

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

MARCH 28TH–29TH, 2026 // BOOK OF ACTS

ISRAEL'S REBELLION (ACTS 7:37–43) THE TRIAL (AND THE CHARGE)

Stephen is on trial before the Jewish council for charges of blasphemy and speaking against the Jewish religion (Moses/law, the temple).

- In response to these charges, Stephen explains what is “holy” and what God has always valued in His people: a covenantal relationship.
- Stephen has spoken about this in the stories of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses.

A PROPHET LIKE MOSES (V. 37)

Moses was a great man, but ultimately his ministry pointed ahead to someone greater—the coming Messiah.

- A prophet is a spokesperson for God who delivers divine messages, and Jesus functioned in this role perfectly (Mark 1:22).
- But, like Moses, Jesus wasn't received by His own people.

REBELLION AGAINST GOD'S PROPHET (VS. 38–40)

Even though Moses enjoyed special intimacy with God and brought forth the revelation of God (“living oracles”), the Jewish people were unwilling to obey him.

- Their hearts “turned back to Egypt”—even though they had been in slavery, there was something about slavery that was at least familiar.
- Rebellion against God is a heart thing.

REPLACING GOD WITH IDOLS (VS. 41–43)

When ancient Israel rejected Moses and God's work through him, they replaced him with their manmade religion—a golden calf and eventually the stars, Moloch, and Rephan.

- When we rebel against God and His Son, we must find something in our lives to replace God because we were created to worship.
- That may even be religion itself!

AMERICAN IDOLS

- Money, success, and lifestyle
- Entertainment
- Sexuality and romance
- Fame, popularity, and celebrity
- Government and politics
- Being right, arguing, and judging others
- Guns? Food? Sports? Toys? Hobbies?

WHAT ARE MY IDOLS?

The test of time and attention: How much time and money go into my worship of this thing at the expense of other things?

- The test of my willingness to question and evaluate: Am I ever willing to step back and question my loyalty?
- The test of spiritual/ethical fruit: What behaviors follow from my worship of this thing?

It's often not that we don't know what God has spoken; we just don't want to obey Him.

- Many people who have heard the gospel still reject it, not because they don't understand it but because they simply don't want to surrender to Jesus and turn from their idols.
- Many lukewarm, complacent Christians know exactly the kind of changes God is calling them to make; they just don't want to obey.

GOD'S DWELLING? (ACTS 7:44–50)

CAN RELIGION SAVE?

- Those who idolize and worship manmade religion often speak to its virtues and benefits—how it makes us “good/moral” people, gives us meaning, and builds community.
- But does it actually fix the brokenness of the human heart and bring us closer to God?
- If it did, wouldn't all of Israel be saved/fixed just by having the tabernacle/temple?

The presence of God in the tabernacle and the temple didn't keep Israel from rejecting God and His messengers.

- No amount of religion or moral effort by our own strength can change hearts still governed by the same inner darkness as the openly irreligious.
- What we need is God's work to transform our hearts, and the Most High God doesn't dwell in buildings made by human hands (v. 48).

The tabernacle represented God's presence amongst His people, but it moved around Canaan from place to place, right up to the time of David. God wasn't confined to one place or building.

- Nothing can confine Him, explain Him, contain Him, or define Him in terms of limited human experience. He's God! Do we wish to surrender to Him or try to control Him?

RELIGION = CONTROL, COMFORT, CONVENIENCE

Religion is safe and practical. Jesus is radical and unpredictable.

- Religion sees other people as the enemy. Jesus sees sin, death, and Satan as the enemy.
- Religion grades righteousness on a curve. Jesus grades righteousness on the cross.
- When Jesus is truly Lord over all your life, He's not confined to little sections of your life.

FOLLOWING JESUS = SURRENDERING TO HIM AS LORD

It means seeing your sin as Jesus sees your sin.

- It means seeing yourself as Jesus sees you.
- It means seeing people as Jesus sees people.
- In your life, it should produce humility, radical dependence on Him, and a whole lot of grace.
- “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver... “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn't safe. But he's good!” (C.S. Lewis).

RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT (ACTS 7:51–53)

“STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE...” (V. 51A)

“Stiff-necked” is a word picture taken from farming.

- Oxen who were “stiff-necked” were those who refused to be guided or steered by their masters.
- People who are “stiff-necked” are those who are stubborn, arrogant, and resistant to guidance, correction, or authority.
- *How open are you to the Master's direction?*

UNCIRCUMCISED HEARTS AND EARS (V. 51B)?

In the OT, covenants with God were often marked by tangible, physical reminders. Every Jewish male was marked by this sign.

- Just as the flesh was cut away, God's desire for Israel was to remove the stubborn, sinful thoughts from their minds and purge sin from their hearts so they could become obedient to God.

By referring to the Sanhedrin as such, Stephen is saying that even with all their rituals, tabernacles, temples, traditions, and religious practices, they had completely missed the point.

- Their hearts were still stubborn and filled with idolatry, just like their ancestors who had killed God's prophets and predicted Jesus' coming (v. 52).
- Now they were treating Jesus the same way.

RECEIVING THE LAW BUT NOT KEEPING IT (V. 53)

Just knowing the laws of God doesn't make you suddenly able to keep them.

- Laws don't change hearts. God changes hearts, and surrendering to God's work through faith is what activates that change.
- Religion, laws, rules, and rituals without obedience and faith in God are pointless and unable to save or fix anybody.

RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT

To “resist” the Holy Spirit is to intentionally ignore, oppose, or disobey God's guidance, conviction, and promptings to obedience and surrender.

- Ignoring inner conviction.
- Rejecting God's Word.
- Refusing obedience and deliberately declining to follow God's instructions.
- Whenever we do this, there are consequences.

RAGE (ACTS 7:54–60)

DID STEPHEN HAVE IT COMING?

Why the change in Stephen's tone? If he had been gentler, his life might have been spared.

- Forgiveness of sins is impossible without acknowledgment of sin.
- The truth that our sin sent Jesus to the cross is painful and even offensive to some. No one likes to be told that they're wrong, wicked, sinful, and have rebelled against God.

Stephen never gets a chance to finish his sermon and offer God's forgiveness to these men.

- They become so offended, enraged, and angry that the gospel message gets cut short.
- This is how many have and will respond to the gospel; they won't receive it or even hear it because something in it offends and angers them.

The religious council now turns into a lynch mob that wants Stephen dead immediately. The language implies wild, jeering shouts of hatred and hostility.

- But Stephen's eyes aren't on the mob. He's filled with the Holy Spirit, and God gives him a vision.
- He sees the heavens opened, and the “Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”
- He then tells the council about this vision.

“SON OF MAN STANDING...”

Jesus said He would be SEATED at God's right hand (Luke 22:69).

- Jesus was the witness in Heaven's courtroom standing to plead Stephen's case.
- 1.) Jesus was standing as Daniel saw Him, ruling over the nations (Daniel 7:13–14).
- 2.) Jesus was honoring His first martyr by giving him a standing ovation.

When Stephen tells his accusers of this vision, they begin screaming and covering their ears so they won't hear any more of it.

- Apostasy/blasphemy called for the death penalty. However, the law said they had to wait at least one more day and receive approval from Roman authorities.
- On that day, the law was thrown out the window in favor of lynch mob execution.

Stephen is taken to the outskirts of the city, and the mob begins to stone him.

- As he is pushed to his knees by this angry mob, he cries out, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them!*” (v. 60).
- After this, he “fell asleep” (a common euphemism for death). This isn't the cessation of existence or awareness (2 Corinthians 5:1–10); it's that for the Believer death is like sleep—it's not the end.

Standing by (and probably participating) during the execution was a young man (between 24 and 40 years old) named “Saul” (v. 58).

- We will learn later that he was a Pharisee and made a living overseeing trials and executions of Christians just like this one.
- *Can you imagine Saul's emotions when he heard Stephen ask God to forgive his murderers? What kind of seed was planted in Saul's heart?*

REBELLION AND IDOLATRY

- The greatest barrier to faith is often not intellectual but volitional. It's not that most people don't know what God has spoken; they simply don't want to obey Him and surrender.
- Often our greatest idols aren't bad things; they're just not God Himself. When our idols get called out, we often grow very defensive and angry.

RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT

- The Holy Spirit of God sends messengers and messages to confront our rebellion and idolatry so we will be led to spiritual life and faith in Jesus. This never feels good, but it's an act of God's mercy.
- We can either listen, repent, and respond in faith, or we can resist the Holy Spirit and grow enraged and offended.

FAITHFUL MESSENGERS

- As messengers of the gospel, we must faithfully speak to the heart of the issue. The gospel demands obedience and surrender to Jesus, but the sinful nature of humanity wants to be in charge and hold onto our idols.
- To speak and live this out unapologetically is costly, and many people will rage against you for having the audacity to proclaim this.

THE WISEST OPTION (CONSIDERING ETERNITY)

- A life of true discipleship is always costly, but it's the wisest option when we consider the true meaning of life and the reality of eternity.
- “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose*” (Jim Elliot).
- When we stand and honor Jesus, He stands and honors us.
- What has your discipleship cost you?