

*THE  
VOICES  
WE CARRY*

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### **Scriptures**

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Stories We Tell, The Voices We Carry



Everyone loves a good story. The mind thinks of a warm campfire, softly lighting the faces of the family gathered around the burning embers hearing the tales of past generations. Or the bright illumination projecting off a cinema screen as the surrounded sound belts a moving speech with a swell of strings as a tear squeaks out the corner of an eye.

Whether we recognize it or not, we define our lives by the stories we tell and the voices we carry. How many of us have dreamed of legacy? A legacy that will be passed on through the ages. A story. A synopsis of our lives and the impact we made in the fleeting years we walked on this spinning orb.

How many of us stared at the ceilings of our childhood bedrooms, basking before a vast, invisible crowd as we received an award that we dedicated to all the teachers who told us we wouldn't amount to anything? With every sleepless night we were trying to rewrite our stories, to paint over the condemning voices of others.

How many of us have felt the sting of standing in the shadows of those stories that went before us? The giants of the past with their seemingly superhuman gifts and talents tempting us to give up, to count out the brevity of our days in the cool shade of other people's stories.

Willie James Jennings once wrote that "There is no life without story. We enter story from the time we are born and never exit story even in death." Every Christian can easily attest to this as we read the pages of Scripture, the story of God's love saturating space and time, not in an ill-defined or theoretical way, but in everyday relationships with men and women just like us. God so loved the world that He created a man named Adam and a woman named Eve. He loved them so much that he gave them freewill and a way of restoration when they fell.

God so loved the world that He encircled all people, every language and tribe, and called them by name. And to make that love and plan of redemption known He chose one man, one woman, one family: Abraham, Sarah and the people that sprang forth from God's promise.

God so loved the world that He allowed Joseph to experience sorrow and rejection from his brothers, sold into slavery into a foreign land, so that that when the time came he would rise up to save not only the dysfunctional family that left him for dead, but all the peoples of the region (even the very ones who enslaved him!).

These stories resonate with us because we know what it feels like to fail. To fail ourselves. To fail others. To fail God. These stories beat with the rhythm of our drums because we know what it's like to feel lonely like Adam in the garden. We know what it feels like to feel broken like Sarah suffering from decades of infertility. We know what it's like to feel the sting of rejection from our loved ones or from the community around us.

Consider his beautiful thought: into the stories of each man and woman of the Bible, God speaks. He sees them as they struggle from internal voices. He hears the condemnation that weighs them down from external voices. And in response, God speaks. He takes the stories we tell and redeems them. He takes the voices we carry and He transforms them.

### **Setting the Stage**

When we look at Acts 6, we see the mix of voices shouting inside and outside. We are reminded of the cross-cultural nature of the early church, made of Jerusalem Jews and the Jews who were shaped and formed other places in the Greek-speaking world (what we call Hellenism). In this short but rich chapter we see the impact of these two groups interacting inside and outside of the Church. Inside the Church the care for Hellenistic Jewish widows gives rise to the establishment of deacons, those men and women who would steward the care of the God's mission to love the widow, the orphan and the foreigner throughout the life of the Church. Men like Stephen and Philip were among the very first deacons. Instead of these diaspora deacons having to prove themselves worthy to the apostles, they are readily accepted and anointed for ministry.

Outside the Church, the story is completely different. As Justo González reminds us, "in Jerusalem the Hellenists were eyed with suspicion, and that therefore non-Christian Hellenists would be particularly interested in proving that they would not allow themselves to be 'contaminated.'" The voices in their heads telling them, "You aren't good enough. Not righteous enough because you aren't like us" led them to prove their orthodoxy. This would lead them to fall into a trap of their own inferiority complex and the

scheming of the religious elite in Jerusalem looking for ways to silence the growing Church.

This all sets the stage for the trial of Stephen, a Hellenistic Jewish deacon, before the Sanhedrin, the religious elite who met in the Jerusalem Temple, based on the accusations that he was attacking the Temple and criticizing Moses to anyone who would listen to him.

How will Stephen answer their accusations? What voices will he carry to his defense?

### **A Calling Voice**

Over the next 21 days we will explore the verses of Acts 7, the longest recorded speech in this defense of the Christian faith that Luke wrote to Theophilus (Acts 1.1), making up over a fifth of the entire book. Clearly, these words are important to Luke and the early Church.

Each day we will find our way through the life of Stephen as he retells the entire story of the Old Testament, from God's choosing of Abraham found in Genesis, through the prophets, to the good news of Jesus Christ we find in the New Testament.

With each reflection we will look at the voices he carries, why they were important to Stephen and why they are important for us too. Ultimately though, if we stop the conversation there the story will be as memorable as a telenovela with too many characters and complicated plot lines. We need to have the narrator and author of the story speak into our lives today. Every day, take a few minutes to pray, both lifting your voice and hearing the voice of God responding. This can be done alone with God or gathered with other believers.

Don't miss this opportunity to meet with God, to lift those stories and voices that have defined you, for good or bad, and invite the Lord to bring life-giving redemption and transformation.





The Voices We Carry: Abraham and Joseph

Monday, June 6

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?”  
Acts 7.1



How many of us have heard an accusation leveled against us? Condemning words that seek to trash our character and knock us down into the dirt. It's as if some people think they should be the center of the universe, believing they should be like the Sun in everyone else's lives, providing the sole source of light and wisdom to the masses and melting the wings of every would be Icarus that flies too high.

In the process, they become pawns in other people's games, seeking access, power and recognition, only to be discarded as soon their usefulness seems to have expired. The Synagogue of Freedmen only show up this one time. Some scholars have argued that the men of this synagogue were slaves who'd been freed from their service to Romans and had either returned to their motherland seeking spiritual restoration or converted to Judaism attracted to the story of God's people. If this is true then we can understand their desire to prove their righteousness in the eyes of others. They weren't on a level playing field with the native born and powerful. Hoping to prove their usefulness was the only way to advance in a world built against them.

Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew himself, has been brought before the most powerful leaders in all of Israel, subjected to false testimonies from men—*maybe even former friends from before he learned about Jesus and became a follower of the Way*—accusing him of blasphemy against Moses, the law and God.

It is hard to imagine the setting of the courtroom, where every eye is set against you, where every testimony is a string of lies and condemnation, and not feel ourselves begin to sweat.

### **The Voices We Carry**

J.S. Park in his book, *The Voices We Carry*, insightfully writes, “We are a world of voices that tell us who we are, how to move and how to be... These voices can come from an entangled knot of our fathers and failures and the things that happened to us.”

In this sense, we are no different than the Pharisees and Sadducees who made up the Sanhedrin or the members of the Synagogue of Freedmen. We all carry those negative voices that push towards



legalism or libertine living. We tell the stories of our fathers through our decisions, good and bad. The impact of their past stories and voices echoes through us into the future.

Stephen chooses, inspired by the Holy Spirit, not to defend himself from their accusations but to give voice to the fathers of the faith that led him to Jesus. They accuse him of blasphemy against Moses. Then he will share the story of Moses anew. They say he speaks against the Temple. Then he will respond by reminding them of the Tabernacle.

Stephen rejects the impulse to react. He is proactive, following the words of Jesus like a well known song into the orchestration of the Spirit (Luke 12.11-12). Stephen does not react to the high priest's leading and accusing question. Instead, he tunes out their voices and invites the Spirit of God to speak through Him.

### **The Voices We Raise**

In prayer, ask God to reveal the voices, internal or external, past or present, that are accusing you. (Revelation 12.10)

Ask God our Father what it means when His voice speaks over you that “you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” (Galatians 4.7)


How is God calling you to lean on the promise of His everlasting arms? (Deuteronomy 33.27)

How is God calling you to bless in prayer those whose voices accuse you? (Matthew 7.1-5)

**Tuesday, June 7**

*To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'*

Acts 7.2-3

 Stephen, accused of blasphemy against Moses and the law God spoke to Him, does not give a point by point refutation of their false claims. Instead, he turns toward his accusers and draws their attention to the first scroll of the Torah written by Moses, the book of Genesis. He does not return fire with fire, slurs for slander, like they have heaped against him. Stephen looks at them and calls them, brothers and fathers. In them he does not see malicious and mercenary enemies but misguided and beloved family.

### **The Voices We Carry**

How many of us have experienced the tension of family dysfunction; those moments of pain because someone we love dearly has misread or misinterpreted our words or intentions? In those times we often turn to stories, past shared experiences to help them understand why we said or did something. We try to explain our motivations through our family story.

This is what Stephen does before the Sanhedrin. He responds to them with sincerity and respect as brothers and fathers worthy of respect. And with them he draws them back into their shared story. He leads them back to the story of Abraham, the father of their entire people. Not only that, but he roots the story of Abraham into its appropriate context. Yes, the story he will tell is about their father Abraham, but great-great-great (ad infinitum) grandpa Abe is not the voice that matters in their shared story as a people. The voice that they should carry is that of the God of glory, the Eternal One, who calls them into the unknown.

With this clarification he recasts the story. Abraham is not the lead. He is supporting cast. The God of glory is the author and primary actor in the story of Israel. In Abraham, called into obedience, Stephen is showing his brothers and fathers that in their father they have been given a model. Abraham was a pilgrim, and they are living out his story as a pilgrim people. This is why Stephen emphasizes that although God promises the land to Abraham and his people,

Scripture highlights that God “did not give them any of it as heritage, not even a foot’s length” (Acts 7.5).

This is important for us to remember that whatever our story has been, whatever the voices we carry have told us about what our lives should be, those narratives are not the author or primary actor of our days: God is. So when the painful days come (Acts 7.6; Genesis 15.2) because they will, we do not lose heart because we know who our Redeemer is. We do not need to fret or worry in the face of false accusations and character assassinations because we know who our advocate is, Jesus Christ the Righteous One (1 John 2.1-2).

It is time to shout down the drowning voices, not with a scream of defiance but with a meek steel and a divine confidence rooted in the voice of Spirit.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Pray for those who are facing persecution today, those you know by name and those who you know only by shared relationship in Jesus (Hebrews 13.3; Numbers 6.26).

Pray for a bold remembrance of your beloved place in the presence of God, even in the face of trials and tribulations (2 Corinthians 4.8-12; Psalms 85.8).

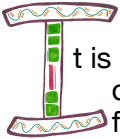
How is God reframing the challenges and difficulties you are facing today as the Author of your story? (John 16.33; 14.27)

Rejoice today that the God of glory who chose Abraham has also chosen you. He is the one who places His favor on you as His child and invites you into His peace (Luke 2.14; Philippians 4.7)

## Wednesday, June 8

*But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.*

Acts 7.7-8



It is easy to ask why God would reveal to Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved and suffer; it is something far more complex to wrestle out an answer. No wonder Moses held to this revelation from the God of glory to their forefather as he walked with the people on their way out of slavery in Egypt and on their way to the Promised Land. If it was all an accident then there is nothing we can learn from it. It is meaningless and life is a series of nihilistic wastes of time.

But if God has revealed this space, allowed this space, then although painful and disorienting, there is purpose. There is purpose not just for the life before and after, but for the in-between, the place of pain and confusion.

This middle space and time has been called liminal, the threshold that is a mix of two, not fully what was but not quite yet the other. Mike Brown explains it as two halves, where the “task of the first half...is to build a sense of identity, structure and security” while the “second half deconstructs those in order to find a deeper source of meaning and purpose.”

Abraham was promised that his people would walk through a liminal space, where they would become more fully who they were always meant to be because they were crossing a threshold into a deeper walk with their Creator.

The Bible is filled with liminal space, just like our lives. Those stages of life where we are no longer children but not quite teens. Truly in *between*. Or that space of indeterminate time where young men and women are legally recognized as adults but have yet to reach a life of real ‘adulthood.’ These liminal spaces are beautiful and ambiguous desert lands where our greatest growth with God comes because we are stripped of those things in which we once placed our security.

## **The Voices We Carry**

Stephen cannot hold back sharing this deep truth with those who place their lives in opposition to him because they have invested their lives in securing themselves in the first stage of life, barricading themselves from painful and beautiful growth. Stephen invites them to meet with God, the glorious One who called Abraham, the gracious One who leads their fathers into the wilderness.

Stephen is sharing with the Sanhedrin a divine dream where they would stop trying to manifest their own self-fulfillment in this life built on human power systems. One not of strength but of weakness (1 Corinthians 1.27). Not one of rushing but of waiting.

The truth is the Pharisees and Sadducees have misread and misinterpreted the voices they carry. They have missed that, as Willie James Jennings says, that their ancestors, this “promised people would carry the vulnerability and fragility that comes from waiting. The waiting is everything. It is the time and place for meeting with God.” Why? Because in the liminal space, in the waiting is where God will reveal His Holy name and lead them deeper into relationship with Himself.

Stephen’s invitation to waiting on the Lord is open to us today if we are bold enough to lay down our weapons, strip our armor away and come barefoot before the presence of God.

## **The Voices We Raise**

In prayer, lay down your protective armor that covers those vulnerable and tender places before the Lord (Mark 9.30-37; 1 John 1.9).

Quiet your heart and listen in the stillness for the voice of the Spirit. Ask Him to show you those undefined places where you’ve built barriers to wall-in past memories and injuries (1 Kings 19.3-9).

Hear the Lord saying to you, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,” (2 Corinthians 12.9; Isaiah 41.10).

Thursday, June 9

*Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.*

Acts 7.9-10



Abraham was the father of the people, and in quick succession he had a son who had a son who had twelve. And those twelve sons became the patriarchs, the fathers of the people. Those twelve sons would become the twelve tribes. These were the founding fathers, not of 1776, but of 1776 BC\*; not of the cherry trees and apple pies but of cedar trees and flat bread.

How interesting then that Stephen does not introduce the founding fathers with overdue reverence or rose-colored glasses but as the Spirit inspired Moses to recount the story. The patriarchs were not heroes but men, and fallible men who burned with jealousy and sold their own flesh and blood brother into slavery. It would have been one thing to kill him or leave him for dead, but instead they faked his death, lied to their grieving father and pocketed the money for Joseph's sold, enslaved body.

Joseph is the first savior of Israel, and yet he is also the one stripped of his autonomy and dignity. His brothers, the very ones who should have come to his defense and loved him unconditionally, treated him like disposable income.

### **The Voices We Carry**

The men of the Sanhedrin would have known this story; memorized word perfect. But how revealing to recognize that memorized words in the mind do not equal truth understood within the soul. Stephen stands before them, reduced to an object of judgment deserving condemnation. Before this tribunal is over, they will go beyond their patriarchs, not just talking of murder but of spilling Stephen's blood with the shattering force of thrown stones (Genesis 37.18-21; Acts 7.57-59a). What the religious elite miss is that they have not only aligned themselves with their founding fathers in position and prestige but also in betraying the voice of God who spoke through Joseph in dreams and Stephen in right remembrance.

But this is not uncommon to us as people. We build the stories of our lives and the voices we carry on those of triumph and strength. We don't want to be the ones acted upon, the ones sold into slavery or abandoned in pits. We want to be the last man standing, defending the hacienda against the enemies of what we hold dear.

What the Sanhedrin forgot, and what we forget too often for our comfort, is to stop and take stock, to take time and make sure we are still heading in the right direction, that we are not out for ourselves building our kingdoms and setting ourselves against God and His Kingdom. In our fury we silence the goading Gamaliels who call us to prayer as we roar and rage (Acts 5.33-39).

Stephen did not miss in his retelling of their national story that God placed his favor on the unfavored brother. God set his eye on the persecuted child of Israel and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave the rejected one wisdom and guided his steps into the very position and prestige his brothers abused. Though his brothers raged against Joseph he would be the redeemer who saved them from starvation.

Stephen reveals once again to God's people that the Eternal Lord who chose Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia to establish a missionary pilgrim people is the same Heavenly King who chose Joseph while he was a slave to save His people at the right time.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Pray that God would show you where you have become too much like the patriarchs, wielding power and position with fragile egos, jealously defending yourself against those Jesus has called us to love.

How is the Lord showing you that the season you are in, one of difficulty and pain, is building up a great victory that only He can bring to pass in your life and the live of others?

*\*1776 BC is used as a rhetorical device and not an actual date.*

Friday, June 10

*Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.*

Acts 7.11-14



Reading Stephen's words to the Sanhedrin two thousand years after the trial makes me wonder if the Pharisees and Sadducees were able to connect some of the nuanced verbal clues that the accused sowed into his speech. He called to them as fathers and brothers, reminding them of their shared story passed onto them through the pen of Moses. And then, with a second breathe he retells the story of their fathers, the brothers of Joseph, who were left hungry and suffering. The very thing those fathers and brothers needed were in the hands of the one they'd betrayed with their judgment.

Perhaps they were annoyed to be told the story they seemingly knew by heart and shared year after year in their synagogues. They'd become home-blind to the Word of God. Like when, after a long day at work we get into the driver's seat one second only to find ourselves at home unable to remember the journey. Sure, we didn't run any red lights but we definitely rolled through some stop signs. When we become too familiar is when we rollout one time too many and crash, or have to slam onto the breaks as the yellow turns to red, leaving us out in the box past the white line. So the men of the Sanhedrin had traveled the words of the law, the stories conveyed by Moses so many times they ceased to see them because their eyes had glazed, too familiar with the holy.

In all the years that passed, Joseph could have sought out revenge or sent out someone to see if his father was still alive. When his brothers came looking for food, he could have forced them into slavery and treated them with the same contempt they saw fit for him. Instead, Joseph did not rush to judgment or set his own pained past on the judgment scales against his brothers. He gave them undeserved food. He revealed his face and name they had tried so hard to forget from years of guilt.



## **The Voices We Carry**

Stephen tells us that Joseph sent for his father and family and his word choice is important. The word he uses is the same that we find in Jesus' commission of his disciples to apostolic ministry. Jesus sends his people out with his good news as messengers. This is the same word that Stephen uses describing Joseph's message of hope to his father and the families of his brothers.

By responding to his brothers in the opposite spirit his message is, not one of jealousy or wrath, but one filled with joy and hope. The good news that Joseph has for his father is that the son he thought dead has been raised to life again, and the famine that has plagued their thoughts and minds holds not threats for them anymore. God has taken what was meant for evil and turned it around for their good (Genesis 50.20)!

Somewhere in the room, perhaps sitting with the Pharisees near Gamaliel, a young man named Saul is hearing these words unaware that the evil he will be a part of that leads to the death of Stephen will be turned around for his good and lead many to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 8.28). Before long he too will be an apostle, a sent one with the message of joy and hope, redemption and transformation. But for this day and time, the truth is lost to him because he has corrupted the voice of Moses and the story of Joseph just like the other fathers of Israel when they cast their brother away from their presence.

## **The Voices We Raise**

Are there places in your life that you are home-blind to the Word of God for your family and community because you've grown too comfortable and familiar with it? (Numbers 14)

How is God calling you to respond in the opposite spirit, not as the world does with wrath and reaction, but led by His Spirit into meekness and resolve? (1 Corinthians 4.12-13a; Matthew 5.5)

Who is God calling you to carry His message of hope and joy to that needs to hear it today? (Isaiah 52.6-8; Romans 10.14-15)

Saturday, June 11

As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased.  
Acts 7.17



“Almost every New Testament use of the word” we translate here as *promise*, Walter C. Kaiser says, “points back to the Old Testament.” God is a promising God and He is faithful to bring to fulfillment what He promises. The New Testament Church rejoiced in the promises God made to Abraham (Acts 7.17, Romans 4.13, Galatians 3.14), to Moses (2 Corinthians 7.1, Ephesians 6.2; Hebrews 4.1) to David (Acts 13.23) and the prophets (Romans 1.2). And although these promises are many, they have a single source: God. And because they are all made from the One true and faithful Father they are considered one promise.

Kaiser uses the example of the Apostle Paul standing judgment before Agrippa because of his “hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. This is the *promise* our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me,” (Acts 26.6-7).

But before Paul would stand trial for the same promise and the same hope, he would hear Stephen give a defense of his faith rooted in the one true, everlasting promise God worked out in the life of His people Israel. The time was filled up, the promise of a people was full. Now the time to enter into the Promised Land was on the horizon.

### **The Voices We Carry**

Stephen is standing trial “accused of attacking the Temple and criticizing Moses” (González). So far, he has established their shared paternity in Abraham, and walked the Sanhedrin through the life of Joseph as a redeemer of his reluctant and rebellious people. Now, he will confront directly the accusations that he has blasphemed against Moses. Truly, the time has come to confront the way they have carried a false representation of Moses’ voice with them. If they had understood Moses correctly they would not have rejected the good news of Jesus. Sadly, the religious leaders of Israel sound more like the patriarchs of old and their stiff-necked children who would grumble their way through the wilderness (Exodus 32.9).

There are times in our lives, just like in the lives of the men who sat in the Sanhedrin, when we must come face to face with the fullness of time. This can be a time of great joy like “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons,” (Galatians 4.4-5)! This good news carried in the voices of God’s promise that changed the life of Stephen forever, so much that he was willing to leave nothing back to share it with any and everyone!

Could it be that as Paul wrote those words to the men, women and children of the Church in Galatia his mind turned to the witness of Stephen? Moved by that memory and inspired by the Holy Spirit he wrote the world-shaking, system-breaking truth that “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God,” (Galatians 4.4-7).

The voice that carried Stephen through his witness before the Sanhedrin, is the same voice that carried Paul. It is the same voice of the Holy Spirit that is ready—as Jesus promised—to teach us by His Word what to say (Luke 12.12).

### **The Voices We Raise**

What aspect of His promise is God wanting to teach you about today? Ask Him to guide you into His Word with fresh eyes and a ready desire to meet with Him there (Psalm 40.6-8).

Rejoice that you have heard the good news of Jesus and have been heirs with Him through God (Galatians 3.9; Romans 8.14-17).





The Voices We Carry: Moses

**Sunday, June 12**

*Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.' He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.*

Acts 7.18-19



One doesn't need to read the writings of Luke for very long to discover how important Moses is to him. Of the 80 times Moses is mentioned in the New Testament, 29 of them are found in the writings of Luke (with nine of them right here in Acts 7). Moses is a hero of the faith, a rescuer, a prefigure of the great Savior to come.

Moses was not born into a family at the height of their prosperity or success. Yes, he was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob into that people of promise, God's chosen people; but there is something sinister afoot. Once the name of Joseph meant something in the land, a savior, a visionary, an interpreter of dreams. He was beloved by the Pharaoh and revered by the people. Room was made for his whole family.

But as his people grew and memory was warped, the favor of Joseph was lost to time and a new pharaoh looked on his people with fear. To live in Egypt was to benefit from the lives of Israel and God's blessing. Depending on the voices you listened to though, the growing minority, 2 million strong, living in the land was either a blessing or a curse. And so, this new Pharaoh approached the 'problem' like so many who would follow: population control. This Pharaoh would set the mold for government-sanctioned assassination that have become the global expressions of abortion, forced sterilization, mass incarceration and genocide. Moses' people went from honored members of society to a dangerous subculture in need of repression in a moment; subhumans deserving of cruel slavery and mass extermination.

### **The Voices We Carry**

It can be hard to imagine the atrocities of the past—and those of our own day and time, for that matter. The death camps in Europe and Cambodia. The internment of different peoples in Xinjiang and Manzanar. The elimination of the unborn and the incarceration of the unseen. These, like the violent actions of Pharaoh against Moses' people, do not come from a place of strength and authority but from a reactionary fear and insecurity.

J.S. Park wonders “how many politicians, bloggers, pastors and parents have been externalizing their insecurities and trying to make ‘miniature versions’ of themselves in a sort of redemption trophy case. When they demonize others, I wonder if they’re sweating out their own demons in a public self-exorcism. I wonder how many parents are hard on their own kids because they’re trying to fix some ‘weak’ part of themselves or attempting to confer their own being into the kid as a sort of self-cloning exercise. All of us, just projecting our expectations all over the place. In the end, this sort of fixing is a closed circuit, fixated on itself, not really trying to help anybody else.”

In the case of Pharaoh, the voices of insecurity which led him to deal treacherously with Israel would pave the pathway for the “all-powerful” king of Egypt to his grave as Moses guided Israel through the Red Sea. In the case of the Sanhedrin, the voices of insecurity which led to their persecution of Stephen—attempting to preserve their place in the Temple—would fair no better against the rising tide of the good news for all people.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Pray for a sensitive heart made of flesh and not of stone toward the current crises in the world (Ezekiel 36.26).

Pray that we would truly be God’s people, who turn away from the insecurity and reactionary fear of the world, and return our hearts to God (Jeremiah 24.7)

Intercede that we, as a nation, would not be afraid of the voices we carry, but that we would place them all before the Lord, both rejoicing and repenting, confronting and confessing, humbled so that we might find His mercy (1 John 1.9; Psalm 32.5 Proverbs 28.13).

**Monday, June 13**

*At that time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God. For three months he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.*

Acts 7.20-22



Reading the Old Testament anew reveals something interesting floating to the surface. It's as if time after time a divine spotlight shines down on individuals. A young man named Joseph has God-inspired dreams (Genesis 37.5-9). A little boy named Samuel hears God speaking to him in the Tabernacle (1 Samuel 3). A prophet tells of a young virgin who shall bear a child (Isaiah 7.14). These young men and women are not superhuman. They are chosen.

This is what Stephen means when he says that Moses was beautiful before God. God's divine purpose radiated over his life. Perhaps the nameless baby born to Amram and Jochebed was a beautiful baby with soft pink newborn cheeks against his tan skin (Numbers 26.59), but this is not what Stephen means. Just as God had a plan for Samuel, God had a greater plan for Moses, his family and his people, than his home could supply. For Samuel it meant leaving home to toddle around the house of the high priest, for Moses it meant floating into Pharaoh's palace as a prince of Egypt.

As Moses said to God decades later, he spoke haltingly, stumbling in his speech, but the truth was as a youth he stuttered in at least two languages (Exodus 4.10). In the arms of his mother he would have heard the first sounds and syllables of Hebrew, while in the corridors of his Egyptian teachers he would have learned and spoken an early form of Coptic. As a youth these languages in his heart and mind must have fought to define his worldview.

### **The Voices We Carry**

How interesting then that Stephen would look on Moses and say he "was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action." If we saw Moses the way he describes himself to God he would appear like an emptied balloon unable to adequately carry God's message to His suffering people and the Egyptian Pharaoh.



What Stephen appears to be describing is a bombastic young man who is capable of great feats and verbal eloquence but is hiding beneath the surface of a bruised and traumatized childhood. All the wealth of Egypt could hang around his neck but none of it could remove the shackles from his people. All the finest food could be placed before him at the king's table but nothing could feed the deep hunger for his family's freedom. Left to his own devices, the friction of Moses' two worlds would grind him toward implosion. But God's plan was to use the pain and the process to lead his chosen servant Moses to a place of total reliance.

Stephen is right to say that Moses was worldly wise and powerful in speech and action, but without the refining fire of God's purpose his leadership for his people was, in the words of Ruth Haley Barton, "raw, undisciplined, violent and destructive to those who were in its path... Moses' natural gifting was at the mercy of his unresolved past and the unexamined emotional patterns that drove him."

Stephen understood that God loved Moses. He was chosen. But that did not mean he would not go through the refiner's fire. God loved His people enslaved in Egypt. And before Moses was saved out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter, he was smiled upon by God his Father. They were chosen. But that did not mean they would not have to go through the coarse, refining wilderness. Before they would walk through the Red Sea behind Moses, they were seen and heard by the God of their fathers.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Thank God that you have heard the good news of Jesus and walking in His redemption (Luke 10.20; Psalm 13.5).

Who do you love today that needs that same promise of salvation? Take a moment to intercede for them (Luke 11.5-8).

How is God calling you to entrust your life to Him today? Are you willing to walk with Him into a season of refining where He purifies our lives through the crucible of suffering? (Zechariah 13.9)

Tuesday, June 14

*When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?' 'But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' When Moses heard this, he fled, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.*

Acts 7.23-29



It seems our generation loves avengers, those men and women who take up arms at the sight of injustice. We portray it in our movies and the stories we tell. Yet, as the stories play out and the screen time stretches, the heroes are vilified. Those caped crusaders who came to the rescue find themselves tried by the court of public opinion. As one cynical, but accurate, screenwriter put it: "You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

After decades of watching his people suffer (Exodus 2.2), Moses went to visit them once again. Stephen's word choice implies that Moses felt prompted by God to visit that day. To his horror he saw a fellow Israelite being killed under the driving blows of an Egyptian slavedriver. The blood must have rushed to his ears, his head swimming with righteous anger, as he threw himself against the workhouse tyrant. Without cowl or cape Moses leapt into action against oppression. Without a mythic glove or axe Moses avenged the life of another man who somehow survived the Egyptian genocide of Jewish boys.

Stephen makes it clear that Moses thought his people would see him as an avenger, one who fought for their liberty and security, like one bringing light into a dark world. Moses thought his actions would be understood, even embraced, by His people. He was the hero saving one Israelite at a time. But much to his surprise, they treated him like a villain!

Another day when he discovered two Israelites fighting and sought to reconcile them, instead of seeing him as their savior, with a big M for Moses on his chest, they treated him as if he were no different than the Egyptian he'd killed!

### **The Voices We Carry**

It's fascinating, when we stop and consider that the men of the Sanhedrin are hearing this story on the lips of Stephen. They accuse him of blasphemy against Moses yet Stephen is well versed in the life of Moses, even interpreting his life in light of God's calling. Did they see David's killing Goliath as a cause for rejoicing? Surely they did, like their ancestors before them (1 Samuel 18.7). And yet, when it comes to Moses—whose hands were stained with the blood of their oppressors—they misunderstand his actions because they misunderstood his calling. Likewise, how then can they rightly understand Stephen and his message of salvation if they have misunderstood His Christ?

Instead of leading the people out of Egypt and bondage, Moses would have to wrestle with his insecurities, and probably even depression, in exile (Exodus 2.15; Acts 7.28–29). He would spend years as a fugitive, learning the way of a shepherd on the hills (Exodus 2.17–3.1), “while his people were under harsh oppression for over forty years (Exodus 2.11; 3.7),” (Youngmo Cho & Hyung Dae Park). Why? Because the voices they carried had no room for an avenger like Moses, and the voices Moses carried had no room for opposition to his leadership.

### **The Voices We Raise**

What plans do you have before you? (James 4.13-17)


Invite the Spirit of God to distinguish between your well-thought out plan and intentions you've submitted to God and your arrogant attempt to bend time, space and success to your own will (Proverbs 16.9; Jeremiah 10.23; Matthew 16.26).

Jesus' exemplifies the Savior who is vilified and crucified. He is the True Light that stepped into the world, but like Moses, was not recognized by those who loved the darkness (John 1.9-11; 3.19). It what ways have you been holding back part of your life from God?

## Wednesday, June 15

*After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'*

Acts 7.30-34

early a century passed between Moses' birth and his return to lead the people out of Egypt. 80 years of life, highs and lows, humiliations and hubris, love and limitations. Four decades in the palaces along the Great Nile in the lap of luxury followed by four decades wandering the hillsides sidestepping sheep droppings.

After he fled from his people and his home into the desert, confused, embarrassed and alone, it would take a clear word of God for him to step back into his calling. And this is exactly what God does. He speaks clearly, attracting his attention with a bush burning without being consumed.

Wildfires are not uncommon in the arid lands like the Sinai Peninsula and the Pacific Northwest, but a bush aflame without cracking beneath the fire's sting is unique everywhere in the world. Stephen telling us that Moses was "amazed at the sight" is a massive understatement. This would-be avenger marveled! Luke, who wrote Stephen's speech down, used this same word describing how awestruck Moses was seeing the burning bush as the people on the day of Pentecost witnessing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.7).

But as amazed and bewildered as Moses was at the sight of the burning bush, it was the voice of the Lord saying "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." that caused him to shake with fear. The absolute holiness of God stopped the refugee shepherd in his tracks as his bones shook within his aged frame.

## **The Voices We Carry**

God heard the cries of His people as they groaned beneath the lash of the Egyptians. He was not then, nor had He ever been, indifferent to the pain in their lives. They had not been prepared to follow Moses when he was forty years younger, and sadly they would all die in their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness because they were not prepared to follow God into the Promised Land.

Stephen makes it clear that God saw His people, heard their groaning and commissioned Moses to lead them out. He is also aware that the people God was sending Moses to were still just as stubborn and willful as they were before. It should not be lost then on us that as Stephen looked out to the men of the Sanhedrin, they wore the same stiff-necked, rebellious features of their ancestors.

In her excellent reflection on the life of Moses, Ruth Haley Barton writes: "If spiritual leadership is anything, it is the capacity to see the bush burning in our own life and having enough sense to turn aside, take off our shoes, and pay attention."

Moses stopped and turned toward the signal fire of the Lord. He redirected the course of his life to the plan and path God placed before Him. Far from blaspheming the life and writings of Moses, Stephen is personifying him before the Sanhedrin. Stephen has come face to face with a faith in Jesus that has set his world on fire and he has stopped, taken off any Hellenistic worldview that would have impaired his vision, and paid attention.

## **The Voices We Raise**

If we are not careful we may abandon God's call because those we were commissioned to serve reject our service. The life of Moses demonstrates that our ultimate service is not, and never was, to those people but to God. How is Jesus calling you to follow Him? (Exodus 3-4)

When was the last time you were awestruck at the beauty of God at work in your life? Take a moment to give thanks for His love and calling on your life (Psalm 118).

Is God calling you to pay attention in a special way? Be still and listen (Psalm 62.5-6).

Thursday, June 16

*“This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness. “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.*

Acts 7.35-38



Because we know the rest of the story its hard to imagine Moses being rejected. We love to tell the stories of the Red Sea as people cross through on dry ground trailing behind his uplifted arms. We love to pass along the memories of the highpoint: the Ten Commandments, meeting with God atop the mountain in cloud and smoke, the great military victories, the stewardship of the people. What we try to forget are the rebellions that swallow up the lives of whole families (Deuteronomy 32), the resistance of priests and elders against Moses’ leadership (Numbers 16), the ministry failures of Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 10). Those things become complicated to hold because they are not the warning voices we *want* to carry.

### **The Voices We Carry**

By accusing Stephen of blasphemy against Moses, the Sanhedrin are claiming to be the people worthy to honor his memory through their religious devotion. Their selective memories expose that they have more in common with those who rejected Moses than the ones who followed Him as He followed God.

Nowhere is this more clear than with Moses’ own words that God would raise up a prophet like him who would be the ruler and deliverer of God’s people. In prophesying the Messiah to come Moses made his voice unpalatable to the Sanhedrin, the very ones who claim to be his representatives. As we read the words of Stephen we can sense the condemnation to come. He is revealing that they have chosen to keep an image of Moses, hollowed out and empty and made in their image.

How many of us are guilty of this too? We would rather have an image of faith rather than walk through the wilderness of transformation. We wave the Christian flag and say the right things in the pews but we are empty, unmoved by the work of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because we carry the wrong voices, and although they are wrong or misguided, they are comfortable and known. If we are not careful we will not be refined by the wilderness, but be left buried in the desert. If we are not sensitive to the Spirit of God we will rake the righteous like Stephen over the coals because his presence threatens the status quo of our kingdom building.

When we tell the story of Moses we must tell the whole story, including the one that leaves him outside the Promised Land, praying for the day God would raise up the greater prophet to rule and reign over His people. When we carry the voice of Moses, not a facsimile or hollow representation of Moses, it will always lead us to Christ.

Stephen is about to make us very uncomfortable.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Ask the Lord how you have been selective with His Word? (2 Timothy 4.3) Be willing to be uncomfortable so that you might also grow in your walk with Him.

As Jesus embraces you with His love and His grace, what is He speaking to you today? (John 10.27)

As you receive Jesus' voice speaking over you through His Holy Spirit, lay your cares and concerns before Him, believing that He is working all things for your good and for His glory (1 Peter 5.7; 1 John 5.14; Romans 8.28)

Friday, June 17

*“But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made.*

Acts 7.39-41



We cannot afford to miss what Stephen is offering us, just as he offered it to the men of the Sanhedrin: genuine self-reflection. William Willimon believes that “Stephen’s speech reminds the Church that one of the most significant aspects of our legacy from Israel is Israel’s ability to use its own Scripture as a means of self-criticism.” If we misread this we will get lost in a negative interpretation of this concept. What Willimon is suggesting, to paraphrase the idea, is that we consult the road map along the journey, because over time the smallest divergence (like willfully forgetting Moses’ Messianic prophesy) leads us to condemn the very people who are serving God most faithfully.

We carry all kinds of voices through life. Some voices can beat us down and condemn us, leaving us for dead in depression. This is often what we think of when we hear self-criticism. But we can also choose to carry voices that challenge us when we start veering toward danger.

### **The Voices We Carry**

Stephen follows a very biblical model before the gathered assembly. He models for them the words and wisdom of Ezra (Nehemiah 8). He was sharing with them the books of Moses, offering them space for confession and a way to worship God in Spirit and Truth (Nehemiah 9.3). He does not shy away from recounting “Israel’s history of disobedience and devastation it brought upon the people,” (Willimon). He calls them to a new purity. He calls them to rejoicing.

Ezra tells them as they are racked with the negative voices of self-criticism:

“This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, “Go, eat the festival foods, drink the sweet drinks, and send portions to him who



has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your refuge,” (Nehemiah 8.9b-10).

This is not the voice of destructive self-criticism but of reconstructive self-criticism. He is not saying hard things to tear them down, but to help clear the way for celebration.

The Sanhedrin missed Stephen’s invitation to self-reflection. Rather than seeing Moses and God’s Word spoken through him, they refused to obey Him just as their ancestors did. In that moment their hearts turned back towards Egypt and a false faith built around idols (Exodus 32). They missed how God challenged the corruption in the hearts of Israel through Moses’ voice, just as they missed God’s self-revelation of His Everlasting Word, Jesus Christ.

The Sanhedrin were well-versed in the books of Moses. They were not surprised by the revelry and celebration of their ancestors when they looked on the the golden calf they’d built. Left to our own devices, people always move toward self-destruction. The issue was the Pharisees and Sadducees thought they were on the mountaintop with Moses, not in the valley making sacrifices to their idols. By not following Ezra or Stephen, they had built a golden calf of their own *in the form of Moses made in their own image*, rather than a Messiah who is the very image of the invisible God (Colossians 1.15).

### **The Voices We Raise**

Invite the Holy Spirit to inhabit every space of your inner world (Psalm 139.23-24).

Ask Jesus to silence the condemning voices that would distract you from hearing His loving correction. You are a work of His hand, beloved and made for a purpose (Isaiah 64.8)

Ask Jesus to show you how you can walk with Him, bringing your faith walk into balance with your divine calling (2 Corinthians 5.17; Ephesians 4.1).

Saturday, June 18

*But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.*  
Acts 7.42-43



A few decades ago, as the world was going through throws of instability and polarization, watching doomsday clocks and practicing atomic drills under school desks, keywords appeared everywhere: news, books, movies and tv. One of the words that so often took centerstage was *defection*. “I want to defect,” we’d hear in a thick Eastern European accent, as someone tried to squeeze through the iron curtain that divided the world. People wanted freedom, not just for the low cost Levi jeans but for the ideas of religious liberty and freedom of speech.

Defection is exactly what Stephen sees in the story of ancient Israel. God had broken down an iron curtain that kept His people in slavery and suffering, and no sooner have they escaped, they begin to look over their shoulder, looking for ways to defect back to their old lives.

This defection from freedom is nothing new. Lot’s wife couldn’t help herself from looking back. Her life, her community, everything she’d wanted and more were back in Sodom (Genesis 19.26). The voices she carried were deeply ingrained calling her back to darkness. The voices the Israelites carried into the wilderness called to them with false promises. It’s so much easier to worship the things we see, the sun, moon and stars, the visible influence and affluence and “success” of our national dream. And the Sanhedrin were no different. They were the important and powerful. They had the ability to make or break others, to craft them into their image or crush them for their opposition.

The Sanhedrin, like the wandering, wayward people in the wilderness did not deal with the internal voices they carried, and it led to their spiritual defection. “The first voices,” J.S. Park addresses have to do with our “valuations—how we grade others and ourselves. They are about the way we lift up and tear down, how we idolize and demonize.”

## **The Voices We Carry**

The Sanhedrin exalted themselves which meant to maintain their elevated status they had to demean others. As they rose in power and prominence, the distance between them and the vulnerable increased. They made legal loopholes to leave aged parents helpless (Mark 7.11). Jesus rebuked them for creating systems that left widows, orphans and foreigners in precarious positions (Luke 18).

True, the Sanhedrin did not build a golden calf in the temple courtyard, but they did enshrine themselves, worshiping the law made in *their* image rather than the God who gave them the Law. This was their natural heritage as the sons of their fathers. The voices they carried out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land whispered across the generations: it is easier to worship yourself, your needs and the things you see than the immortal, invisible abiding I AM.

As C.K. Barrett put it: “Never had a people been so privileged or so completely negated their vocation.” The Lord placed His Tent of Meeting in their midst and led them by the fire and cloud of His Holy Spirit, but they chose to take up the tabernacle of Molek and follow the star of Rephan instead (Amos 5.25-27).

Before we voice our agreement with Stephen too loudly and quickly, what tabernacles are we carrying, what stars are we following?

## **The Voices We Raise**

Don't rush this time of listening prayer. Where are the areas of spiritual defection that are creeping beneath the surface of our souls? (Psalm 78.40-42; 2 Thessalonians 2.3-4)

Invite the Spirit to shine a light on where you have idolized and demonized yourself (Romans 7.21-8.2; 1 Corinthians 10.12).

Invite the Spirit to shine a light on where you have idolized and demonized others (Matthew 7.1-5; Luke 6.32-38).





Stephanite Cross, engraved with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob  
1500-1522, Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia

## Sunday, June 19

*Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen.*

Acts 7.44

Since Stephen has addressed their first accusation—blasphemy against Moses and His Law—he now turns his attention to their second, God’s use of holy space (which for them was the Temple, Acts 6.13). With a clever repetition of the word *tabernacle*, Stephen begins his defense.

Once again, Stephen uses collective language, referring to “our ancestors” who had the tabernacle that God directed Moses to build. What a blessing to have the manifest presence of God in their midst. And yet, as the people followed Him through the wilderness and came face to face with His promises they turned away, chasing idols and entertaining dreams of returning to Egypt (Numbers 14.4; 13.26-33).

How easily we forget, says Paul Mumo Kisau, “Without God’s initiative, there would be no holy people, let alone a holy place.” So, as “Stephen brings his account of Moses’ life to a close by speaking about the tabernacle... which was built according to the design given by God to Moses” we must remember that “It was God’s idea, not that of Moses or the fathers.”

### **The Voices We Carry**

This is the voice we must carry, not the internal voices that send us spinning out after idols, or the external voices that pressure us into conformity, but the voice of God who is calling all people to Himself (John 12.32). God called to His people to be his beloved kingdom of priests (Exodus 19.3-6).

God thundered from over the mountain (Exodus 19.6), telling Moses “so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you,” (Exodus 19.9b). It should be no shock then that God would do the same thing over the One Moses promised would come after him (John 12.27-30). God the Father’s voice thundered over the people as Jesus prayed, “Father, glorify your name!” as He faced the crucible of the cross (John 12.28).

Fully human, Jesus looked wearily at the cross on the horizon, troubled by the pain and passion that lay before Him. The voices of self-preservation and self-centeredness must have echoed out of the world into His ears. No one understood what He was facing and even sought to dissuade Him from His obedient path (Matthew 16.21-23). “The crowd could not fathom the idea of a crucified Messiah,” writes Pratap C. Gine. But instead of conceding to them, Jesus prayed. He prayed the Father’s will. He prayed for His Father’s name to be glorified.

How beautiful that in this moment of sincere and earnest prayer, with confused disciples and an angry world around him, God responded to Jesus’ obedience with His thundering voice. Not for Jesus. For his disciples. For us. Will we believe? Will we abandon the voices we carry that deafen us to the thundering call of God?

“Jesus gives the people one last chance,” states Adele Reinhartz, “to understand his cosmological significance (12.32–36), but they refuse. He hides and departs from them. Even so, the narrator states, many authorities did believe in Him but were afraid to confess openly for fear of expulsion from the synagogue (12.42).”

Today, may we not block our ears to hear the voice of God, speaking through Moses, Stephen, Luke or John: “Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God,” (John 12.42-43).

### **The Voices We Raise**

Where have we excluded God’s voice in our life for the comfortable sound of others? (Isaiah 30.10)

What are the internal and external voices that are blocking your ears to the voice of God because of fear or comfort? Lay them before the Jesus and pray with Him, “Father, glorify your name!”

What are the internal and external voices that are blocking the ears of our society to the voice of God? Intercede with a sensitive heart that God’s voice would thunder in our world.

**Monday, June 20**

*After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them.*

Acts 7.45a



As the people of God entered into His Promised Land they were living a very *Tale-of-Two-Cities* existence. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. They had the tabernacle of the Lord in their midst. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob brought them into a land of their own, but as Amos shows, it was also the worst times as they brought with them the tabernacle of idols into the land.

It was the best of times as men and women like Joshua, Caleb and Rahab placed their trust in God, who spoke out against the idolatry of their time: “if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living,” while speaking over their descendants “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD,” (Joshua 24.15). It was the worst of times as many opted to pick and choose from the gods of their neighbors, seeking autonomy and finding only oppression (Judges 21.25).

Time after time, the people twisted themselves out of shape under the weight of the voices they carried as they chased idols. And all the while the tabernacle was in Shiloh. When the pain became too acute to ignore, like when they felt crushed in Egypt, they cried out to the God who was always there. In His infinite love and unfathomable mercy God heard them every time (Judges 3.9; 6.6-7; 10.10).

### **The Voices We Carry**

It is important for Stephen to show that God’s presence and His use of sacred space was not confined to a single place or time. To believe that God only inhabits one place, even the Temple in Jerusalem, is to forget the nature and character of God. God was with His people in the wilderness. When Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, God was with them there too. He was always present, doing great works of deliverance, as He fulfilled His promises faithfully to His unfaithful people.



It is beautiful to see people gathered in a building on a Sunday morning, lifting their voices in worship and listening intently to the Word of God together. As the writer of Hebrews says, we should “not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but” we should also be “encouraging one another” all the more as we follow Jesus into the future (Hebrews 10.25). But what we cannot afford is to allow the voices of men to invest our fidelity into institutions rather than to Jesus. Those voices lead us to preserve soulless systems at the expense of the vulnerable and marginalized. No amount of charisma can replace character, and no charismatic leader can replace Jesus.

For the Sanhedrin, their devotion was more and more to the Temple and the institutions that kept them in power. Often what they said was accurate about Moses and the Law, but their lives and how they stewarded God’s people was wrong. They killed Jesus because He spoke out against their abuse and misuse of people. “Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees *sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.* They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them,’” (Matthew 23.1-4). Obsessed with the temple building and “their web of legalism” they missed the point of why God entered the Promised Land with His people in the first place.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Inquire of the Lord to show you where you’ve brought devotion to old things into the new place forgetting He has already brought you out from their bondage? (Joshua 7.1)

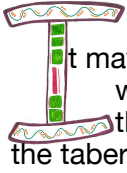
Are there voices that have confused your faith with ideas and beliefs that are contrary to the nature and character of God, muddling your walk with Jesus? Ask God to show you what they are and begin to remove them (2 Timothy 3.13; Colossians 2.4).

Celebrate that God has not left you alone, but placed you within His people, shoulder to shoulder with brothers and sisters before His throne (1 Peter 2.10; Hosea 2.23).

**Tuesday, June 21**

*It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him.*

Acts 7.45b-47



It may not be immediately obvious to us as we read Stephen's words but he is directly addressing the accusations about the temple the Sanhedrin brought against him. What does the tabernacle have to do with the temple?

The tabernacle was made as God directed. The material, the shape, the dimensions were all spoken into the life of Israel by God's own voice. Even more, He empowered the craftsmen and artisans, Ohliab and Bezalel with His Holy Spirit "with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills" to bring the masterwork of the Tent of Meeting into existence (Exodus 31.2-3).

From the time of Joshua when they first entered the Promised Land until the time of David it was in Shiloh (Joshua 18.1; 2 Samuel 6.17). By that time decades and centuries had passed, generations had come and gone, and the Tabernacle must have shown some age. David, the shepherd king of his people, saw the tabernacle and sought to honor God with a permanent "dwelling place" among His people (Psalm 132.4-5). David understood, unlike Saul his predecessor, that God was the True King of Israel. But, because David's hands were stained with blood, he was not allowed to build the temple. That honor would pass to his son, Solomon, who reigned over Israel's greatest season of peace.

### **The Voices We Carry**

Stephen's ears were ringing with the voices of David and Solomon, the incredible kings of Israel. David, the warrior king who completed the task begun by Joshua, longed to love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. Solomon, the king whose very name means peace, sought to steward his power and position well.

One wonders if the Sanhedrin remembered David's story as Stephen spoke. How the great king was not allowed to build the temple but given a promise, a new covenant, of an eternal throne (2 Samuel 7.8-17). To David, the king who only knew the tabernacle as the dwelling place of God, was promised a messianic king who would reign forever in the midst of His people.

Or, did they recall the very words of Solomon, as he presided over the inauguration of his grand temple (1 Kings 8)? How he called for all the elders of the nation to be present as the Ark of the Covenant was carried into the temple. How the manifest presence of God overshadowed when the Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies. How Solomon himself, with a loud voice prayed before the people:

But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. (1 Kings 8.27-30)

Along the way, the Sanhedrin forgot the words of David and Solomon. The voices they carried sounded more like Rehoboam (1 Kings 11.43b-12.11), like ones of power and privilege, elevated status and earthy importance. The voices they carried were not ones seeking divine forgiveness but of human judgment. The voices they carried were of a confined god to a single temple of their own imagined making, not an omnipresent God that the heavens and earth could not contain.

### **The Voices We Raise**

As you reflect on worship—how we seek to honor God with our lives and our gifts—in what ways have you made that worship more about yourself than God? (Romans 6.16-19; 2 Timothy 3.1-3)


How have you tried to confine and constrain Jesus in your life? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you have tried to limit His access to your soul (Psalm 78.40-42).

Ask the Lord how He is calling you to worship Him in this season, walking in His forgiveness and renewing (Isaiah 55.1; Hebrews 10.24-25).

## Wednesday, June 22

*“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?”*

Acts 7.48-50

 Stephen lifts up Solomon’s word that God cannot be limited to a temple made with hands. The king who took 6 years to build a palace befitting the divine was left recognizing the vanity of such an impossible task (1 Kings 6; 8.27; 2 Chronicles 6.1-2, 18). The very construction of a fixed dwelling place could only give rise to the dangerous thinking that God could be confined within its walls and the temple itself was worthy of reverence.

To this point, Stephen leads his audience even further through his recitation of the Old Testament. Where he started with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, walked alongside Joseph and Moses, arriving in the lives of David and Solomon, he concludes with Isaiah the prophet. And not to be lost in the long story of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry he quotes the prophet’s concluding thoughts over Israel and the nations (Isaiah 66).

In these verses, Isaiah reminds us the transcendence of our God who is so majestic and marvelous that the heavens are His throne, and the earth is where He places His feet. No temple built by human hands could contain a single toe, let alone the glory and resplendence of God, not even the temple of Solomon.

### **The Voices We Carry**

The Sanhedrin, like us today, could only imagine what the temple built by Solomon looked like. It had been destroyed long before during the destruction and exile, prophesied long before Isaiah to Solomon himself after its construction (1 Kings 9.8). They gathered in a much less impressive temple built to replace the one lost to time and disobedience.

How sad the men of the Sanhedrin were to cling to the faded shadow of a former glory. They held it with tensed hands, seized with pride and obstinance, against every perceived threat. Rather than heeding the words of Isaiah to carry the voice of God into the nations they filled the courts designed to invite all peoples with animals and market stalls (Matthew 21.12-17; Mark 11.15–19).

By deifying the house (they occupied as the seat of their religious power) they imposed “a false limit on the nature of God,” (I. Howard Marshall). Because of this they could not understand the God of Isaiah who would send His people into the whole world because all of creation was His (Isaiah 66.1-2, 18-23). They could not truly worship God because they did not worship him in Spirit and in truth (John 4.24).

Paulson Pulikottil has said, “Humility and obedience are the essential elements of worship.” Stephen was able to see past the place of worship because He knew the One He was worshiping was not confined to a single place or a unique people. He was a child of a chosen nation, not for the self-glorifying honor of being the best, but for the immensely humbling honor of carrying the message of the loving God to all peoples. But the Sanhedrin may (like we do too often) “say that they are worshiping the Lord, but in practice they are doing what they want to do. Their worship does not reflect any love for him because it is not combined with obedience,” (Pulikottil).

As we see in such sharp contrast, it is to those that worship in humility and obedience like Stephen that God commissions to the nations and entrusts with His presence!

### **The Voices We Raise**

J.B. Philips once wrote a challenge to the Church saying “You’re God is too small!” How have you tried to put God in a box of your own making? (Acts 17.24-31)

Where is God breaking down your past perceptions of who He is? How is God inviting to breakthrough those false limits on His nature as He guides you closer to Himself? (John 6.44; ` Corinthians 2.10-16)

Ask the Spirit of Jesus to show you today how you can worship in humility and obedience (Isaiah 25.1; Acts 16.25).

Thursday, June 23

*“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him...”*

Acts 7.51-52



Stephen, the man accused of blasphemy against Moses and His God carries the voice of God and His prophet to their ears.

“You stiff-necked people! (Exodus 33.3, 5; 34.9; Deuteronomy 9.6, 13; 31.27).” The people of Israel were well-known by God and Moses as a stiff-necked, rebellious people.

How often did Moses have to plead with the Lord on their behalf (Exodus 32.9-14)? They were churlish and difficult, setting out their own plans and approaching God on their own terms. They carried their bruised and beaten identities as oppressed slaves into the relationship with God and Moses. Like so many children who has been beaten down and abused by those who should care for them, when someone comes along who truly loves them, they act out. They break past boundaries. They shatter things and scream, at times because they’ve never had a voice before, at other times because their grief is beyond words.

Lest we misunderstand the words of God and His servants Moses and Stephen, these words are not made from hate or fury. They are, as Willie James Jennings artfully says, “words that reveal divine presence yet caught in the drama of resistance. God’s harsh words can never be separated from God’s unremitting love for Israel.” Moses loved the people though they broke his heart. And God loved his roughneck children all the more, for they were His chosen people to carry His message of love to all people!

Many have approached this passage and said that Stephen must have sensed his message was not being received and so he rebuked them harshly. Nothing could be further from the truth! Stephen’s words are one final effort to draw out a response, carrying the voice of Moses before his beloved people.

### **The Voices We Carry**

In our own day, we hear of abuses within the Church. To the world these acts of violence and evil are done in the name of God! In a recent article discussing this continued abuse of the innocent, Peter

Wehner comments that “Many of those who appear in the report are misogynistic, judgmental, unforgiving, arrogant, and certain of their own righteousness. They are the martyrs and heroes of their self-created narratives. They represent much of the worst of religion and none of the best. And they have exercised enormous power.” Oh, stiff-necked people! Have mercy on us, Lord!

The truth is that we all carry within us the capacity to establish narratives, built on the voices we carry. As J.S. Park teaches, “Narratives are not bad. Rules and rituals are not bad. We need them. But they need examination. They need accountability. A healthy community will allow questions, will disagree, will challenge their own practices, and will have the courage and compassion to speak up to their leaders. Healthy persons will also question themselves, disagree with themselves, examine their own ideas, and speak up to their own ways.”

Stephen does not challenge the circumcision of their hearts and ears because he hates the men of the Sanhedrin. He does not shout without tears in his eyes! His words are laced with grief and he laments the stubbornness of his people, beloved by Jesus but blind by choice. Jesus came offering them life, living water that would never die, and instead they spilled His blood and hung Him from a cross (John 7.37-39; John 19.16-17). They murdered the Author of Life in the name of God (Acts 3.15).

### **The Voices We Raise**

Beloved, as you enter the presence of God today, would you go humbly, not like a pharisee, but as a sinner in need of grace (Micah 6.8). Read Luke 18.13 and be still before the Lord awaiting His voice.

Where are the places in your life where Jesus is inviting you to humble yourself and speak against the injustices in your home, community and nation? (Deuteronomy 10.18; Psalm 147.3)

Where are the places in your life where the Holy Spirit is grieved because of your obstinance? Call out to Him as your Father, your Lord, and seek Him as you did at first (Isaiah 63.10, 15-19; Revelation 2.2-5).

Friday, June 24

*“...you who have received the law that was given through angels  
but have not obeyed it.”  
Acts 7.53*



Moses last act as a leader” Ajith Fernando points out  
“focuses on blessing the people.” His final words sing as  
poetry over the people he dedicated his life to lead.  
Lyrically, Moses composes his praise as a song:

The Lord came from Sinai,  
And dawned on them from Seir;  
He shone from Mount Paran,  
And He came from the midst of myriads of holy ones;  
At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.  
Indeed, He loves the people;  
All Your holy ones are in Your hand,  
And they followed in Your steps;  
Everyone takes of Your words.” (Deuteronomy 33.1-3)

In these poetic words He cast his long memory back over time and remembers how God saw His people, and like the sun at dawn rose in the East. He illuminated their path at Paran with His covenant. Deborah the great Judge will model her own song of God’s triumph on Moses’ words, recognizing the same places but using the metaphor of water rather than light (Judges 5.4-5).

The theme of the Lord coming from before the midst of a myriad of holy ones is taken up by Daniel in his apocalyptic visions. He sees the great and glorious Ancient of Days dressed in splendor and also, like Moses before him, Daniel must resort to poetry to describe the wonder of God (Daniel 7.9-10). Words cannot suffice to capture the holiness and righteousness of God. Fire flows before him, just as it did from the burning bush before Moses. Once again, God is in the midst where:

Thousands upon thousands were serving Him,  
And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him.

Before Moses the people face the capacity for blessings, whereas before Daniel the Ancient of Days has taken his seat ready to pass judgment. In the mind of Stephen, the men before him received the law given through Moses, carried into the lives of Israel through countless messengers and myriads of angels. Now, the Everlasting



God is seated on His throne ready to pass judgment; God the Father and also Jesus Christ the Righteous One the people rejected.

### **The Voices We Carry**

Recounting the whole Old Testament we see “Israel was in transition: it was on the brink of entering the Promised Land, and Moses had taken them as far as he could take them,” (Bennett). In the exile, where Daniel and his fellow exiles had to navigate a foreign existence in strange lands, Israel was in transition. Daniel was not in the Promised Land yet he experienced the absolute nearness of God. Before Stephen, Israel was once again in that liminal space of transition, where true change is possible. They were in the Promised Land but lacked the presence of God. They were in the halls of purpose in the temple, in the heart of the city named for the peace David sought for his people, Jerusalem, but failing to meet with God. Moses’ blessings took them as far as he could take them. Daniel’s prophetic words took them as far as he could take them. Stephen’s sermon took them as far as he could take them. It was now time for them to decide, not his fate but theirs.

### **The Voices We Raise**

Think back on the myriad of messengers, those men and women God placed in your path, to share His light. Thank God for their voices and consider how you carry their voices in positive ways into the lives of others (Deuteronomy 11.19).

Reflect on the negatives voices you carry, those condemning voices that berate you and twist what God is speaking over your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to rewrite the script in your life that leads to hardness of heart and away from obedience (Ezekiel 36.26; Jeremiah 24.7).

Who is God calling you to bless today? Take steps to express His love for them in ways that would be most meaningful for them (Proverbs 22.9).





Ethiopian Cross  
Province unknown

**Saturday, June 25**

*When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

Acts 7.54-56



As the trial pressed on, the men of the Sanhedrin must have become increasingly agitated. Every reference to Moses and the Law, every quotation of the prophets, every story of Abraham and Joseph must have flooded their ears with blood. But in Stephen's last words, his final appeal to them as rebellious sons of Abraham, they could not longer hold back the torrent of their rage. In the final moments of his life Stephen saw Jesus, the heart of his faith's non-negotiables which would ultimately lead to his death.

Non-Nonnegotiables are the "you that you bring to a room. The values you lift up everywhere you go. What you fight for. What you want to bring in. What you never budge from. Basically, what you are about." (J.S. Park) For Stephen it was to witness to the risen Jesus. Jesus was not the abolisher of the Mosaic law or the destroyer of the temple. Jesus was the One Moses promised would come, the One who fulfilled the law and the One greater than the temple because He was the everliving presence of God dwelling among His people (Deuteronomy 18.15-19; Matthew 5.17-20; John 1.14). Jesus was the heart of Stephen's non-negotiables.

When the condemnation of the world was pummeling Stephen, he clung to his non-negotiable faith in Jesus. He was standing trial for his life, falsely accused and already condemned. The Sanhedrin stood in judgment of him seeking for ways to silence him and the people of Jesus' Way. How beautiful it was for Stephen, and for us as we find ourselves in his story, to see how the Spirit of God drew his eyes towards heaven and showed Him the glory of God. There in the temple courts was God the Father seated on His throne, just as He was before the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6.1). As his eyes focused on the wonder and splendor of the sight, his eyes fixed on Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. He couldn't contain Himself as He was filled with this sublime vision. He had to share it with others!

## **The Voices We Carry**

Stephen called to the men of the Sanhedrin standing in judgment over him to look up above their heads and see the very Jesus they sentenced to death now standing at the right hand of God! Surely, Jesus was now standing in judgment over them!

Stephen is a very important voice we carry as followers of Jesus. He was the first martyr to experience the full wrath of a fallen world because of his non-negotiable faith. As persecution has arisen across the millennia many have escaped the hangman's noose or the torching pyre by denying their faith in Jesus. Some walked away from Jesus as they stood before the kings and courts of this world. Some ran out in shame like Peter only to find the gentle hand of Jesus leading them back into faith. Still others refused to deny the Lord who refused to deny them salvation, even at the cost of the cross.

Stephen lifts our eyes with his words, just as he did for the men of the Sanhedrin. "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" I see the One who suffered and died for my redemption and restoration! I see the One who became incarnate, taking on the form of His creation, to recreate me in His new life. I see the One who rose from the dead and holds all authority in His righteous right hand (Luke 9.22; Matthew 28.18)!

## **The Voices We Raise**

What are the aspects of your faith God is calling you to make non-negotiable? (Philippians 4.8)

How is God calling you to a healthy, living walk with Him in this season, regardless of how others may respond? (2 Corinthians 6.14; Psalm 147.14)

Despite the attack of the world, Jesus is still sovereign over your life. How is the Spirit reminding you that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God? (Psalm 63.8; Hebrews 12.2; 1 Peter 3.22)

**Sunday, June 26**

*At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

Acts 7.57-58



In his book *The Voices We Carry* J.S. Park writes these challenging words: “I can either become a voice that someone has to overcome, or a voice that helps someone to overcome.” In the visceral chaos of this biblical passage we see two schools of thought. The first is the natural, worldly response that fights tooth and nail for its way and its domination over others. Like the child’s game “King of the Hill” they have secured the high ground and will destroy any who would come against them. Their rage and aggression does not stop at open hostility. Any word spoken or action taken that is perceived as a threat must be annihilated. They refused to listen, shouting at the top of their lungs their party line as they dragged their “enemy” to be stoned.

The second school of thought is that of Jesus. One that speaks difficult truths because when understood they help others overcome. The people of Jesus should not seek world domination or political power, if the gospel of Jesus is true. Jesus is Sovereign over His creation, and all power and authority have been given to Him (Colossians 1.16-17). If he calls them to steward positions of governance they must not allow themselves to be corrupted by the way the world dishonors His divine calling. One group shouts profanities against the truth of Christ while the other group, with eyes fixed on Jesus, invites their persecutors to see Him too. One group leaves carnage in their wake, the blood of innocent people for their sake, while the other group offers their voices as stepping stones that lead the hurting and oppressed to Jesus.

### **The Voices We Carry**

Luke carefully guides our eyes as we watch the innocent Stephen dragged out of the city to his death to notice another young man named Saul. Both Stephen and Saul were from the same region, both growing up in Cilicia. Although Paul does not raise his arms in violence to bury Stephen with stones, he is a full participant, perhaps even part of the original group of men from the synagogue of Freedmen (Acts 6.9) who spoke false accusations against Stephen.

The voices Saul carried were ones of condemnation and fury. The story Saul took with him during this trial would drive him to start rounding up Christians through Jerusalem and Judea. Eventually he would procure permission from the high priest and the Sanhedrin to breathe his murderous threats against the Christians in Damascus (Acts 9.1).

Saul should have known that his days of rage and rampage were coming to an end. The Jesus Stephen saw standing at the right hand of God would blind Saul with His radiant glory, throwing him to his knees and turning his world upside down. All of Saul's resistance to a loving God would come to nothing. Jesus would show Saul the persecutor the good news Stephen was willing to suffer for, the good news Saul would suffer for too (Acts 9.16).

How fitting then that Stephen would quote the prophet Amos remembering the failure of the people of Israel in the wilderness (Amos 5.25-26; Acts 7.42-43) while artfully holding back the final phrase of that prophesy to his people: "And I will send you into exile beyond *Damascus*," says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts."

Before Saul would encounter God on the road to Damascus, God was already encircling Him with His Word. Before Saul arrested his first Christian or imprisoned his first follower of Jesus, Jesus surrounded him with a cloud of witnesses that would call him to lift his eyes toward God's throne and meet with Jesus. Stephen carried the words of Amos into Saul's life, and the Spirit of God would invite Saul to a life beyond Damascus, exiled from his former deformed faith, where He would meet with the Lord enthroned on high (but that my friend, is a story for another day).

### **The Voices We Raise**

With a humble heart ask the Lord what kind of voice you are in the lives around you. Are you a voice that helps people overcome, or are you a voice they must overcome? (Ephesians 4.29; Matthew 12.34)

Knowing that God loved Saul, even while he was persecuting the church, how is God calling you love those who have hurt you? (Matthew 5.43-48)

How is God calling you to entrust the judgment on other people, like Stephen did with Saul and the Sanhedrin—not taking up arms against his oppressors but proclaiming the truth of Jesus to them? (Deuteronomy 32.35; Psalm 54.5; Romans 12.19)

## CONCLUSION



mil Brunner once wrote:

For every civilization, for every period in history, it is true to say: ‘Show me what kind of a god you have, and I will tell you what kind of a humanity you possess.’ A purely secular civilization will always like this deeper kind of humanity; and the converse of the statement would be that the purest humanity is to be found where God, not man, is at the center of all.”

This was true of the Canaanites and the Egyptians. It was true of the Sumerians and the Gauls. It was true of the Israelites and it is true of us today. What becomes painfully clear, however, is how much is at stake when we fail to understand our God. What great damage can come when the Greeks or Romans failed to worship the lifeless stone and wooden idols of Zeus or Apollo? What expense was taken from the life of the people when they refused to bow down before Quetzalcoatl or sacrifice their children to Moloch? These false gods and demonic manipulators betray the corrupted voices we carry across the generations.

### **A Hacker’s Example**

Imagine when Gideon the son of Joash heard “the Lord say to him, ‘Take the second bull from your father’s herd, the one seven years old. Tear down *your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it*. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering,’” (Judges 6.25-26). The next morning when the people of his hometown came out to find their idols destroyed they cried out for blood. They wanted vengeance. The people of Israel were furious their idols had been tampered with! After carefully investigating the case they discovered the culprit: Gideon (whose name literally means ‘hacker’). This single moment of courage under the cover of night cast how the people of Israel would see the son of Joash forever.

The reversal of God’s ordained order for His people was immense! Havilah Dharamraj reminds us “The sentence that ought to be imposed on the idol worshipper (Deuteronomy 13.1-18) is reversed — it now falls on the head of the idol breaker!” What this reveals is that the god of the people was not the God who lead them out of Egypt but the one who enslaved them beneath the oppressive hand of the Midianites. Before the God of Israel, Gideon is the judge who



hacks at the idols that entrap his people. But to the people he became known as Jerub-Baal because his father sought to defend him from the mob saying, "If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar," (Judges 6.31). Although the people cried out to God seeking freedom they refused to let go of their chains (Judges 6.6-10).

In the days of Gideon the Hacker, in the days of Stephen, a crown of the early the church, and in the days you are living in today, "the purest humanity is to be found where God, not man, is at the center of all." But this does not mean that your words or witness will be received when you topple the idols and altars of this world. The Israelites of Manasseh called for Gideon's blood when he challenged their corrupted faith, those voices they carried that contradicted the words of Moses. The men of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem called for Stephen's blood (and took it by force, Matthew 11.12) when he challenged their malformed faith, those misshapen voices they carried that contradicted the words of Moses. Beloved, don't be surprised if you face the same response, even by the people who claim the cross and the gospel.

### **A Gradual Decay to an Anti-Life**

After living through two great world wars, and seeing the name of Jesus used to massacre millions, it is little wonder that Brunner would write:

"A sinister inhumanity clouds all life. We have forgotten who we are, and no remembrance of an absolute obligation brings us back to our lost origin; all obligation simply intensifies the gulf which lies between us and our origin in the word of God. Responsibility and love, which were formally a unity, have been turned into a contradiction."

How then must we respond this fallen world's constant decline into gradual decay, generation after generation? Stephen's short life gives us an idea. He does not live a reactive life, quick to reshape his faith into more negotiable terms or offer up the heart of his belief in Jesus to survive another day. He does not choose to betray his Lord so that he could live another day doing good. Truly, "a life lived," according to I. Howard Marshall, "out of reaction to everyone else, is sort of an anti-life. It has no originating force, no engine. It doesn't know what it's about."

Never do we see Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, reacting to the accusations of the freedmen or the Pharisees. Instead we see a follower of Jesus who sees his enemies and his brothers and

fathers, and although he will not hold back from saying hard things, he says them saturated in love. He sees this sorrowful farce of a trial, not as a space to give a defense for his life, but as a space to love his countrymen of Cilicia and the council of the Sanhedrin where he shares the story of God's faithfulness to His unfaithful people, from Abraham to Amos, from the courtroom of the temple to the throne-room of King Jesus!

### **A Life of Proactive Prayer**

What then is a life well-lived? It is a life of Holy Spirit-inspired prayer.

The last words of Stephen were a prayer for himself and for brothers and fathers. With his eyes set on Jesus beyond the grave He surrendered his Spirit to the resurrected Jesus standing at the right of God. With his eyes on Jesus he echoed His words from the cross "Lord, don't hold this sin against," (Acts 7.59-60). He prayed that over the Sanhedrin. He prayed that over Saul. Beloved, he prayed that over you.

Thank you for dedicating the time to spend these days in prayer, inviting the Spirit to speak and inspire, encourage and correct. Today, you may feel more like the unrepentant Saul than the martyred saint Stephen. Take these following words as inspiration of a life powered by proactive prayer, where we are not condemned by the family stories we carry, but drawn near to Christ by the voices we carry. They are the words of the Apostle Paul, that same assassin Saul, to the church in Philippi—I pray them over you today too:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.  
(Philippians 1.3-6)



The Voices We Carry: Stephen



**cornerstone**

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