

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
September 27, 2015

Lesson Text: Acts 7:2-4, 8-10, 17, 33-34, 45-47
Lesson Title: Remembering God's Faithfulness

Introduction

Approximately six months to a year has passed since Pentecost and the apostles have already been persecuted, imprisoned, released, and imprisoned a second time. Peter and John were warned not to preach in Jesus' name, but responded by saying, "*We ought to obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). The principle of faithfulness to their call and commission to preach the gospel is firmly settled in their hearts. God has given them boldness and is miraculously protecting them as they do His will.

Persecution against Christians was gaining momentum and soon its target would be a man named Stephen. Stephen is famous for being the first Christian martyr, but there is much to be learned from his life. In response to a complaint that certain widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of provisions for the needy, the church selected "*seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost, and wisdom*" (Acts 6:3) to deal with this problem. "Stephen" a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, was one of the seven chosen (Acts 6:5).

Acts 6:8 marks a transition in the book of Acts. Until this point, Peter has been the dominant figure. Now, it transitions to Stephen who will be the example of true Christianity and the object of persecution. He comes on the scene "*full of faith and power, doing great wonders and miracles among the people*" (Acts 6:8). In response to Stephen's powerful ministry, a certain group of self-righteous individuals who hated Jesus Christ, rose up to "*dispute*" with Stephen (Acts 6:9). They engaged with him in a formal debate. Luke does not give us the debate details, but based on the charges leveled against Stephen, the debate most likely centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 6:10-15).

Whatever happened in the debate, Stephen won! The council was unable to "*resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake*" (Acts 6:10). If that were not enough, they had to debate a man who had "*the face of an angel*" (Acts 6:15). God answered their false charges by putting His glory on Stephen's face, something experienced by no other person in history except Moses (Exodus 34).

Unable to defeat Stephen in an open debate, the council seized him and took him before the Sanhedrin for an official trial. "Once the Sanhedrin heard all the charges, the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" (Act 7:1)

though he was not really interested in anything Stephen had to say. What followed was one of the most amazing and most potent sermons ever preached. Stephen knew his Bible and his Bible history. As he stood tall before the Council, he brought the theology of Christ down hard on the three great pillars of popular Judaism: the land, the law, and the temple—three false bases for confidence before God. He not only attacked those three sacred cows—he took them by the horns and turned them belly up.” (Preaching the Word - Preaching the Word – Acts: The Church Afire.)

Remembering God’s Faithfulness to Abraham (Acts 7:2-4, 8)

Verse 2-4

“And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.”

Stephen began his defense with the words, “Men, brethren, and fathers” which are words revealing his identity with them and respect for them. He then began to talk about “Abraham,” the father of faith. The life of faith for the Jewish people began in Abraham. Stephen reminded the Jewish leaders “the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham” long before he was living in the Promised Land. God revealed Himself to “Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran.” In other words while Abraham was far away from the Promised Land, he was also dwelling in the midst of idolaters and pagans. It was there God said unto him, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I will shew thee.”

Stephen’s point is, at the time God chose, called, and blessed Abraham he did not own one inch of the Holy Land. The land the Jews now possessed was not the blessing. The blessing was in the faithfulness of God to choose a lost sinner like Abraham to be the recipient of God’s grace and favor. It was God who “removed him into this land, wherein ye dwell.” If God in His sovereign plan and choice of Abraham had not “removed him into this land,” the descendants of Abraham would still be lost pagans in Ur of the Chaldees!

Stephen is taking the nation back to her spiritual roots. It is a heritage that the people seemed to have forgotten. Over the years they have somehow equated physical descent with spiritual experience and depended on their blood line for righteousness rather than personal faith in the Lord.

Verse 8

“And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.”

It may seem strange that Stephen, would introduce “circumcision” into his testimony. The Jews prided themselves in “the covenant of circumcision.” It was the identifying mark that separated them from all other people and nations. When God commanded Abraham to “circumcise Isaac” on the “eighth day” it was a sign that no fleshly achievement would bring to pass the promises of God to Abraham and his descendants. Abraham was to look beyond his ability toward God and teach his descendants to live by faith.

Stephen’s point is at this stage in Jewish history, there are no land, law, and temple. The faith of Abraham was passed from generation to generation by dependence upon God’s Word.

Remembering God’s Faithfulness to Joseph (Acts 7:9-10, 17)

Verse 9-10

“And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him, And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.”

After discussing Abraham, Stephen discusses “Joseph.” The story of Joseph and how his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt is one of the most fascinating and extraordinary stories of the Bible and Jewish history.

The “patriarchs” is a reference to Jacob’s sons. Out of “envy” they “sold Joseph into Egypt.” The word “envy” describes dealing with someone in a hostile manner. The Bible says, “*And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him*” (Genesis 37:4). Joseph’s brothers both hated and envied him.

“But God was with him, And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.” God was “with Joseph” when his brothers put him in that hole in the ground (Genesis 37:20-29). God was “with Joseph” when he was sold into Egyptian slavery (Genesis 37:36). God was “with Joseph” when he was accused of rape by Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:7-14). God was “with Joseph” when he was in prison (Genesis 39:20-21). God was “with Joseph” during the famine in Egypt (Genesis 41:25-57). God was “with Joseph” when He made him “governor over Egypt and all his house” (Genesis 42:6).

Romans 8:28, **“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose,”** was not written at the time of Joseph’s trials. But God’s Word applied to Joseph then just as it applies to us now.

Stephen wanted the council to think about how God often exalted those whom the people rejected. In this particular example, it was Joseph. It was symbolic of what they had done to Jesus. They had rejected him but now God had raised Him from the dead and exalted Him (Acts 5:30-31).

Verse 17

“But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,”

In Acts 7:11-16, Stephen continues his discourse regarding Joseph and his extended family in Egypt. This sets the stage for one further observation about Abraham. For nearly two hundred years Abraham’s descendants amounted to no more than seventy-five souls at the time Joseph and his family is in Egypt (Acts 7:14). The four hundred year stay in Egypt would result in God’s people growing and multiplying. Not even slavery in Egypt prevented God from making good on His promise to Abraham.

The “time of the promise” refers to the time when God would fulfill his “promise” to “Abraham.” That “promise” was *“that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child”* (Acts 7:5).

In Hebrews 11:3, the Apostle Paul reminded the Hebrew Christians that Abraham and the patriarchs died without receiving the promise. However, when the time “drew nigh” for the fulfillment of the promise, God kept His promise and gave “Abraham” the land.

Remembering God’s Faithfulness to Moses (Acts 7:33-34)

In Acts 7:18-32, circumstances went from bad to worse for God’s chosen people. After Joseph’s death, *“there arose a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph”* (Exodus 1:8). As a result, the honored descendants of Joseph were quickly reduced to slaves. But God raised up a deliverer: Moses. That historical fact becomes the next point in Stephen’s sermon.

When Moses was forty years old, he murdered an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew (Exodus 2:12; Acts 7:23-29). He thought his fellow Hebrews knew who he was and that they understood his God-given assignment as their deliverer. But the Bible says, *“they understood not”* (Acts 7:25). Like the men before whom Stephen was speaking, and like the men before whom Jesus had been

tried, the Hebrews displayed their spiritual blindness in rejecting Moses as he tried to help them in their hour of slavery.

As a result of the Egyptian murder by Moses and the blindness of the Hebrew people in not understanding who he was, Moses was forced to flee into the desert. It was forty years before he returned as their God-sent deliverer to lead them out of Egyptian bondage. It that desert Moses encountered the burning bush.

Verse 33

“Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.”

As mentioned earlier, Stephen knew his Bible. He quotes Exodus 3:5 which occurred when Moses was standing before the burning bush. It was indeed “holy ground” because God was about to speak to Moses with a fresh revelation of Himself and directions for Moses life.

Verse 34

“I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.”

Stephen is quoting Exodus 3:7-10 in this verse. But Stephen is not just quoting Scripture to impress his listeners. Verse 34 is emphasizing that God is raising up a deliverer for the Hebrew people. He will send “into Egypt” to deliver His people. Stephen’s point is that God had promised He would someday raise up a Deliverer like Moses, one that the people must hear (Acts 7:37). This of course was the Lord Jesus Christ, whom members of this council had rejected.

Remembering God’s Faithfulness to David (Acts 7:45-47)

In response to the accusation that he spoke against the temple, Stephen retraces the history of the tabernacle in the wilderness to the temple to show his respect for the Jewish house of worship. He begins first with the tabernacle and how God instructed Moses concerning its construction (Exodus 25; Acts 7:42-43).

The generation of Israelites could not plead ignorance to God’s glory and presence because they had His presence in that mobile house of worship for forty years.

Verse 45-47

“Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David; Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built him an house.”

The “fathers” or forefathers that lived in the days after Moses’ death, had the tabernacle as “Jesus,” a reference to Joshua, not the Lord Jesus Christ, when they entered the land of Canaan. Joshua and the tabernacle led them “into the possession of the Gentiles” or the land possessed by pagans, and “God drove them out.” The tabernacle was still operative unto “the days of King David.”

Having found “favour before God,” David “desired” to build a better structure in which to worship (2 Samuel 7:1-4). In fact, he told Nathan the prophet his desire to build a temple and Nathan agreed. But later that night the Lord spoke to Nathan to tell David not to build a temple. That would come later through David’s son, Solomon.

What Stephen is telling the Sanhedrin is dangerous. He is telling them the temple has no significance anymore. Stephen wants them to understand that because of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the true church will not be identified with the temple. You see, these religious people were trusting in a building. They had put all their hopes and dreams in a structure, but their hearts are far from God.

Stephen wanted the Sanhedrin to know *“the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands”* as spoken by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:48). He abides in the hearts of those who trust Christ for salvation.

Conclusion

Stephen began his defense before the council by telling them they did not understand Abraham or the land God had promised. Being sons of Abraham was their greatest claim, but they would never see God’s heaven by just being sons of Abraham. They must have faith in God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and be born again (John 3:3).

Stephen continued with the story of Joseph hoping they would see the One rejected was eventually exalted. They had rejected Christ but God had exalted Him through the resurrection. He recounted the story of Moses where the Hebrew people were blind to what God was doing through His chosen deliverer.

Finally, Stephen mentioned the temple. The Jews defended their temple at all cost. They had allowed their devotion to a building to replace their loyalty to God.

Stephen was a man who knew his Bible and Bible history. Sadly, many Christians today have little or no understanding of what they believe or why they believe it (1 Peter 3:15). Our hope is not in this free land in which we worship. It is in faith to the God who called us to salvation. Likewise, our hope is not a building or meeting place for worship. It is in the faithfulness of God to meet with us as He has in the past, in the wilderness, in a temple, or in our hearts.

Illus. Song: "My Faith Has Found A Resting Place." My faith has found a resting place, not in device or creed; I trust the ever living One, His wounds for me shall plead. I need no other argument, I need no other plea, It is enough that Jesus died, and that He died for me.

"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:7-9).

Amen.