

The Response of “Stiff-Necked” People

Acts 6:8 – 7:60

Pastor Bryan Clark

Acts 6:8 – 7:60:

⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” ¹²And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. ¹³They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.” ¹⁵And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

(Chapter 7) ¹The high priest said, “Are these things so?” ²And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’ ⁴Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. ⁵But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. ⁶But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. ⁷AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,’ said God, ‘AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.’ ⁸And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, ¹⁰and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

¹¹Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. ¹²But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. ¹³On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. ¹⁴Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. ¹⁶From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

¹⁷But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, ¹⁸until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. ¹⁹It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. ²⁰It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. ²¹And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. ²²Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. ²³But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. ²⁴And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. ²⁶On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' ²⁷But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? ²⁸YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?' ²⁹At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

³⁰After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. ³¹When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: ³²'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. ³³BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. ³⁴I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'

³⁵This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. ³⁶This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' ³⁸This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. ³⁹Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' ⁴¹At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴²But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? ⁴³YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

⁴⁴Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. ⁴⁵And

having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. ⁴⁶David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. ⁴⁸However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

⁴⁹‘HEAVEN IS MY THRONE,
AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET;
WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?’ says the Lord, ‘OR WHAT
PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?
⁵⁰WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?’

⁵¹You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵²Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

⁵⁴Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; ⁵⁶and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. ⁵⁸When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep. (*NASB)

Patti's grandmother was a godly woman and had many wonderful attributes but was highly opinionated and at times unreasonably stubborn. On one occasion, Patti's dad (which would have been her son-in-law) was discussing an issue with his mother-in-law. They were discussing a particular highway, what the highway number was, and where this particular highway traveled. They got into a disagreement and they finally reached an impasse; there was no budging. So Patti's dad went out to the car, found an atlas, opened it up and sure enough, he was right about the highway number and exactly where this highway traveled. Patti's grandmother studied the map for a minute and concluded that the map had a misprint and that she was still right. It is obvious there was no convincing her. I am pretty sure if she would have been driving on that highway she would have concluded that the State had put up the wrong signs and that is still not correct.

We laugh at that because we know people like that. We laugh at that because we see those tendencies in ourselves. We all have these areas where we lock up and we are just not going to budge.

There is probably no area of life in general where people get locked up more than this whole area of religion. Probably most of us can identify people we know who have a religion and a denomination. They have a belief system and they know the rules, the rituals and the drill. They just are so set in that they do not want to talk about it, they do not want to discuss it and they do not want to interact. They are very defensive. If you were to open up your Bible and show them

that what they believe actually is contrary to what the Bible teaches, they do not care. They just do not even want to talk about it. They are just stuck, stubbornly stuck.

That was certainly true of the religious leaders of the first century. When God Himself became flesh and manifested Himself before them, Jesus did miracles before their eyes. He taught them. He told them. He rose from the dead. What more could it take to convince them? But they were so stubbornly stuck in their religious system. They knew the rules, they knew the drill, they knew the ritual, but they were not going to budge. No matter what happened, they would not believe.

That same mindset of course carries into the Book of Acts. Peter has had a couple of direct confrontations with these religious leaders where he has hit them point blank with the stubbornness of their ways, but they refuse to listen. Now in Acts 6 and 7 you have the final recorded collision between the followers of Jesus and the religious establishment of the first century.

Turn with me to Acts 6. This is a very long text. To break it up into smaller texts you basically miss the point, so we almost have to cover this much ground. We felt like the best way to do it was to have the whole passage read to you so you had some sense of how the story goes and how it all flows together. Obviously I do not have time to re-read it, but just to identify the highlights and try to get to what the point is. This is the longest sermon in the Book of Acts (and I am referring to Stephen's, not mine.)

Peter has been the chosen instrument in this particular case. It is Stephen who delivers the message. We only have a chapter and a half about Stephen in the whole Bible, yet he emerges as one of the most impressive characters in the entire Scripture. We met him last week in chapter 6. In the first part of the chapter he was one of those leaders chosen to help with the issue related to widows and the tables. We learned then he had a good reputation. He was filled with the Spirit and he was wise. When his name is mentioned in verse 5, he is a man full of faith and has the Holy Spirit.

In verse 8, it says:

Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

Obviously, he was a very godly man. He was a Spirit-filled man. He was a very impressive individual. This is the first time we are told that anyone outside of the circle of the twelve was doing signs and wonders. I do not think that circle ever got very wide, but certainly it went beyond just the twelve, and that is evident here in this text.

Apparently Stephen is engaged in formal debates with people coming from a number of different synagogues in the public square. It would have been common for people to gather in a public area and debate certain beliefs. When it says they argued with Stephen, it is not a word that means they quarreled with him. It is a word that means they formally debated him. What the text says is that they were no match for him. They were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. When you combine the power of the Holy Spirit with a message that is absolutely true, there is no rebuttal to that. We saw it with Jesus in the Gospels, and we see it again with Stephen.

If you cannot win the day on the basis of the substance of your argument, then you go to Plan B and that is to sling mud. That is the next step. They cannot out-argue him so they are going to

slung mud at him. And if that does not work, you go to the third plan, Plan C, and that is to take legal action. That is it today: If you cannot win the argument you sling mud; if the mud does not work, you take legal action. That is what happened here. They had false accusers come and make their false accusations. Stephen is then grabbed and taken before the Council, which would be the legal Council, in essence. The verbs here indicate this was not a friendly crowd that said, “We probably should go chat with the Council a little bit.” The verbs indicate this was a violent, riotous, very angry mob. This was a very unpleasant situation. They bring Stephen before the Council. The two charges are that he speaks against the Council and he speaks against the temple.

In the end of chapter 6, a very interesting statement is made. It says, “**...the Council saw his face like the face of an angel**”—meaning it was radiant or it glowed. Probably the only other person in the Scripture with a statement like that would be Moses after he came down from Mount Sinai.

You have to understand what is going on here. Stephen was standing against the entire religious establishment of his day. All of the power, all of the authority, all of the credibility, all the buildings, all the robes, all the titles, all the experts all weighed in favor of the religious system of the day. Here is this little band of Jesus’ followers saying in essence, “You are wrong.” That is a very intimidating situation. But this was God’s way of saying to the Council (and Luke records it for us) that amidst this very powerful religious system, Stephen is right and they are wrong. It was the idea that it was God’s glory glowing through Stephen as evidence that Stephen was indeed correctly representing God.

In Acts 7:1, the high priest says, “**Are these things so?**”—meaning “Are these accusations true?” Stephen gets a chance to defend himself and he launches into this lengthy sermon. There is a lot of discussion about how to organize this sermon. Some commentators went all the way to say this is just a meaningless rambling of Stephen. Now of course we do not take that position. A lot of commentators organized this around the accusation made. Everything has to do with Stephen’s defense and that he does not speak against the temple and he does not speak against the law. There is merit to that. The problem is you try to organize Stephen’s speech around those two things, and it just is not comprehensive enough. There is a lot that Stephen said that does not fit into those two categories.

You have to broaden the umbrella yet a little bit more. When you think about the temple and the law, in essence what they are saying is, “We have to be right; we are the organized religion. We have the temple, we have the experts, we have the law and we have tradition. We have got to be right.” There is always this temptation to reduce God down to religion—where we have our rules, we have our rituals, we have our buildings, and we have the thing that we do. It is all structured and carefully defined. And then I just do my religious thing, I follow the rules and I am good with that. That is where they were.

But what Stephen is saying is that you cannot put God in that kind of a box. Religion has always tried to put God in a box, and God has always said, “You can’t treat Me that way.” God has always been bigger than that. God has always been unpredictable. God has always done unimaginable things through unconventional means through very unlikely people who are willing to trust Him by faith.

You have this history of God refusing to be put in a box to accomplish His plan and purpose. I think that is the thread that goes through Stephen’s sermon. He is saying, “Let’s go back and check out history, because history will show that you have never been able to predict God. God

has never been such that you could confine Him to a religious box. God has never operated on the basis of conventional wisdom. A lot of what God does doesn't make sense at the time. He has always required that His people follow Him by faith."

With that in mind, we start with Abraham in verse 2. The Hebrew people were likely to say that God dwelt within their geographical city, within the temple. It was a very limiting factor. So Stephen is going back to Abraham as the father of the Hebrew people, and he is reminding them, "Don't forget, Abraham was a pagan. Abraham was an idol worshiper. Abraham was from a foreign country, and God showed up and called Abraham out of a pagan lifestyle and said, 'Abraham, I want you to leave your home. I want you to leave your family. I want you to leave everything behind and I want you to trust Me. We are going to go to a land that I will tell you about later. I am not going to give you a lot of details. You just have to trust Me with this thing.' "

Really with remarkable faith, Abraham agreed. He agreed to follow because he believed that God tells the truth. So they set out on this magnificent, very undefined journey. Along the way, God said, "Oh, by the way, you will never really possess the land. Your descendants will, but you won't." This whole "descendants thing" was a bit of a problem because Abraham was getting quite old and he did not have any children. Of course the story is he did not have his promised son until he was 100 years old. You can't tell me that is conventional or predictable.

God also came along and said, "Oh, by the way, Abraham, your people will all be in bondage for 400 years, but after that they will make it back to the land and eventually they will possess it." Abraham, with remarkable faith, chooses to believe that—that God would accomplish what seemed like an unimaginable plan and purpose. So he identifies the covenant of the circumcision in verse 8. The essence of circumcision is that Abraham and his people's commitment for God's plan and purpose to be carried out is so unimaginable and so big that, *There is no way that we in our flesh can make this happen. It will have to be a work of the sovereign God.* The rest of the story is really the evidence that God has been in the story sovereignly orchestrating details to ultimately accomplish His plan, which came to fulfillment in Jesus and of course continues to this day.

In verses 9 and 10 you get into the discussion of Joseph. You go through the patriarchs of Isaac and Jacob and now the discussion of Joseph and his brothers. They hated him and sold him into slavery. Here is a Jewish boy sold into slavery in Egypt, but because God is sovereign and orchestrates events in ways nobody could ever imagine, he ends up the governor of Egypt. In essence he ends up ruling the most powerful nation of the world. You can't tell me that is conventional. You can't tell me that when they were sitting back planning and plotting, they thought, *This is probably the way it will work: probably the slave boy will be sold into Egypt and he will end up running the country.* Nobody could have expected it, and that is the point. God has never been predictable. People have never been able to put God into a box. Along the way, those people of faith could not have understood what God was up to.

Starting then in verse 11, there is a discussion about God orchestrating the events of the famine and bringing Jacob and the rest of the family into Egypt. Jacob would die there. Joseph would die there. They would die believing that one day God would give the land to their descendants, but they died in faith never seeing it come to pass. As a matter of fact, when they died it must have seemed so incredibly unlikely that it could ever happen. But they died believing.

In verse 17, he starts into the story of Moses. One of the accusations made against Stephen was that he spoke against Moses. Yet Stephen is going to make the point that he is actually in perfect

alignment with Moses. They are the ones that are fighting Moses and frankly, the Hebrew people have always fought Moses. He starts by telling the story of Moses' birth. He was born during a time when little Hebrew baby boys were being executed. He was put in a basket and floated down the river. He was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter and she decided to raise Moses as her own son. So Moses was exposed to the greatest training and education the world had to offer—there is an emphasis on that in the text. People today continue to marvel at what the ancient Egyptians knew and understood. They were way ahead of their time. Moses would have been exposed to the greatest training and education humanly possible. It is perhaps out of that, that he thought God would then use him to deliver his people.

At 40 years of age, he is out wandering about and he comes across an Egyptian who is abusing a Hebrew and so he kills him. I suppose in his mind that is the beginning of what God could do to use him to be the deliverer. He comes by the next day and there are a couple of Hebrews who are fighting. He tries to break up the fight. He is imagining that they view him as the potential deliverer: he is in Pharaoh's house; he is highly trained; he is the man. Instead they turn on him. They say, "Hey, Mr. Big Shot, who put you in charge? Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" And Moses realizes these people are not siding with him. They are attacking him verbally.

He fears for his life and flees into the wilderness of Midian. There he remains for the next 40 years. Let that sink in a minute. I did not say four years; I said 40 years! This was a man who had grown up with all of the wealth, all of the education, all of the power that was available in the world. He probably believed with all his hopes and dreams that God would somehow use that to allow him to deliver his people. But when the moment of truth came, everything came crashing down, and for the next 40 years he considered himself a failure. Those hopes and dreams were over and this is where he would live and this is where he would die. About the time he is making applications into the local rest home, God shows up in the burning bush. He says, "Moses, your life is about to begin. I am going to call you to one of the greatest leadership opportunities in the history of the world." God speaks to him out of this bush and says, "You are My man, and I am going to use you to deliver My people."

The Hebrew people had a tendency to isolate God's presence down to one geographical place. And yet God, in the wilderness of Midian, said, "Take off your sandals. You are on holy ground." Stephen is making the point that the ground is holy wherever God is. You cannot limit Him to one geographical space. So God raises up Moses to be the deliverer of the Hebrew people.

To understand the next section starting in verse 35, you have to notice the specific terms that are used. Verse 35 says, "**This Moses whom they disowned.**" Verse 36 says, "**This man.**" Verse 37 says, "**This is the Moses**"—meaning the same Moses. Verse 38 says, "**This is the one.**" In other words, it is saying this is the same Moses who for 80 years waited—40 years in Pharaoh's house and 40 years in the wilderness. This is the same Moses whom they rejected, whom they turned against, whom they hated, who was going to shrivel up in the wilderness. This is the same Moses that God now has raised up to deliver His people. This is a way of saying that this was very unconventional. This was the last thing any of them expected, including Moses.

Verse 35 says, "**This Moses whom they disowned.**" It is the one they rejected. Verse 37 says it is the Moses who said, "**GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.**" That is a statement that the Messiah would come. Stephen is actually in perfect alignment with the prophecy of Moses. It is the religious leaders who are out of alignment.

Verses 38 and 39 state it was Moses who was up on Mount Sinai and received the Law. He brought the Law down and shared it with the people. When he shared it with the people, they said, “Oh, thank you very much. We have been waiting for this for so long.” That is *not* what they said. They said, “We don’t want it.” As a matter of fact, they had built a golden calf. They had been worshipping the pagan gods. They were doing their own religious thing, saying, “This is our religion. These are our idols. This is the way we want to do it.” And God says, “Even for 40 years when you wandered in the wilderness, you were not worshipping Me. You were worshipping pagan gods.”

The religious leaders are trying to make this case that down through history they are the ones who have revered Moses. And Stephen is saying, “Are you kidding me? The Hebrew people have fought and hated and resisted Moses every step of the way because Moses was God’s man leading them in a new direction.”

Starting in verse 44 is the discussion about the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a mobile tent that represented the presence of God. It was never meant to be a box that limited the presence of God. It was symbolic that God dwells with His people, and where God’s people go, that is where God goes. But then David wanted to build a permanent house, and Solomon ended up building a permanent house. There is the sense in which the temple, which was meant to be a picture of the coming Messiah, became a replacement for the Messiah. It actually became an object of their idolatry.

Verse 48 is a critical verse. I think it is the heartbeat of the sermon.

However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: “HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET.” (vs. 48-49a)

In other words, he is saying all throughout history you have never been able to put God in a box. You cannot reduce God down to religion with rules and rituals. God cannot be geographically located. God is the God of the universe. God uses the earth as His footstool. God is too big for that. It has always been unpredictable. It has always been unconventional. It has always been God working out His plan through methods and people that no one could have predicted. That is why it has always required people to walk by faith.

So he makes this case. There is the sense in which these religious leaders have got to be right. They have the experts, they have the buildings, they have the titles. They have the tradition; they have everything. How could they be wrong? People make that same case today. They say, “You can’t tell me that all these different religions and all these different religious systems all over the world can all be wrong.” Stephen’s answer would be, “Yes they can. They have always been wrong.” The religious systems, in attempts to box God in, have always been off track. They have always been wrong. They have always been man-made. God has never allowed Himself to be boxed in that way.

In verse 51 he gets out the “2 x 4s.” He says:

“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.”

The word “stiff-necked” would have immediately rung true to them because that was a term often used in the Old Testament. When the people of God would hunker down, they would bow their neck. They would refuse to listen. They would get unreasonably stubborn, to where they

were no longer seeking God. They were not seeking truth. They did not want to know it. They just were stuck, and God will call them stiff-necked people: “You people just won’t listen.” Stephen is saying, “You are just like the people have been for thousands of years. You are resisting the very person of God.”

Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? [*What they are doing to Stephen is what they have done to the prophets all throughout history.*] **They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One,** [*meaning Jesus*], **whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”** (vs. 52-53)

They are not understanding the temple. They are not understanding the law. They are not understanding their traditions. They are not understanding God at all. Of course this was such a dramatic sermon that the people responded wonderfully, saying, “Thank you for sharing that. We have been deeply touched today. We will go home and think about that.” That is *not* how they responded at all. As a matter of fact, this group was very angry.

You would have to believe, given the temperature of this whole text, that Stephen understood this was his last sermon. God had called him to declare the message and, like the prophets before him, this would be his last message and he would die—which makes it all the more courageous of a message.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (vs. 54-55)

There is a dramatic contrast between the rigidity, the stubbornness, the hardness of hearts of the religious leaders versus the wonderful faith-filled courage of Stephen. When it says Stephen looked and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, that is a very unusual statement rarely seen in the Scriptures. Always Jesus is seated at the right hand of God; only on a few very rare occasions is Jesus standing. Again, it is a way for the text to say Stephen was right; the establishment was wrong. This is Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father, welcoming this faithful soldier home for a job well done.

Stephen dies very much as Jesus did. He cries out for God to receive his spirit. He cries out for God to forgive those who have put him to death. You have to understand this was not even legal. The Jewish Council did not have the authority for capital punishment. This was a riotous mob that just was out of control and ended up stoning Stephen to death.

I think we have a little bit of a misconception about stoning. You see it on television and in Christian movies, where they throw a half dozen stones and one finally hits him and they all walk away. But that is not really the way it happened. It would have been a very long, laborious, gruesome way to die. It was a horrible picture to watch.

There may be a tendency to say, “Okay, I understand that God was rather unconventional and unpredictable in what He did with Abraham, Joseph, Moses and so on through the patriarchs. But this is now the New Covenant. This is the Church and this is going to be a lot more predictable. This is going to be a lot more understandable. We understand what we are supposed to be doing so it probably will not be that way.

But you have this interesting statement that they laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. File that away because that is going to tell us that the God of the Old Covenant is

the God of the New Covenant and He is going to be just as unpredictable as he was in the Old Covenant. He is going to take the most unimaginable people, who have been through the most amazing circumstances, and do the unimaginable through them to change the world. If there was one person who was the most unlikely person to ever be significantly used by God to change the world, it would have been a young man named Saul. We will learn more about that next week. God is going to take the most unimaginable person and, in an unpredictable style, He is going to change the world.

It is just a way of saying that you cannot box God in. You have never been able to box God in. God has always been unpredictable. God has always been unconventional. God has always resisted religious attempts to try to box Him in and define Him through rules, rituals, buildings and structures. God has always said, “Don’t do that to Me. I have a plan and a purpose and I am going to accomplish that, but I am going to do it My way. You are going to have to trust Me by faith.”

You can’t tell me there was one of those Old Testament figures that sat down and said in his lifetime, “This all makes sense to me.” As a matter of fact, it couldn’t have made any sense. We look back thousands of years later and we say, “Oh, that makes sense. This is what God was doing.” But they couldn’t have understood that in their lifetime. They had to simply trust by faith. God has always demanded that. We want to look at these Hebrew people and say, “What is wrong with those people? We would never be like that!” But we can become very much like them. We all have this drive within us to reduce God down to that which is predictable, that which is explainable. We have our rules, we have our rituals, we have our routine and we know the drill. *Tell me what I need to do and I will do it each week. God is happy with that, and that is my religion.* Somewhere in the midst of it, we do not have the living, dynamic, faith-filled life that God wants.

Several years ago we went through the Book of Galatians. The Book of Galatians is all about legalism. We talked a great deal about legalism and what that means and what it is. Frankly, legalism is just another form of religion. It is the exact same thing: *I want my rules, I want my rituals, I want my regulations. Give me the list and I will follow the list. I have my thing down pat and it is all very predictable and safe.* But is it never about God.

We talked a lot about those legalistic standards from years gone by, 20 or 30 years ago—those that I would have grown up with. We identified those as legalism. You look back 20 years later and you say, “What were those people thinking? Why would they have thought that would make someone more like God? Who came up with the list?” It is kind of fun to laugh at them and think, *What was wrong with them?*

But the thing that sticks in my head is those were godly people who made those lists. Those are people I highly respect. They were not people who were way out to lunch. They were people in this area who just lost track. That causes me to think, *What is it today that is true in my life that I am caught up in that is the same form of legalism—that today I can’t see but it is there?* Twenty or thirty years from now people will look back and say, “What was wrong with them? What made them think that was the only way to do it? What made them think that was right? What made them think that made them more like God?”

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could identify those areas and address them today instead of laughing about them 20 years from now? As I have processed this and asked myself the question on a regular basis, I think one of those areas may very well be this whole discussion we are having, this idea of structure and methods and programs. There is a tendency to get so locked up into

these things as if they are biblical mandates. We fail to realize that really they are just manmade constructions to carry out the mission. It is very easy to start to fall in love with the structure, with the programs and the methods of what is predictable. *Okay we get it, we understand it.* And then we operate with it and that is structure. But sometimes in the process we end up resisting the Holy Spirit because God is doing something unpredictable. God is doing something we hadn't imagined through people we hadn't anticipated. God is always out there on the edge doing something, forcing His people to trust Him and walk by faith.

We talked last week that it is necessary to be organized, and Stephen was a part of that. But it is easy to begin to serve the organization. It is easy to begin to serve the structure. It becomes our religion and we cease to be sensitive to God doing something new and different among us. What if God wanted to do something completely different in a completely different way through people we couldn't even imagine? Would our tendency be to hunker down and say, "Oh, that is not the way we do it. This is the way we do it." And you become just like them. We hunker down to what we know and to what is safe.

Some of you are thinking, *I know where he is going with this. In a couple of weeks he is going to introduce some bright new idea and some new initiative. He is going to shock us all and he is just trying to lay the groundwork. Two weeks from now we will think, here he goes again.*

But that is not true at all. I have nothing in mind (some days, *nothing* in mind!). The directional team, the board—we do not have some new thing cooking that we are ready to spring on you. It is not about that at all. Twenty years from now, this church may look very much like it does today. But five years from now, it may look completely different—I don't know.

All I know is that God has called us to be faithful, and the story of history is to be faithful. We trust God by faith and God is not conventional. He is not predictable. God is always out there on the edge doing His thing to change the world. We have to be willing by faith to be a part of that or be left behind. What if God had a completely new way to do children's ministry? What if God had a completely unconventional way to do youth ministry? What if the college ministry was radically changed? What if there was a whole new way to do a lot of things? Are we people of faith that would say, "God, whatever You want and where You lead, You just lead us. We don't necessarily understand it. We can't explain it, but we want to trust You by faith."

The reality is this: God will accomplish His plan and purpose with us or without us. My prayer is that it will be *with us*. Wouldn't we always want to be out there on the cutting edge of whatever God is doing to accomplish His mission? The answer is yes. I pray that we would have the courage to say, "Yes, God, whatever you want... we are there."

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2006 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

Study Questions
The Unstoppable Church
The Response of “Stiff-Necked” People
Acts 6:8 - 7:60
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What are the marks of a person who is closed-minded or unteachable?
2. What are the marks of a person who is learning and growing?
3. What causes us to become rigid and unteachable?
4. As a general rule, would you say most religious people are learning and growing or rigid and closed-minded? Why?

Bible Study

1. What do we know about Stephen from Acts 6:1-15?

Do you think it’s good for leaders to start by “serving tables”? Why or why not?
2. How did the religious crowd respond to Stephen’s powerful ministry?

Why do you think they responded that way?
3. In responding to the charges made against him by the Council, Stephen reviews the Old Testament story of the Hebrew people. What was his point? (Refer to Acts 7:1-50.)
4. What would it mean for us to become “stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears and always resisting the Holy Spirit”? (Read Acts 7:51-60.)

In what ways might we box God in with our religion today?
5. Contrast the religious leaders to Stephen as he is presented in this story. What made Stephen so radically different from the religious leaders of his day?

What will keep us from becoming “stiff-necked” and resistant to the Holy Spirit?

Application

1. Would you say right now in your faith walk you are more “stiff-necked” or more full of grace and the Holy Spirit’s power? Why?
2. What practical things can you do to be more like Stephen rather than like the religious leaders? Name at least three.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
3. If along the way you become “stiff-necked” over an issue in your faith walk, would you give your LifeGroup members permission to lovingly point this out to you in order that you might not find yourself resisting the Holy Spirit?