

## Sermon transcript Acts 6:8 -8:1

Reading is 6:8-15 and then 7:51- 8:1

### Introduction

Thank you Lois for reading excerpts from our passage for us today. This passage, the longest defence of the Christian faith in the New Testament, has many lessons it could teach us, and so with that in mind, I would encourage us all to read the passage in full for ourselves in our own time. However there are two key themes that I want to focus our time together on this morning. But first, let me pray for us as we do so.

**Father, in a passage, so full of many truths and lessons to learn, please help us, by your Holy Spirit, to hear from you today; please help us hear what you wish to say to us and please change our hearts to be in line with your truth and ways. Amen**

Well, the tragic sinking of the Titanic, that ‘unsinkable’ ship, is well known for many reasons. One of the reasons, is that many of the key people involved had hard heartedness when it came to listening to warnings. It could easily be said that stubbornness and hard heartedness led to the deaths of over 1,500 people.

Whether it was Thomas Andrews, the ship’s architect’s stubbornness in refusing to change his design to be safer, under pressure to maximise living space on the ship.

Or perhaps it was Captain Smith’s stubbornness. Captain Smith ignored seven iceberg warnings from his crew and other ships. If he had called for the ship to slow down then maybe the Titanic disaster would not have happened.

Or perhaps the choice to have life boat space for only half the number of passengers. A choice made in the confidence it was ‘unsinkable’ and the stubbornness to maximise space on the boat.

Well, we look at these awful decisions driven by pride and stubbornness, which ignored expert and other advice and we simply cannot understand it. Their hard heartedness at not being willing to listen and change is so blatantly obvious to us. But today we will see something much worse in the history of Israel, the Jewish people, a hard heartedness with significantly worse consequences.

So first of all we are going to see in this passage ‘hard heartedness’ and we will explore what that means in a little while.

But another story from the Titanic, this one the fictitious story of Jack Dawson, who if you have seen the film, spends the entirety of the time the ship is sinking with one focus and aim in mind – to save Rose, the woman he has fallen in love with. Cover your ears now if you don’t know the ending and don’t want to find out. But the film ends with Jack giving up his life to save Rose (we won’t debate here if they both could have fitted on the floating piece of door!), but sacrificially he allows her to stay out of the water, whilst he freezes to death in it. We see here a story of someone weighing up the cost, here the ultimate one, his life, but deciding it was worth it. The joy of Rose’s life, was more valuable to him than his own life. In today’s passage we will see another life lost in the cause of something they considered more worthwhile than their own life.

So let’s look at our first theme; hard heartedness against God.

## Hard heartedness against God

So, to set the scene, let's glance through the first few verses together. Stephen, one of the seven men that we met last week, who was commissioned with helping out the widows amongst the Hellenistic Jews, is as we see in verse 8, performing 'great wonders and signs among the people', but the religious leaders, the 'members of the Synagogue of the freedmen' in verse 9, start to oppose him.

But Stephen, a 'man full of God's grace and power', as we see in verse 8, spoke with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit (verse 10) and so the arguments of these religious leaders were heading nowhere. So they turned to dirty, under hand tactics. 'Secret persuasion' in verse 11; calling people to accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God. The very worse crime one can commit; either calling God a liar or giving yourself the status of God. The dirty tactics continue (verse 13) with false witnesses and in verse 14, misquoting of what Stephen had said about Jesus.

This then leads to Stephen's speech, where there is one key and consistent lesson - **God's deliverers, God's messengers are consistently rejected by Israel.**

Stephen's speech shows us that through their history, Israel has been hard hearted against God.

### Israel's hard hearts

We did not read this section of the passage from 7:1- 7:50; but it is a sweeping history of the people of Israel, from Abraham to Solomon. Over 1,000 years of the history of God's people, with a common theme; God sends a messenger, God sends someone to save his people, but that person is rejected.

We see in Chapter 7: 2-16 the story of Abraham to Joseph. The key verse, verse 9. **<sup>9</sup> "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him." God's chosen one...rejected by Israel.**

**We see in Chapter 7 verses 17-43 Moses, Moses rejected by fellow Israelites.**

Verse 27 says **<sup>27</sup> "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?"**

And then verse 35 makes it clear. **<sup>35</sup> "This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself"**

**God's chosen one...rejected by Israel.**

Then we see Stephen bring it to his day, now towards the Synagogue leaders themselves, the accusers become the accused. Verses 51- 53

**<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— <sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."**

How cutting, but how true. He calls these leader's hearts and eyes uncircumcised. As such, hearts of gentiles, for gentiles were those not circumcised. In essence, hearts of unbelievers! Stephen, has been accused of being against God, but he has turned it on its head and now accuses them of doing exactly what they had accused him of – rejecting God.

Stephen's proof? See in verse 52, If you reject and if you persecute God's prophets, God's messenger, God's deliverer, you reject God himself. In the past, verse 52 says, those that predicted the coming of the righteous one (that is Jesus), were rejected by Israel, but **you** (the religious leaders Stephen was speaking to)...but **you** have betrayed and murdered God's ultimate prophet, God's ultimate messenger, God's ultimate deliverer – Jesus himself.

Have Israel not learnt their lesson? Have they not looked at their history and seen the consequences of rejecting God's messengers? Why are their hearts like that of Captain Smith, refusing to listen? Do they think they know better? Why are their hearts so hardened against God?

### **Our hard hearts (we are no better)**

When I read the Old Testament, it is so very easy to ask these questions of Israel. It is easy to sit from afar and see the ridiculous stubbornness of Israel's hard heart, just as it is easy to sit and judge Captain Smith; it is much easier to do this than it is to hold up a mirror and ask the same question of ourselves.

**So Israel's own history condemns them, but before we are too hasty and start to feel superior, let us remember our own history condemns us – we have, if we are honest, been no better.**

Each one of us has a life which would condemn us; revealing that we have the same attitude of Israel. Each one of us has rejected all of the 10 commandments in how we live, think and behave. Have we all been proud, yes, have we all been self-righteous, yes, have we all had unjust anger towards others, yes and very sadly the list could go on. We have all rejected God's ultimate messenger - Jesus, proved by the fact that we have rejected how he has asked us to live, think and behave.

If we are Christians today, we can praise God that our hard hearts have been softened enough to hear God's call that we need to be forgiven. What joy that we can be forgiven and are forgiven if our trust is in Him!

But in the everyday, in our daily Christian walk, how often do we reject God's messengers? What they have told us in scripture? Do we not, like Israel, fail to truly listen to what God's Word is saying to us? I need to ask myself; 'in the big and the small decisions, where is it that I am behaving just like Israel and not listening to what Jesus would say or have me do?

If you are investigating the Christian faith, know that no Christian can sit there feeling smug; every single person has been like Israel; has been as stubborn, has been 'stiff-necked' as verse 51 puts it, has been as hard hearted, against God, as we see Israel has been in this in this passage. We are not a group of people loved by God because of our good behaviour, we are a group of people realising that we have been like Israel and in need of asking God for forgiveness. The same is true of you; to become a Christian is to realise that you personally, have rejected God, not listened to Him and His ways. It is not anyone else's fault and there are no excuses. It is my fault when I reject God and so I need to say sorry to him. The same is true of all of us, the same is true of you. But, as all Christians can joyfully testify, once you acknowledge this sobering truth and realise that it is true of our hearts, we can then discover the message of grace, and forgiveness that is offered in abundance throughout the Bible, through God's messengers.

So Stephen's speech shows us that **Israel's own history condemns them, but before we are too hasty and start to feel superior, let us remember our own history – we have been no better.**

## A message worth dying for

But now to look at second theme. Stephen's message to the religious leaders here is most certainly hard hitting and is deeply unpopular; so unpopular that Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr as we see him stoned in verse 58. He lost his earthly life because of this message – but he knew it was a price worth paying. But why did he think that this was a message worth dying for?

### A message full of necessary difficult truths (v 51-53)

Well, we see in verses 51-53, that stiff necked section that we read earlier, that it's a message full of the difficult truths that the religious leaders needed to hear. Difficult, but necessary for them...because it was true! It was an act of love to tell them difficult truth because it revealed their true standing before God. We know Stephen is telling them out of love, for in verse 60, he even asks God to not hold his death against them. It was an act of love for someone to tell you that you have rejected God and that that has consequences...it's an act of love, even though it's hard to hear, because if you don't know you need rescuing, you are not going to ask for help!

The very classic image, which is often used is that of coming across someone in a house, who doesn't know that the house is on fire. If someone is in a burning house and they don't know, of course you tell them, so that they can get out! They need to know the reality and seriousness of their situation. Or similarly with someone who has a disease. If someone is ill, but doesn't know, they won't do anything about, they can't do anything about it if they don't know! It is an act of enormous love to tell them. Similarly if someone has rejected God and the penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23), of course you tell them, it should be an act of love and compassion to tell them the reality of their situation.

### But a message which brings life

But throughout Acts we have seen that the difficult truths that need telling are not the end of the message, but just the beginning. Yes we need rescuing, we all need God's forgiveness, for we have all rejected God and his righteous one Jesus, but the message of Acts is that we can be saved, we can be forgiven!

**Acts 2:21 – And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved**

**Acts 2:38 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'**

**Acts 4:12 <sup>12</sup>Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."**

The difficult truths Stephen tells them, can lead to people understanding and accepting the glorious truths of how to go from death to life, how to be forgiven by your maker. It is this message which can bring you peace about death; not pretend optimistic peace, but real peace knowing where you stand before God – forgiven and secure. It is this message which reveals that as a Christian you are unconditionally loved and can rest assured in your salvation, for you do not and cannot earn it, it's achieved by Jesus. It is this message which reveals that those who trust in Christ have eternity with no more tears, which cannot be taken from them. It is this message which reveals to us how to have life to the full.

### So it's a message worth dying for

So quite simply, it is a message worth dying for. What is more precious than anything we have just said...nothing. What is more valuable for people to hear? Nothing. What is most needed for each person – to hear this message of difficult truths, but this message of life.

In our rather more soft Western Christian circles, I often hear it said – ‘have a go at evangelism, the consequences are not too bad. It may be a bit awkward with your friends, but most people are often at least respectful, even if disinterested. It often really isn't too bad, so have a go. It's very unlikely you are going to die for your faith here.’

I think this is poor advice! Or more importantly, I don't think this is Biblical advice!

For most of us, whilst at the moment it is probably unlikely that will die sharing our faith - that is not the point! If you lose all your friends, if your family fully and totally reject you and throw you out, if you lose your job because employer doesn't like your faith and most serious of all, like Stephen in this passage, you even lose your life...evangelism is worth it, because we bring the most precious, most valuable, most needed message in the entire world – we bring the message of life!

In Titanic, Jack was willing to die to save someone he loved, how much more should we be willing to die to bring a message that can eternally save all who hear and accept it! I certainly don't want to die sharing the gospel, but I must see it as a price worth paying.

How we tell people, when we tell people, yes of course we can discuss those things and ask for God's wisdom in our context. But we really must keep each other accountable, let's not egg ourselves on to do evangelism because it will probably be ok...let's do evangelism; even if it has dire consequences for us in earthly terms, because we grasp how precious, valuable and necessary the message of life that can be found in Jesus is. We have this message of power and life and it is this message that we share with a lost and broken world!

I say this so strongly as I think this is what the Bible says and secondly, I think it's what my heart needs to keep hearing! Come on Johnny, just remember, how good is the gospel, how good is your saviour, how good is the promise of eternal life; don't dumb it down, don't underplay how much others need to hear it – it is the difference between life and death... so without a doubt, it is a message worth dying for!

But just before we start to worry and start to think that this boldness to proclaim totally depends upon us and our ability to summon our own courage, look back at chapter 6 verses 5 and 10. Stephen has the Holy Spirit, he is not doing this on his own. It is this same Holy Spirit that changed Peter from the timid denier of Christ to the bold proclaimer that we saw in Acts 2 and it is this same Holy Spirit which is in us, all of us as believers! It is this same Spirit which can convict us of just how precious, valuable and necessary the gospel is! We are not alone in our mission!

### A surprise....

But, in such a long passage, full of hard truths and full of the shocking reality that sharing these hard truths might lead us to die, we see the sovereignty of God and the assurance of His plans and the proof that he will complete His mission. Look at chapter 8 v 1

**And Saul approved of their killing him. 'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.'**

At this point in Acts, evangelism had been only to the Jews and in Jerusalem, but the death of Stephen, which aimed to squash and stop the message, led to persecution against the church, which in turn led to the church being scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus had commissioned at the beginning of Acts in 1:8. Through persecution, the church was scattered, but as you can read about in the rest of Acts, this led to the preaching of the gospel far and wide to both Jews and Gentiles. The death of Stephen led to many more hearing the message of life and being saved...most certainly a price worth paying!

And just look at who was there...Saul, who would soon become the apostle Paul. A man here who is wanting to extinguish this message of truth and life. But in chapter 9, he is a man who is utterly transformed when he comes to acknowledge and believe the difficult truths (that he personally had rejected God) and accept the message of life that is found in Jesus. So let us not despair in our evangelism when it seems impossible that people we know will turn to God. This is a wonderful reminder of what God can do to the most hard hearted person, who is completely against him.

So let's keep encouraging each other to keep going, to be more bold in evangelism (whatever that might look like), to see the preciousness, the value and the necessity of the gospel for the world around us, for Huntingdon and to keep reminding ourselves, just what our God can do! Just look at what he did in Saul's life!

## Conclusion

So we have looked at two main themes from this passage today. Hard heartedness towards God and we have seen how Stephen knew that the gospel is a message worth dying for. So a couple of questions for myself and for us all to consider and pray about as we finish.

### **Question 1: Where might God's Word be showing you that you are being hard hearted?**

I could give examples here, but they would not really be from the passage. This isn't a passage asking you to reconsider your use of money (as we have seen earlier in Acts), or time or challenge sexual behavior etc. But rather, this passage shows a principle; God sent His messengers (in the Old Testament it was the prophets, and in the New Testament it is Jesus and the apostles relaying the teachings of Jesus). Stephen has shown us, that when Israel rejected God's messengers, in fact they rejected God himself. We today have the words of His messengers all throughout scripture. If we reject them those words, we reject God himself. With that principle in mind, are there any areas of life that you need to search the scriptures to see what they are saying and need to come under the authority of scripture on? A big, big question and an on-going work in all our lives as long as we are here on earth, but a question we must be asking ourselves on a regular basis. A question often best done with others, which is why we value so much meeting up for Bible studies in groups, as we all need continuing help with this. So, if you are not part of a Bible study group, can I encourage you to consider joining one, as they are invaluable as we help each other see where we need to be better at listening to God.

### **Question 2: Do I really believe that we have a message worth dying for?**

I'm not sure what else there is to say to this...I need to pray more that the gospel, that Jesus himself captures my heart more, enthralls me more, that my mind doesn't reduce down his power, glory and grace to being Johnny sized but rather scaled up to it being scripture sized. I think this is something we should all be praying for each other, I know I need help with it. So that we would all be those who get just how precious, valuable and necessary the gospel is for a lost and broken world, so that we would be, if it came to it, willing to die in order to get this message of life out there. So let me pray.