

“HISTORY LESSON” (Part 3)  
Jeremiah 2:26-30, 2 Peter 2:17-22, Acts 7:39-53  
August 3 & 4, 2024

“The company that makes Arm & Hammer baking soda pretty much has a monopoly on the product. Most people associate baking soda with the Arm & Hammer brand because they sort of have the market cornered. There’s just not a lot of competition.

“In the same way, God wants to corner the market in terms of our affection and praise. He wants to have a monopoly. Even though there are a lot of idols out there that could compete with God for a share of the market, God does not want to share us with the competition. Every time something shows up in the culture that distracts people from the true God, it encroaches on His 100% market share and God wants a monopoly!”<sup>1</sup> He is a jealous God and He wants us to love Him only.

The problem is, however, we don’t have that same loyalty to the Lord our God as He does to us. Humanity is quick to seek other gods to worship, and we have a very difficult time accepting the Only True God’s guidelines and principles. We want a god who lets us do whatever we want, with no strings attached, BUT when we find ourselves in trouble, we want that god to come to our defense and protect us and save us. We want what we want, when we want it, just how we want it, to the neglect or outright rebellion of the Lord God Almighty. We are so quick to run after all of the delights and pleasures of the world, and we forget about Almighty God’s laws and commands. And when the world turns up-side-down on us, we want to blame Almighty God for not coming to our rescue.

As we look through biblical history, it is easy to see that we quickly turn from the ways of the Lord God, and pursue the ways of the world. And it is always to our detriment. Unfortunately, many of us don’t find that out until it’s too late and we’re stuck with the consequences of our addiction to the ways of the world. We make cars, or airplanes, or trains, or boats, or houses, or jobs, or sports, or parades, or people, or money, or alcohol, or drugs, or sex our highest priorities, and we make them into our gods. And we chase after them with our whole hearts, only to lose out completely in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 163, #488)

The sad thing about all of those things is that they will always disappoint us. Oh, they may occupy our time and our energy and our resources, but they will never satisfy, and they will never give back to us security, or happiness, or protection, or salvation. When we put our trust and hope in any thing of this world, we will **always** come up empty. And so we keep chasing after other gods in pursuit of fulfillment.

Jeremiah made that point known to the people of Jerusalem during the reigns of kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah before they were taken into exile into Babylon. He exposed how the people had turned from the ways of God, the Father Almighty, and had pursued their own gods of wood and stone to worship, enabling them to do whatever they wanted in their own eyes. They claimed to be a people of Almighty God, going through the motions of worshipping at His Temple, yet their hearts were not with the Lord God, but they chose the ways of the world instead.

The Lord God speaks through Jeremiah, saying, “...*the people of Israel are disgraced - they, their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets. They say to wood, ‘You are my father;’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth.’ They have turned their **backs** to Me and not their **faces**; yet when they are in trouble, they say, ‘Come and save us!’ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you, Judah, have as many gods as you have towns” (Jeremiah 2:26-28).*

**Are we not** in the same situation here in the United States of America? We claim to be followers of Christ, yet we neglect His ways. We chase after any other gods, and yet we still want the Lord God Almighty to bless us. We turn our backs to the Lord, not our faces, and when the bottom drops out of our lives, we also cry out, ‘Come and save us.’ God is not mocked, nor is He willing to save those who blatantly turn against Him in all their ways. While we say with our mouths that we are people of the Lord, our hearts are far from Him. Will He not **also**, then, let us be overrun by the enemy? Will He not also then let us suffer the consequences of our sinful lives? He desires that we turn from our wicked ways and pursue Him with all our hearts, but we still chase after the gods of this world. **It won’t work!**

Although the Almighty God desires that we follow Him with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, He lets us make the choice of who or what will be our first priority. He does not force His will and His way upon us, but rather invites us to seek Him and find Him so that He might delight in us and make us His children so that He might guide us and protect us and provide for us and save us. The choice is ours as to whom we will make #1 in our lives.

Likewise, Peter addresses the trend for people to not only resist the Lord God, but to also convince others that the world's ways are superior to the Lord God's ways. There are some that lead others to follow the gods of this world, even to their own destruction, "*promising them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity - for 'people are slaves to whatever has mastered them'*" (2 Peter 2:19).

But if they come to know Jesus Christ, and find His salvation, yet **they turn away again** from all of the benefits of knowing Jesus, they become worse off than when they first started. It is one thing to be uneducated in the ways of the Lord Jesus Christ, but to come to know all His fullness and experience His righteousness and grace, and then turn away **once again** to the worthless things of this world, there is little to no hope for us. Take heed that you do not fall away from following Jesus Christ, for if you do, you may become forever lost.

The situation we find in our study of Stephen in the Book of Acts chapter 7 is just that condition. As Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin defending himself against false accusations from the "Freedmen," he points out to the religious leaders that they are falling into the same line as their forefathers did before them. They had been given the Laws and Commandments from the Lord God Almighty, yet they turned their backs on them. They had models like Abraham and Joseph, and Moses and David to learn from and follow, yet their hearts were not set on living out the laws and commands of the Lord God Almighty, but rather they preferred the ways of the religions around them and began worshipping the Temple rather than the God who gave it to them. They began making offerings to gods made of wood and stone, claiming them as the ones that created them and gave them birth. They began

offering their own children as sacrifices in order to gain approval and blessing from the false gods.

They lost track of the Lord God Almighty and began mixing His ways with their own ways to satisfy their own desires and pleasures. (Sounds like today, doesn't it?)

Listen to the way that Stephen states it. This is Acts 7:39-53 (READ Acts 7:39-53).

The people, kings, priests, and prophets who had once known the ways of the Lord, now turned from those ways, even persecuting and killing those who tried to bring them back into alignment with the Scriptures. They continually called for idols to be made by which they could worship as their gods, going so far as to even placing them into the Temple of the Lord God, while at the same time denying the Lord His rightful place to be worshipped wholly and completely. God's hope for a monopoly for the people became a sorry minority.

Over and over again the Lord God Almighty tried to get the people's attention. At times He would save them miraculously to help them see that He was the ONLY One with ultimate power and authority, but as soon as they were saved, they reverted right back to their idol worship. So God allowed them to be occupied by other peoples. Maybe during exile, they might long to return to the Lord God who had saved them in the past. Even then, they refused to give God the monopoly in their praise and worship. And after God brought them out of exile, guided them to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, and provided resources and man power to make it happen, it was not long afterward that the people wandered away once more. So God gave them up to conquest by the Romans.

They kept forgetting the very 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment given to their ancestors on Mt. Sinai: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me"* (Exodus 20:2-3). Instead they kept going after *"the sun, moon and stars"* (Acts 7:42) to make their gods.

But are we any different? Many people put their whole lives into following the daily horoscope in the paper or on-line. They pattern their whole lives on what the stars "tell them." Others put their trust and dependence upon science, placing their trust and health in the "wisdom of the human

scientists.” Some even predict the future based upon what ancient, extinct cultures predicted with numbers based upon the stars in the sky.

Stephen reminds them that this was what brought them into exile in Babylon (Acts 7:43). They had so abandoned the ways of the Lord God Almighty, yet claimed loyalty to Him, that God finally let them have their own way and allowed other powers to capture and enslave them. How could God bless a people who were not willing to follow Him or obey His commands? How can God bless any country that refuses to let the laws and commands of God guide their countries?

Stephen then confronts their fixation on the Temple in Jerusalem. Since Solomon had used the resources that David had prepared for the building of the Temple, the thought became popular that God lived only in that temple. Yet Stephen lifted up the fact that the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle was once the place where God would visit to speak to Moses. The Tabernacle was not a permanent structure, yet God resided there occasionally. Joshua had brought it into the land that God had given the people. David had retrieved it from the enemy and brought it back to Jerusalem.

But it was not the Temple made by human hands that became God’s home, but rather a place where the people could gather to worship and offer sacrifices to Him. The Temple was not to be worshipped, but God. The Temple was the outward sign of God’s grace to the people of Israel, signifying to them that they were His people. The Temple was the place they were to use for honor and praise and reverence to the Lord God Almighty.

The same is true for us! This place is not God’s House, where God lives. It is a place where we gather to worship Him as our One and ONLY God. Yes, He visits us from time to time, but this is not His SOLE residence. But we are tasked with presenting this place as a worship space, not something to be worshipped, but to seek God’s Holy Spirit in.

Now, it’s hard to hear the real truth when we are so fixed upon our own ways. We become blinded to how God wants us to live, and we are so focused on getting our own way that we are quickly offended when the truth is exposed to us.

That's what happens when Stephen finishes his defense. He holds no punches, but boldly tells the truth of what the leaders have done. They persecuted and killed the prophets who told of God's fulfilling His promise to send the Messiah. They also rejected and then had THE MESSIAH killed like a common criminal because He tried to bring them back to the Lord God. They even persecuted the ones who tried to get them to see what they had done. And he comes so close to prophesying about them martyring him as a witness to the Son of God, Jesus. They had made power and position their gods and they were not about to give up the leading of the people to anyone, not even the Messiah.

Once again, Stephen was not out to disrespect the laws of Moses or the practices of the Jewish religion. He was trying to open the eyes of the leaders to see what they had done. He so desperately loved them that he confronted them with the truth, HOPING that they would repent of their own ways and come to know Jesus Christ as their Messiah and their Savior. Stephen loved them enough to expose what was happening AND then to guide them to the Truth found only in Jesus. He not only exposed the problem, but offered the eternal remedy that would save all of them from eternally rejecting God one last time.

As the last part of his defense, Stephen opens the book to them and exposes that they had outright rejected "*the Righteous One*" and saying, "*And now you have betrayed and murdered Him...*" (Acts 7:52). He was defending the truth of Jesus Christ being the Messiah. And he let them know that it was for this reason that he had been instructing the people of Jerusalem that he served, telling them about God's fulfilled promise of a Savior. If the leaders of the Sanhedrin, the "spiritual leaders of the Jews," were not going to proclaim the Good News of God in the fulfillment of His promise through Jesus to the people, then He was going too.

So filled with the Holy Spirit was Stephen, that the wrath of God spoke out to the leaders about what they had done to Jesus. Yet they didn't give Stephen a chance to complete the Gospel account, by proclaiming that it was through the murder of Jesus on the cross that atonement for the sins of the world came onto the Earth. Stephen never got the chance to inform them about the love of God through Jesus,

that whoever confessed their sins in His Name, and claimed Him as their Savior and Messiah, would not perish under the condemnation of their own sin, but would receive forgiveness and have eternal life. Stephen was not given the chance to complete his defense by sharing the teachings of Jesus, informing the leaders that Jesus was the Perfect Sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, and that by His blood poured out onto the earth, their sins were wiped away.

God had supplied the way for the elimination of sin, supplying the Perfect Lamb to carry the sins of the people. And by being slain for the people, crucified on the cross, the penalty for sin, which is eternal death, was paid. Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice for all humanity, took our sins upon Himself, and became sin for us so that we would not have to face the punishment of our own sins. He gave His life, letting His body be broken and His blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins, to all who would profess Him as the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior come to set His people free.

Stephen wanted the leaders of the Temple know the goodness that God had done through Jesus. He knew the change that had taken place in his life when he had professed Jesus as the Messiah, and he wanted everyone to know about it. Stephen's desire was that all those in Jerusalem would come to hear about the great Good News of Jesus Christ, so he boldly instructed the leaders that God had indeed provided His Messiah.

And what about us? Are we willing to live our faith so boldly that we also become arrested and tried for "disturbing the peace" or challenging church traditions or questioning city guidelines? Is our faith strong enough to get us arrested for standing up for Jesus? Many have done just that, but today there is need for more. The Day of the Lord is coming quickly and we need to use every opportunity we have to live for the Lord Jesus.

Stephen looked to those around him and saw their emptiness, their daily survival, and he desired to give them more. Stephen wanted the leaders of the Temple to understand the magnitude of God's love for them, as He sent Jesus to us to become our Salvation. Stephen loved those around him so much that he wanted everyone to know that it is only through Jesus Christ that we have life abundantly.

Stephen looked out to the people in Jerusalem and saw the desperate spiritual emptiness they had, and he worked hard to bring others to faith in Jesus Christ. Our day is no different!

I pray that the eyes of our hearts might be opened up to those around us, seeing their spiritual emptiness and desiring to fill it with the truth of Jesus. There are so many here in Sheboygan that don't know Jesus. They are focused on their own idols, seeking their own pleasures, wanting nothing more than to live another day, yet their life wastes away with each breath. Who will take the Good News of Jesus to them? Can we blindly turn our backs to them and let them die for all eternity while we enjoy such blessing and peace and joy from the Lord ourselves? Can we just live our lives for our own sake and not help the ones around us find Jesus as their Savior, too?

God has put Fountain Park Global Methodist Church right here in downtown Sheboygan for a purpose - to reach out and touch the lives of all who come here. To the destitute - to the businessmen and women - to the homeless - to the broken hearted - to the orphan - to the widow and widower - to the foreigner and the long-time residents - to the old and to the young - to the leaders of our community - to the police department and the fire department. We are to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to the ones at the Farmer's Market, to the ones at the beach, to the ones at the Beer Garden, to those living under bridges and in back alleys, and to the ones at the park. We are to be the witnesses of Jesus Christ wherever we go so that we might encourage them, uplift them, pray with them, heal them, and move them toward Jesus so that they might find His peace and love and joy. Let the Holy Spirit fill you with the love of Jesus for all those around you so that they might find the true life that only Jesus can give.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for the example Stephen sets for us, to be a bold witness to Jesus. Give us the heart for the people right around us so that we might give them hope and life, too. Give us the boldness we need to become servants ready to go where You want us to go, do what You want us to do, and say what You want us to say. Help us not to be afraid of anyone, but to freely share the hope that we have in our Savior Jesus. Speak through us, Lord, so that we might help others find Your Salvation, for it is in Jesus' Name that we pray. AMEN.