

As most of you already know... this has been an incredible week for my wife and I. It all started Sunday afternoon when Tom (my wife's brother) called from Fresno... where he lives. ... Tom was bursting with joy. Tom is a Christian and we had all been praying for his and Patti's dad... who had always been very antagonistic toward Christianity... He would often show much disdain toward his family members for their belief. Tom... Patti... and I had... on occasion... tried to share the Gospel of Christ with him... but he would have nothing to do with it. But on Sunday... Tom decided he would make one more effort to try and present the Gospel to him. He called his dad and asked if he could come over. ... His dad said, "No." ... But Tom went anyway. When he got there... he said... *"Dad... I have something very important that I really need to discuss with you. Dad... you need Jesus to forgive you of all your sin..."* Then Tom said he braced to be thrown out by his dad... just like all the previous times. ... But his dad did not do it. In fact... Tom said his dad relaxed and listened to everything Tom had to say. Eventually Tom asked his dad if he wanted to pray with him... and his dad answered "yes." So Patti and Tom's dad confessed his belief in Christ and asked for the complete forgiveness of sin. Then Tom asked *"Dad, who did you just talk to?"* Immediately came the reply – *"Jesus... I just prayed to Jesus."*

Sunday night... Patti called her dad. We had prayed that God would show us evidence of a transformed heart in her dad... and God answered our prayer. Her dad was assuring Patti to trust her circumstances to God's will. This was clearly the behavior of a "FORMER atheist."

At 3:00a.m. the very next morning... God took Lew Curtis to his new home in eternity. (Patti's dad died.)

6:30p.m. that very evening... I was driving Patti to Chemult to catch a train down to Fresno. Both of us sat rather numb in the car... driving through a heavy rain storm. My cell phone rang. The caller ID said it was my dad's wife. ... I remember thinking "*How nice! Jackie must have heard about Patti's dad... and is calling to offer her condolences...*" So I handed my phone over to Patti so she could answer it... especially since I REALLY needed to keep my eyes on the road through the fast-moving wiper blades. ... Patti's "*Hi Jackie!*" was met by Jackie's shaky voice and hysterical message. She spoke of not being able to get hold of any of my brothers or sisters... and that my dad had collapsed and was not breathing. The EMTs were working on him at the time. ... We got word just before Patti stepped into the Amtrak car that my dad did not make it. He died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

Services will be next weekend down in California... but I wanted to be here today... because our very next passage in the Book of Acts has an important point to make about the situation my family and I are facing. ... Do you mind if I relate this rather significant life-principle that we see in our passage...?

Patti's dad responded to the bold... persistent... witness from her brother Tom. We are certain that we will see him in Glory. All day Monday we just COULD NOT BELIEVE how gracious God was to bring him into His Kingdom... after a life of scoffing... just before he died. "The Author and Perfector of our faith" – Jesus Christ... authored faith in him... and then took him Home.

Just like Patti's dad... my father resisted many attempts to present the Gospel to him. Like Patti's dad he would scoff and show nothing but hardness. He would tell me that I need Jesus, but he didn't. He saw his own self-sufficiency as enough. ... Last month my brother and two sisters drove to his house on the Central Coast of California. My brother said, "I am looking for a way to share the Gospel of Christ with him." ... But my dad resisted hard. My brother told me that they all left very disappointed.

God must open the heart... in order for a person to believe. We will see an amazing thing... later on in the Book of Acts... when Paul went to Philippi and preached to a group of women... But just look ahead with me... for a moment at the situation that Acts 16:14 describes.

**Acts 16:14 (ESV)**

*One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*

A few moments ago I referenced Hebrews 12:2... (In this graphic that I am putting on the screen... I made a few notations that reflect a little better... what the original language says...

**Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**

*looking to Jesus, the founder ( ἀρχηγός - "originator") and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

(Look at that!)... Jesus is the originator and perfecter – "of faith". ... So... Why would Jesus - author (or originate) a faith in my father-in-law... but not my dad...? Why did He open the heart of Patti's dad... but not my dad's. ... Both had persistent witnesses presenting God's truth to them...? Was it the

way the Gospel was presented...? Was it because one had it presented to them in a very compelling manner... (so they responded) and to the other presentation was missing something...?

What we are about to see in our passage today... is the answer is (clearly) **NO** to these assertions. ... We are told to share the Gospel wherever we go... and we are encouraged by our passage today... to do it BOLDLY. ... But as we will see... even though Stephen offered impeccable logic... and he did it compellingly with incredible boldness... his message was rejected... and Stephen was taken out and murdered by the ones to whom he witnessed.

We MUST share the Gospel as bold and compelling as we can – but it is God’s job to open the heart... and author faith. ... I have no idea why Christ authored faith in me... but doesn’t in someone else. That is His business! He simply says... “*Go out in the power of My Holy Spirit and share this Gospel – then leave the results to Me!*”

That is exactly what we see Stephen do. His results (rejection and murder) - may seem like failure... (I mean) what could indicate a botched witnessing attempt (better) than such a dismissal we are about to see... followed by stoning him to death...? ... But it won’t take long in our study of Acts... before we see a man named Saul... who was greatly influenced by it... and went out and set the world on fire for Christ. ... And let me say this... ... What may seem like failed witnessing efforts of your own – may not be at all! ... (LISTEN)... failure for **sure** – is when we refuse to share our faith!

Today we will (#1) look at the witness, himself – Stephen. Then we will (#2) examine his bold, impeccable, and compelling witness. (And I want

you to notice)... The logic he employs is beautiful. It would seem no one could possibly argue with it... that the only response possible was to accept it. But that did not happen. Their hearts were not opened... and faith was not authored inside of them. So we will conclude with (#3)... the apparent tragedy of rejecting of it.

We begin with the person giving the witness – Stephen.

### **Acts 6:8-15**

Full of... grace," Stephen possessed a charm of character that touched even those who did not know its source. Notice the impression Stephen left on the Council (Acts 6:15): "*All who sat in the council...*" (All of his enemies who wanted to kill him)... "*looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*"

His face had no clenched jaw... or eyes that burned with hate. ... A great injustice was being done to him... but he didn't breath out vile threats of vengeance. It is EASY to be harsh with... and to reject someone who is being like that! But Stephen was winsome... and we are about to see that he also had an incredibly forceful ...and undeniable argument!

The rejection of Stephen and his message started in the Synagogue of Freedmen. This was a fellowship of gentile converts to Judaism... from around the Roman Empire... who now lived in Jerusalem. ... They had a strong motivation to prove to the ethnic Jews in the city... that they were not second-class Jews... but they could show just as much zeal... as those who were born "Jewish."

Verse nine specifically mentions that this synagogue included “those from Cilicia...” ... Tarsus was the most important city in Cilicia. That is where Saul (who would later become Paul) was from. ... The Apostle Paul (before Christ authored faith inside of him)... was probably part of those debates with Stephen in that synagogue. He most likely suffered a lot of humiliation and defeat because he could not withstand the wisdom Stephen manifested. This was probably why he became so hostile against him... and why we see at the end of our passage Paul oversaw the entire event of Stephen’s murder. But Paul... and the entire Sanhedrin was about to experience an even greater whipping.

The members of the synagogue level false charges and accusations against Stephen... in order for the Sanhedrin to condemn him for blasphemy. ... When evil lacks convincing substance and arguments... it will turn to violence. This has been true in every age! So they stir up the crowd and bring him before Israel’s High Court.

Now we are ready to see Stephen’s witness. His arguments are solid. No one could possibly argue against what he says. Stephen proved from their own Scriptures that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those they had accused him of committing. ... His listeners should have been convinced by the evidence Stephen brings forth. But they weren’t!

### **Acts 7:1**

The High Priest was not interested in anything Stephen had to say... This was a mockery of a trial. The charges were false... and the High Priest knew that. They had heard these same charges previously when they were leveled almost exactly the same way toward Christ.

Stephen begins... where Judaism began. It started with Abraham. ... Now the Jews placed a confidence in their standing before God... in the Land of Palestine. God's favor... they thought came from being in the Land. ... Stephen is about to confront their misplaced confidence – The Land of Israel is not the blessing! He is going to show that the land is not the blessing by using the examples of Abraham... Joseph... Jacob... and Moses. But he will also score a few important points while he does that. As far as the importance of the land... he is about to show... God was blessing Abraham before he even set foot on it's dirt. God revealed Himself to Abraham before he was even living in the land... and blessed him tremendously – before it was his.

#### **Acts 7:2-8**

As he put the importance of the Land into proper perspective... Stephen very subtly begins to set the stage for one of those other vital points he will score – Each of the revered Jewish Fathers have rejected God's leading. Stephen is working his way to pointing out their ultimate disobedience by murdering the Messiah. But he starts to show the historical trend... going all the way back to Father Abraham.

#### **Acts 7:4**

Dwelling in Haran was disobedience. God did not tell Abraham to go dwell in Haran. God told Abraham to separate himself from his family and relatives and go to a land that he would show him. Abraham didn't separate himself. He took his father and his nephew. They only traveled from the Land of Ur... half-way... to Haran. ... Stephen mentions that only after the death of Abraham's father... (who wasn't supposed to be on this

journey)... were they able to complete the move that God called him to make. Abraham's father was the reason Abraham settled in Haran... before obediently going all the way to the place where God wanted him. And then later when they get to the land... his nephew Lot acts up and causes more trouble. So Stephen begins where the Jewish history began... and even there... we see a defiance to God's leading.

### **Acts 7:8**

Stephen pointed out that God always had kept his side of the promise... He promised Abraham descendants... and He gave them. Abraham had received a covenant... (along with a sign for it)... that even Abraham's disobedience could not annul.

Stephen has already suggested that God's blessing is not in the land. (God was blessing before they possessed it.) But now he is discussing another false confidence of the Jews – Circumcision. It is not the land... and it is not circumcision. Before the land and before circumcision... the basis of blessing is on the basis of **BELIEF**. God was blessing Abraham because he believed. It has always been about belief!

In verses 9-16... Stephen goes on to show that the same thing happened again with the 12 sons of Jacob... The basis of blessing is not the land. God blessed them in Egypt... even though the only piece of real estate the descendants of Abraham owned... was a family tomb. True Holy Land is wherever God meets with His people. That can even be in Egypt. And again... in this section we see more defiant rejection of God's will... by Israel's revered "fathers."



### **Acts 7:9-16**

There are so many reasons for Stephen to discuss the story of Joseph. ... Those who should have honored Joseph persecuted him just as was the case with Jesus. ... This rejection of Joseph mirrors the Jews' rejection of Jesus. ... Envy led to the rejection of Joseph and envy was involved in rejecting Jesus, too. ... Another striking parallel is that Joseph was sold into slavery. This reminds of Judas selling Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. ... Yet even still... Joseph was first rejected... but later received when he came to power. Jesus is coming back. He was first rejected by the Jews... but when He returns... Jesus will be accepted. ... The one who was rejected is the one who provides for the rejecters. This reflects the grace of God that brings redemption to sinners who have rejected Him.

This last parallel to Joseph has the same history lesson through the life of Moses... who Stephen turns to next. Moses was rejected by the Jews the first time that he came to rescue them...

### **Acts 7:17-38**

This prophecy (in verse 37) is recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15. It is a prophecy that speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ. Stephen has from the Scriptures given a summary of the history of Israel and shown the habit of Israel to accept their deliverer the second time, not the first time.

The hardness of heart by God's people is clearly seen in their history. Abraham... Joseph's brothers (the 12 Patriarchs)... and now Moses. God in His grace and mercy (in other words... not because He happened to look down and say – Wow! What lovely people! They deserve My compassion!

By virtue of their goodness... they have earned My kind attention...)  
Instead God in His mercy sent someone to help... but they rejected him.  
(The Jews... as a people... have a consistent history of this BEFORE Christ came...)

Moses gave them the Law. The Law could not save them... but Moses told them to look for another prophet – with equal authority as he had. Moses gave them the Law... but another Prophet (according to Moses) will have the authority to give them something else - of equal or greater value. Moses... was pointing to Christ! (And it is right there in their Hebrew Scripture.)

When Stephen spoke... in Acts 7 here... Moses was well thought of. But that was not always the case... The Jewish nation rejected Moses multiple times. When he first tried to lead them... and later ... his Law... and the worship of God that he led them to...

### **Acts 7:38-43**

Stephen is clearly and compellingly showing that everything his 1<sup>st</sup> Century audience held very dear... was at first rejected. They have a history of being hard-heartedness and refusing what God has provided for them. Next he brings up the Temple. Here Stephen will show that they accepted this provision by God... but in the wrong way. They placed too much importance on it. They worshipped the Temple – instead of the God of the Temple.

### **Acts 7:44-50**

Throughout the centuries, Israel had refused to submit to God and obey the truths He had revealed to them. Their ears did not hear the truth, their hearts did not receive the truth, and their necks did not bow to the truth. As a result, they killed their own Messiah!

Now we come to the climax of Stephen's speech...

### **Acts 7:51-53**

Stephen does not mince words. He calls the rebellors by their right names. They were stubbornly sinful and polluted in heart and hearing. ... Those who rebel against God persecute and mistreat the true ministers of God.

Now as we look at our final verses... I've already mentioned that this compelling witness would not look like it succeeded. Stephen's listeners reject this powerful testimony and end up killing Stephen.

It is yours and my responsibility to present the truth of God's Word to a lost and dying world... as compelling as we can... and then to leave the results to God. He may or may not author faith inside our listeners. ... Stephen was successful. He died. His listeners rejected the message. But Stephen was successful!

### **Acts 7:54-60**

Patti's dad received God's forgiveness at the very last minute. I have no evidence that my dad ever did. But I am so thankful to serve a Sovereign God... and I want my life (this biological life from my human father) to have as it's mission - to boldly proclaim God's Word as compellingly as I can (just like Stephen) - in the power of the Holy Spirit- and leave the results to Him.