if you will, and earth is my ottoman. You're all about the temple.

But I reign in heaven and earth. That's just another way of saying, everything's mine. Heaven is my throne, the earth is my footstool, and everything in between is mine.

[20 : 33] You want to build me a house? So, they say, you disrespect the temple.

And he says, you're missing it. The Lord has always worked wherever and whenever he wants. The problem is not the temple.

The temple is a good gift from God. It's a temporary gift, but it's a good gift for people to offer sacrifices and worship the Lord. But it was never meant to limit God.

And that's what Stephen's all about. It was never to put, it never meant to put God in a box. Now, sometimes we relate to the Lord like we can put him in a box.

And often he confronts us to say, you will not box me, so to speak. Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. And so the temple was never meant to confine God to only working in one place among one people.

[21 : 38] The temple was never meant to be a place where God was, this is the only place he works. It was a place where God worked among his people, yes, but it was never meant to lead to loyalty to a place or to the good old days.

I saw a tweet this week that said, if the pilgrims and Indians knew we would still be eating what they ate, they would have chosen steak. I can say amen.

And you can be liberated from Turkey if you need to be. You know, we, and not that I have that power, but we in the South, we love our traditions and doing the same things and eating the same things at the same times every year.

And it's so great in so many ways, but tradition is dangerous when we bring it into the church. And I think that's what he's saying. Tradition kills true religion.

And this is what the Jews are guilty of. They love the temple because the Lord worked there. The former glory was there. Great days were there.

[22 : 50] I mean, we love old things. You know, I went home this week. Sometimes I go home and it feels like we just talk so much about what used to happen or what happened back then.

And that's fine. But our fellowship with God ought not be defined by those things. So Stephen says, you're worship of the temple.

Your love for the temple is not worship. It's idolatry. It's a way of trying to keep God on your leash and put God in your box.

Jesus says he'll destroy the temple in three days. That's what he's talking about. And now he's raising a new temple. In a sermon by Dick Lucas, he recounts the imaginary conversation between an early Christian and a first century neighbor that I think gets this so well.

The neighbor says, ah, I hear you are religious. Great. Religion is a good thing. Where's your temple? Where's your holy place? He says, we don't have a temple.

[23 : 57] Says the Christian. Jesus is our temple. No temple. Now he says, no temple, but where do your priests work? Where do they do their rituals?

Where do they perform their sacrifice? He said, we don't have priests to mediate the presence of God. Every Christian is a priest. And he says, Jesus is our priest.

He said, no priest, but where do you offer sacrifices to acquire favor with God? I mean, you can guess it. We don't offer sacrifices.

Jesus is our sacrifice. What kind of religion is this that neighbor might say back to him? And he says, it's no religion at all. That's what they're missing.

Jesus is building a church. He's not pouring new wine into old wineskins. He's building something completely new.

[24 : 59] A people of all nations following Jesus Christ. Don't let what God's done in the past, what you hope you do in the future, cause you to miss what he's doing.

Point two, the disciples nearly missed it. Disciples nearly miss it. You know, this passage, and again, we just don't have the time to unpack every verse.

After Stephen preaches, they rush on him. They cast him out of the city. They stone him. One of the deacons becomes the church's first martyr. And you remember the end of his sermon, right before he's crucified, he says, I saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father on high.

And everybody always asks, what does that mean that he's standing? Because he's always referred to as seated at the right hand of God the Father. I think what it is is Jesus is standing up to receive the church's first martyr.

The first who would follow him to a death like him. The first who would follow him to an execution. And then a great persecution breaks out.

[26 : 08] Look down there in verse 8, 1. There arose on that day a great persecution among the church in Jerusalem. It was organized. It was no longer single instances with Peter and John.

It was widespread. The whole church of Jerusalem was brought under persecution. It was aggressive. I don't think there's any other way you'd describe it, but aggressive when it says it's a great persecution.

Look down at verse 3, we get a little snapshot and Saul, who we'll learn more about in a few weeks, was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

And these verses are carefully crafted. Look down there in verse 1. It says, There arose on this day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

So the persecution, which was great, resulted in a great scattering all throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

[27 : 18] Now this is significant. This is meant to kind of make some bells go off in our head to remind us of the promise Jesus said. Look down there. Look in verse Acts 1.8.

This is Jesus before he's ascended, but you will see power and the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. So we don't hear Judea and Samaria referenced from Acts 1 up until right here. The point is all of Acts has taken place in Jerusalem, but something happens in this scattering that's important and significant.

No one had moved out. No one had taken the gospel from Jerusalem. Now, why? They heard the promise. They were preached to by Jesus.

Maybe they were strategizing. Maybe they were praying and waiting. Maybe they were saving. Whatever the reason for the delay, it takes the persecution to get them on the move. Sometimes it takes bad things to get good things start happening and that's what happens at this point.

[28 : 23] That's what Luke's saying just with this reference that the persecution is not arbitrary. It is in fact Jesus fulfilling his promise to reach all people. Now, this passage certainly teaches that often God turns persecution into triumphs of mission.

If you read Fox's Book of Martyrs or if you read missionary tales, you see this again and again. Indeed, as Tertullian said in the early centuries, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. But this passage also warns that comfort, success, safety, and freedom often hold back the mission.

The disciples were experiencing extraordinary success in Jerusalem. I mean, just 3,000 this day, this day, 4,000 another day. It's just a motley crew and the burden of focusing on ministry there caused them to almost miss what God was doing.

D.C. This is so often the case. The very thing we think would produce more creativity and more advances in mission often lead to its decline.

[29 : 56] Financial prosperity. Security. Security. Little fear of mistreatment or oppression. Advances in technology and transportation.

It's widely known yet still sobering that increased income does not result in increased giving. That's a fact. That's a statistical fact. One study said the poorest fifth of the church gives 3.4% of their income to the church.

the richest gives 1.6%. Half of what the poor give. Why? Financial success chokes out the word what the scriptures say.

But it's not just financial success safety freedom and comfort hold back the mission as well.

There may be no more powerful idol in America than comfort but how does comfort hold back the mission? I think comfort slows mission because we begin to care more about our kingdom than God's.

[31 : 23] We begin to hope more in our plans than in his. We begin to fight more for this life than the next. In so many ways the American society is built around comfort.

I read this fascinating article the other day bless you. that article is talking about Christmas shopping which is right up there with Dante's Inferno for me.

I mean it's so intolerable but it says suffer spend repeat was the title of the article and basically he says have you ever noticed that when you go into Christmas shops they're playing like obnoxious Christmas carols at a decibel that's completely intolerable.

He said well it's on purpose. Retail shops have tried to create the most miserable environment because they know if you're miserable you'll spend more.

And they talk about music that's why you hear chestnuts! Roasting on an open fire which is not a good carol you know and you hear it everywhere that's why you're in a wine shop or maybe you go to a wine shop and you hear classical because you start to think I have refined taste you know and I'll buy that X dollar bottle of wine or they say if you're in a restaurant they play some upbeat music because they know the tips will go larger I mean nobody's leaving a big tip to Hank Williams you know that's when you're crying and you're thinking about how poor you are but the upbeat music gets you spending and so it's a way of our economy the whole point is our economy is built around comfort and it leads us to believe fighting for comfort is a number one thing this passage would ask us where is a desire for comfort let us away from loving hard people where is a desire for comfort let us away from making hard sacrifices where is a desire for comfort let us away from doing hard things where is a desire for comfort let us to sulk do we sulk comfort can be an okay desire but it's a horrible

[33 : 45] God and it kills mission that's why the church in the United States is not the most aggressive church and I'm not trying to be down on the church or anything like that but I do want to call us to what's before us point three the church gets it the church gets it disciples nearly miss it and then they're scattered but after they're scattered they start preaching look at verse four he says now those who were scattered went about preaching the word persecution refocuses them on what matters and so when they're scattered they go about preaching like they go to Samaria to preach like they didn't go to Samaria for a job transfer or a new job opportunity they hated Samaria but when they get there they preach and we ought not be mistaken I mean they covered this persecution really quickly but the persecution was not easy they lost everything they lost their homes families places of worship all they knew but when they're there they get it and I just love that I'll bang my head against the wall ten times but finally I can have hope if it sinks once and that's what they did they remember the mission they preached the gospel and here Luke calls them the church look at verse one again he says there arose on that day a great persecution against the church

Luke this is the second time he's used that word this whole book he very intentionally uses it here because when they realize the gospel isn't only for them and the church is not just for Jerusalem they begin to act like the church they're incredible they preach the gospel they keep preaching look in Acts 11 look at this though now those who are scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch that's hundreds of miles away I think the idea is that scattering became a way of life like they were the scattered but that didn't mean they settled anywhere they scattered so that they could keep scattering to keep preaching the gospel so here they are hundreds of miles away and they're still preaching the gospel ultimately they refused to let what God has done in the past or what they'd hoped he'd do in the future to cause them to miss what he's doing now they were weak and small and beaten and scattered but they knew God was mighty and that he was on the move but how are we doing what's troubling us that we have a hard time letting go of the past this bitterness keep us up through the night are we more aware of what God is not doing and has not done than what he is have we lost hope that John

Piper says occasionally weep deeply over the life that you hoped would be grieve the losses feel the pain then wash your face trust God and embrace the life that he's given you that's incredible I think that's what happened nobody chooses to have their life upended but it happened to these disciples and they grieve the life that they had hoped and they embraced the life that God gave and I want us to do the same thing today today is the first Sunday of Advent if you're not used to using that word neither am I but it's just a season in which the church anticipates and celebrates the coming of Jesus at Christmas and there may be no greater season than what to meditate on what God can do with broken things than Christmas there may be no greater season to meditate on what big things God can do with small starts in Christmas when God came to save the world he didn't send a king to Rome he sent a baby to Bethlehem so he might shame the strong and provide a refuge for all the world let's don't judge what God is doing by what he's done in the past or even by

the hopes that seem dashed for the future let's trust God when he makes all things you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at