

ST. ARMANDS KEY LUTHERAN CHURCH
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

COME, JOIN THE CONVERSATION!
ON
THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson Plan for Thursday – February 21, 2013
Resource Book – Kerygma Series – “*into the world*”
Chapter 6 – “*Stephen, Front and Center*”

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To carry on our conversation about the Book of Acts while continuing growth in fellowship with other participants.
2. To cite the charges against Stephen in Acts 6 and briefly summarize his responses to those accusations.
3. To describe Stephen’s indictment of his adversaries and why it aroused their anger.
4. To define the term “martyr.” Give an example of someone who has suffered for her or his faith.
5. To name an area in our lives where God may be challenging our loyalty to the gospel.

OPENING PRAYER OF PRAISE (*Resource 6A*)

Psalm 27 (CEV)

You, LORD, are the light that keeps me safe.
I am not afraid of anyone. You protect me, and I have no fears.
Brutal people may attack and try to kill me, but they will stumble.
Fierce enemies may attack, but they will fall.
Armies may surround me, but I won’t be afraid;
war may break out, but I will trust you.

**I ask only one thing, LORD:
Let me live in your house every day of my life
to see how wonderful you are and to pray in your temple.**

In times of trouble, you will protect me.
You will hide me in your tent and keep me safe on top of a mighty rock.
You will let me defeat all of my enemies.
Then I will celebrate, as I enter your tent with animal sacrifices and songs of praise!

Please listen when I pray! Have pity. Answer my prayer.
My heart tells me to pray.
I am eager to see your face, so don't hide from me.
I am your servant, and you have helped me.
Don't turn from me in anger.
You alone keep me safe. Don't reject or desert me.
Even if my father and mother should desert me, you will take care of me.

Teach me to follow, LORD,
and lead me on the right path because of my enemies.
Don't let them do to me what they want.
People tell lies about me and make terrible threats, but I know I will live to see how kind you are.

Trust the LORD! Be brave and strong and trust the LORD.

REPORT AND GROUP DISCUSSION: What is a martyr?

1. Do we romanticize martyrdom? Explain.
2. Are there modern day martyrs?

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE



Acts 6.8-15

Acts 6:8-15: Stephen Is Arrested

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

⁸ God gave Stephen the power to work great miracles and wonders among the people. ⁹ But some Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria were members of a group who called themselves “Free Men.” They started arguing with Stephen. Some others from Cilicia and Asia also argued with him. ¹⁰ But they were no match for Stephen, who spoke with the great wisdom that the Spirit gave him. ¹¹ So they talked some men into saying, “We heard Stephen say terrible things against Moses and God!”

¹² They turned the people and their leaders and the teachers of the Law of Moses against Stephen. Then they all grabbed Stephen and dragged him in front of the council.

¹³ Some men agreed to tell lies about Stephen, and they said, “This man keeps on saying terrible things about this holy temple and the Law of Moses. ¹⁴ We have heard him claim that Jesus from Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses gave us.” ¹⁵ Then all the council members stared at Stephen. They saw that his face looked like the face of an angel.

1. What are the charges against Stephen?
2. Now read Acts 21:20-21, 28; 24:7; 25:8. How do the charges against Stephen compare to those later leveled against Paul?
3. Stephen’s face “looked like the face of an angel.” How could they know what an angel’s face looked like? What is implied here? N.T. Wright suggests that this was part of an “overlap of heaven and earth.” Do such overlaps exist? Explain.

Acts 7:1-52 - Stephen’s Speech

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

The high priest asked Stephen, “Are they telling the truth about you?” Stephen answered:

Friends, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he had moved to Haran. ³ God told him, “Leave your country and your relatives and go to a land that I will show you.” ⁴ Then Abraham left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran.

After his father died, Abraham came and settled in this land where you now live. ⁵ God didn’t give him any part of it, not even a square foot. But God did promise to give it to him and his

family forever, even though Abraham didn't have any children. ⁶ God said that Abraham's descendants would live for a while in a foreign land. There they would be slaves and would be mistreated four hundred years. ⁷ But he also said, "I will punish the nation that makes them slaves. Then later they will come and worship me in this place."

⁸ God said to Abraham, "Every son in each family must be circumcised to show that you have kept your agreement with me." So when Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him. Later, Isaac circumcised his son Jacob, and Jacob circumcised his twelve sons. ⁹ These men were our ancestors.

Joseph was also one of our famous ancestors. His brothers were jealous of him and sold him as a slave to be taken to Egypt. But God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him from all his troubles. God made him so wise that the Egyptian king Pharaoh ^[a] thought highly of him. The king even made Joseph governor over Egypt and put him in charge of everything he owned.

¹¹ Everywhere in Egypt and Canaan the grain crops failed. There was terrible suffering, and our ancestors could not find enough to eat. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there for the first time. ¹³ It was on their second trip that Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family.

¹⁴ Joseph sent for his father and his relatives. In all, there were seventy-five of them. ¹⁵ His father went to Egypt and died there, just as our ancestors did. ¹⁶ Later their bodies were taken back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor. ¹⁷ Finally, the time came for God to do what he had promised Abraham. By then the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. ¹⁸ Another king was ruling Egypt, and he didn't know anything about Joseph. ¹⁹ He tricked our ancestors and was cruel to them. He even made them leave their babies outside, so they would die.

²⁰ During this time Moses was born. He was a very beautiful child, and for three months his parents took care of him in their home. ²¹ Then when they were forced to leave him outside, the king's daughter found him and raised him as her own son. ²² Moses was given the best education in Egypt. He was a strong man and a powerful speaker.

²³ When Moses was forty years old, he wanted to help the Israelites because they were his own people. ²⁴ One day he saw an Egyptian mistreating one of them. So he rescued the man and killed the Egyptian. ²⁵ Moses thought the rest of his people would realize that God was going to use him to set them free. But they didn't understand.

²⁶ The next day Moses saw two of his own people fighting, and he tried to make them stop. He said, “Men, you are both Israelites. Why are you so cruel to each other?”

²⁷ But the man who had started the fight pushed Moses aside and asked, “Who made you our ruler and judge? ²⁸ Are you going to kill me, just as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?” ²⁹ When Moses heard this, he ran away to live in the country of Midian. His two sons were born there.

³⁰ Forty years later, an angel appeared to Moses from a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ Moses was surprised by what he saw. He went closer to get a better look, and the Lord said, ³² “I am the God who was worshiped by your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Moses started shaking all over and didn’t dare to look at the bush.

³³ The Lord said to him, “Take off your sandals. The place where you are standing is holy. ³⁴ With my own eyes I have seen the suffering of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groans and have come down to rescue them. Now I am sending you back to Egypt.”

³⁵ This was the same Moses that the people rejected by saying, “Who made you our leader and judge?” God’s angel had spoken to Moses from the bush. And God had even sent the angel to help Moses rescue the people and be their leader.

³⁶ In Egypt and at the Red Sea ^[b] and in the desert, Moses rescued the people by working miracles and wonders for forty years. ³⁷ Moses is the one who told the people of Israel, “God will choose one of your people to be a prophet, just as he chose me.” ³⁸ Moses brought our people together in the desert, and the angel spoke to him on Mount Sinai. There he was given these life-giving words to pass on to us. ³⁹ But our ancestors refused to obey Moses. They rejected him and wanted to go back to Egypt.

⁴⁰ The people said to Aaron, “Make some gods to lead us! Moses led us out of Egypt, but we don’t know what’s happened to him now.” ⁴¹ Then they made an idol in the shape of a calf. They offered sacrifices to the idol and were pleased with what they had done.

⁴² God turned his back on his people and left them. Then they worshiped the stars in the sky, just as it says in the Book of the Prophets, “People of Israel, you didn’t offer sacrifices and offerings to me during those forty years in the desert. ⁴³ Instead, you carried the tent where the god Molech is worshiped, and you took along the star of your god Rephan. You made those idols and worshiped them. So now I will have you carried off beyond Babylonia.”

⁴⁴ The tent where our ancestors worshiped God was with them in the desert. This was the same tent that God had commanded Moses to make. And it was made like the model that Moses had seen. ⁴⁵ Later it was given to our ancestors, and they took it with them when they went with Joshua. They carried the tent along as they took over the land from those people that God had

chased out for them. Our ancestors used this tent until the time of King David. ⁴⁶ He pleased God and asked him if he could build a house of worship for the people of Israel. ⁴⁷ And it was finally King Solomon who built a house for God.

⁴⁸ But the Most High God doesn't live in houses made by humans. It is just as the prophet said, when he spoke for the Lord,

⁴⁹ "Heaven is my throne,
and the earth
is my footstool.

What kind of house

will you build for me?

In what place will I rest?

⁵⁰ I have made everything."

⁵¹ You stubborn and hardheaded people! You are always fighting against the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did. ⁵² Is there one prophet that your ancestors didn't mistreat? They killed the prophets who told about the coming of the One Who Obeys God. And now you have turned against him and killed him. ⁵³ Angels gave you God's Law, but you still don't obey it.

1. In Acts 7:1-29, Stephen recounts a good bit of salvation history. Who does he mention in his speech? What might be the purpose of this part of his speech? Stephen was doing what many other Jews of the time were doing. See Nehemiah 9, Daniel 9, Psalm 105 and Psalm 106. How is the way he tells the story significant?
2. Acts 7:29 seems to imply that Moses fled his own people (see 7:27-29), whom he received little affection from (see 7:39). Cross reference with Exodus 2:15. Do these two passages concur?
3. Luke wrote Acts sometime after the destruction of the temple (70 CE). Stephen was martyred in Jerusalem about the year 35 CE. Willimon reminds us that:

"when contemporary Christian interpreters utilize Stephen's speech, we must remember that we are reading the speech of the persecuted church, of which Stephen was a martyr and Luke was a defender. The church has now in many parts of the world changed places with the council members who bore the brunt of Stephen's charges. To appropriate Stephen's defense against persecution as our excuse to persecute Jews would be a blasphemous misuse of the text." (Interpretation)

Has this passage been used as an excuse for persecution?

4. Stephen indicts his critics in Acts 7:51-53.
 - What are the charges he levels at them?
 - What do his remarks imply about his accusers' relationship to God?
 - Why would his comments warrant hostility in his hearers?

REPORT AND GROUP DISCUSSION: Stoning as a method of punishment

Progression of Punishment in Acts

Acts 4:21 – Peter and John are released.

Acts 5:40 – Apostles are flogged

Acts 7:58-60 – Stephen is stoned.

Acts 7:54-60 - Stephen Is Stoned to Death

⁵⁴ When the council members heard Stephen's speech, they were angry and furious. ⁵⁵ But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked toward heaven, where he saw our glorious God and Jesus standing at his right side. ⁵⁶ Then Stephen said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!"

⁵⁷ The council members shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen ⁵⁸ and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him. The men who had brought charges against him put their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "Lord Jesus, please welcome me!" ⁶⁰ He knelt down and shouted, "Lord, don't blame them for what they have done." Then he died.

1. In Acts, visions are a primary means of God's making clear to earthly disciples the reality of heavenly facts. Can you cite another example of a vision in Acts?
2. The "Son of Man" reference in 7:56 is one of the few cases in the New Testament where that title is used by someone other than Jesus. What might be the significance of this?

3. As Stephen dies, he prays. His last prayer is that those stoning him be forgiven.

Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. - Acts 7:60 (NRSV)

What does Stephen's dying prayer say to us today?

CLOSING PRAYER

NEXT WEEK – THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2013 – 10:30 AM OGRAM HALL

1. Read Resource Book – Chapter 7 – “*The Gospel Spreads Beyond Jerusalem*”
2. In Scripture read: Acts 8:4-9:43