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The Freight Train Cometh
Acts 7:44-60

Last week I received a letter from my friend Peter Mistkevich in Moscow. I went to seminary with him and Erin and I visited he and his family several years ago. I taught a seminar at Moscow Theological seminary where he was the vice president. He is the Russian voice of Chuck Swindall for Insight for Living and a pastor. He writes of his own father Valter whose father, Peter's grandfather, was a Minister of the Gospel during the time of the Stalin regime. Arrested several times and spent a total of ten years in prison and labor camps. It was hard on the family and Valter didn't want to follow those steps. He became secretary in the young communists league, went to medical school and became a successful dentist. But one day when visiting an old family friend from his fathers church in St. Petersburg he decided to accept the invitation to attend a prayer meeting. There the Holy Spirit got a hold of Peter's dad, Valter and his whole life turned around. He gave up his dental practice and became a pastor. He is 72 now and serves as pastor in the Moscow region. This church has been under constant attack by the atheists and ultra nationalist in their area. Last November the church was robbed stealing sound equipment, Bibles and Hymnals. In January a group of young men destroyed part of their fence and broke two church windows. In February another section of fence and windows were broken. In April two young men came in and spread an obnoxious smelling liquid all throughout the worship hall. It was so bad meetings could not be held there until professional came and removed the smell. In May a large glass window was broken. Later in may a national pro-national TV program that airs 3:30 in the afternoon called "Russian House" firmly stated that the church should be closed down. First week of June at 3am

arsonists broke into the church, spread gasoline and set the church on fire. The roof is totally gone but the church walls remain standing. Right now all you can see is the cross standing above the burned out roof.

Attacks, persecution and suffering comes when God's people stand up for the truth and make it known. The truth forces the issue. The truth refuses to let you be neutral. There is nothing safe about the truth will press you one way or the other. This morning we see the truth coming into a rapid collision, for the men of the Jewish council who are interrogating Stephen. Like a freight train into a brick wall truth will be dealt with. Truth must either be accepted and you hop aboard for the ride, stand in its way and you will get run over...or get out of the way. For truth allows no neutral ground.

Turn in your Bibles to the book of Acts chapter 7 as we see the train of Stephens words have built up a head of steam and in getting ready to collide with the council. The council has accused Stephen of speaking against the law and Moses and the temple. So Stephen tells a couple of stories from the past history of the Hebrew people to make several points. 1. God will not be confined to a land, or temple or certain kind of people. A place is only holy because God has decided to show up. 2. That God never wavers in His unfailing desire to see people come to Him in faith and obedience, but He is will change the way He reaches out to men. You cannot set God in stone. He will not be pegged down. 3. Israel has a proven track record of rejecting God and God's messengers. Read with me Acts 7:44-60 (READ)

In v.44ff Stephen says that God designed both the temporary tent they used to worship while wandering around in the desert and God was the one who designed and directed the temple building. God is far greater than the temple building. It's up to God to choose where he decides to inhabit.

v.48 God doesn't dwell in houses made by humans. Lets get some perspective here. Stephen quote God from Isaiah 66 is quoted, "I use the

earth to put my feet up to rest. Hello. Do you think that you can make a building that could possibly contain all that I am? I am the Creator. I am the maker of all things. You adjust and shift things and slightly change things. “What is not my hand which made all these things?”

If you continue to read the next verse from Isaiah 66 it says “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at my word.” This was a very familiar passage of scripture to the council and would have recognized that Stephen stopped his quote there and instead continued to say the opposite in v. 51 “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in the heart and ears always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing exactly what YOUR fathers did.

To think that we could build a house to contain God is ludicrous...but the council is proud and more interested in flexing their religious power muscles than of being obedient to God. Their root evil was that they derived their joy, gained their satisfaction from what they could achieve with their own hands. Look back at v.44 “they rejoiced in the work of their hands” They wanted a kind of God, a kind of worship that could showcase their own strength, power and wisdom, morality. And religious zeal. They got all their joy not from God but from what they could achieve and the temple had become a symbol in Israel of what they could achieve, the work of their own hands. Their worship was not about God but about themselves. It had become an ugly form of self-worship...all while looking very religious. Their face looked religious but they hadn't changed a bit on the inside. They were looking very religious on the outside but were dead on the inside. Hard, stiff and proud. Their heart was not seeking after God and their ears refused to listen to God's messenger. They rejected the compelling influence of the HS. Stephen saw them repeating exactly what their fathers had done. It was so clear to him he let both barrels rip.

Here's the point; God will not be fit into our mold. It is He who has made us and not we ourselves. We are the sheep and He is the shepherd.

Don't let the fulfillments from the words of your own hands and own strength. Don't take and worship the blessings of God in exchange for God himself. For we cannot possibly build anything to contain God. The proud think they cannot make him into anything that suits their desires. God resists the proud and the proud resists God. God will not be shaped by men. So for those who want to look at all the religions of the world and pick and choose the aspects that suit you. For those who want to designer shape their a la carte religion to suit their own tastes and desires, I'm sorry but God is not pleased. Half-truth is not truth at all and you will come crashing up against a very intolerant truth someday. For truth refuses to be neutral. God will not fit into our mold. He is the one who makes the mold.

V51 the freight train of truth makes impact. Notice how Stephen stops saying "our" fathers and now uses the indictment "your' fathers. Truth allows no neutral ground. It will knock you off the fence you are desperately trying to straddle. You either accept it or fight it. Truth will drive you to one side or another. They had to either accept or reject to embrace or destroy. Foe Stephen was placing before them the truth That man's dead religious traditions had been replaced by God's living truth.

Their response? It is not very teachable here. They are really hacked off. They throw away any vestige of propriety and decorum. They no longer try to pretend being the calm, cool and collected leaders of the Jewish people. The text says, they were "cut to the quick" literally the truth sawed them in half. Stephens's words had ripped apart the veneer of their false spirituality and exposed them for the hypocrites they were. Their response reveals what side of the fence they were knocked off on to. They rejected the God of Glory in Jesus Christ.

V.55 Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit and looked up and sees Jesus. If you want to continue to stand for truth in the face of intense opposition you can't be a people pleaser, you must live only for the applause of one set of hands. When I played tennis or basketball and my

father was watching, I always knew exactly where it was he was sitting. I always looked over there to see his response when I made a great shot. Stephen looks to see the applause of only one and that is Jesus Christ His Lord and Savior. Stephen sees him standing at the right hand of the father in the very throne room of heaven. Elsewhere in scripture it tells of Jesus seated at the right hand of God. In Jewish temples there were no chairs to signify that the work of the priests was never done. They were continually offering sacrifices. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the father emphasizing that His redemptive work on the cross is done and complete. Here Stephen sees Jesus standing. Why? I think he is standing to welcome Stephen home. Stephen lives to see the pleasure of Jesus. Longs for the embrace of Jesus. Desires to hear those words, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." Whose applause do you seek the most? Do you work and live and worship longing to see the applause of Jesus?

Stephen says that he sees the SON OF MAN standing at the right hand of the throne. This phrase was the one that unleashed all traces of restraint in them. To say that Jesus was the Messiah was one thing to the Jewish leaders. To claim that he was the son of God was another, but worse yet was to use the title Ezekiel used to describe that one who would be the redeemer of the entire world. This same council also remembers another prisoner a few months earlier whom they also put to death. But was silent at their questions until the high priest in frustration finally demanded that he speak "I adjure by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ the son of God. Jesus then replied, "you have said it yourself, nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven." I'm sure they remembered that Jesus claimed this same deity as Savior of the world...and they murdered him. Now they have no choice. Truth has pressed them into a corner. They must either accept or reject and they reject. They rush at Stephen. It's a mad rush.

The same word for rush was used in the gospels to describe the rush of demon possessed swine down the cliffs into the Sea of Galilee. Truth allows no neutral ground. They drove Stephen out of the city and stoned him.

Fredrick Bueckners writes that stoning somebody as young and healthy as Stephen is not an easy job. You just don't get the job done with the first couple of stones and rocks. And even after you get the man down it is a long hot business. To prepare themselves for the work out, they stripped down to the waist and got somebody they knew and trusted to keep an eye on things for them until they were through. The man they choose to watch their coats was a fire breathing arch conservative Jew named Saul, a guy from Tarsus. Saul was there because he was in full agreement with what they were doing. He makes this cameo appearance in the story of Acts because this same one God would unrepentantly use to make an incredible impact for the gospel clear across the world. God would so transform this man from hate to love that his very name would change and one who would be the most prolific writer of New Testament books. A guy most of us know as Paul.

In our sermon this morning the main point has been that truth demands a choice. Truth will knock us off the fence. Truth will not be content to take a neutral ground. So...here is another point we can learn. Truth is always the right place to be....but its' not always the safest place to be. I'm sure that when the early Christian believers heard about the terrible stoning of Stephen they were asking a lot of questions. Why God? Why did you not spare Stephen like you had so many others? Others you had freed from prison and miraculously spared death...but not Stephen. God if I were you I wouldn't have let Stephen be killed. He was the cream of your new and rising crop of leadership Why God do the good die young? Stephen's leadership was just getting ready to kick into a blaze and then it gets snuffed out.

When the enemy picks off our rising star Stephen we wonder if the gospel message will go off and cower hiding in the rocks. But Stephens murder does not stop the message of the truth. For truth will never be silenced. We must not overestimate the power of the enemy and we must not underestimate the power of God. God was not finished when Stephen died. God in fact had barely begun. The persecution that began to sweep across the Christian community was the force that pushed the believers out to fulfill the mission that God had commissioned them with. God had called them to be witnesses. Not only in Jerusalem but also Judea and Samaria and to the rest of the world. God allowed the persecution to come to encourage the spread of people and his witnesses clear across the world. Stephens death forced an independence from the what Judaism had become. Stephens death forced the believers out into the gentile world. Stephens' death was a mighty wind that would blow the seed of the gospel wide open and spread clear across the world and would multiply by millions. The blood of the martyrs certainly is the seed of the church.

Joseph Ton was pastor of the Second Baptist church in Oradea, Romania until he was exiled by the Rumanian government in 1981. He wrote that in 1972 he fled his country to study theology at Oxford, but felt led to return to his country. Joseph's student friends asked him what chance he had of successfully being allowed to minister back in his homeland. So Ton asked God about it and God brought Matthew 10:16 "I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves" as Ton wondered, "What chance does a sheep have of surviving five minutes, let alone converting the wolves? But Joseph God said, That is how I send you: totally defenseless and without any reasonable hope of success. If you are willing to go like that then go. If you are not willing to be in that position then don't go. So he went and began to preach uninhibited. The harassments and arrests came. One day during interrogation an officer threatened to kill him. Then Pastor Ton replied, "Sir, you supreme

weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir you know that my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, I will be sprinkling them with my blood. Whoever listens to them after that will say, "I'd better listen. This man sealed his message with his blood. The message I speak will speak ten times louder than before so go ahead and kill me. I will have the supreme victory then." The officer sent him home.

Think about it. The Lord does not always offer us safety, but He does offer us strength. Maybe you are a Christian who is cautious and timid to stand up for truth because you want to survive. If you are willing to give up for whatever God wants even to the point of embarrassment, ridicule, harassment, looking like a nerd, looking out of touch, things we think are far worse than death. If you are ready to give it all up, then now you are ready to do whatever. You have no fear of man and can do whatever you want. Our task is obedience to God and it may lead to difficulty, but he will give us the power to stand. Jesus said, "My strength is sufficient for you. For my strength is made perfect in weakness." Truth refuses to stand on neutral ground. Truth will knock you off the fence of indecision.

So...what will you give your life for? The very last words spoken by Joan of Arc just before being burned at the stake for her faith. "Every man gives his life for what he believes. Every woman gives her life for what she believes. Sometimes people believe in little or nothing, and yet they give their lives for that little or nothing. One life is all we have and we live it and thus it is gone. But to surrender what you are and live without belief is more terrible than dying. But there is a worse fate than living without belief. It is to live with a commitment which, at the portals of eternity, turns out to have betrayed you."

Truth forces a decision. It knocks off the fence. It drives you out of spiritual Switzerland that refuses to make a choice. What's your choice?

Acts 7:44-ff Why do the good die young?

v.44

Our Fathers...had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness.

How was the tabernacle a testimony?

Just as HE (God) who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern.

POINT: God was directing Moses. They aren't on the same level.

POINT: At the begging the place of worship was a tent, a tabernacle that they carried around with them, in the desert. God met them even there.

v.45 And having received it in their turn OUR FATHERS

brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nation whom God drove out before OUR FATHERS until the time of David.

POINT: God keeps continuing his faithful protection and loving pursuit of his people even in the faith of two-timing rejection of Him.

v.46 and David found favor in God's sight

Asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob

But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.

(Rebuttal of the Temple accusation)

However, the Most High King does not dwell in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says:

Heaven is my throne,

And earth is the footstool of my feet;

What kind of house will you build for me? Says the Lord

Or what place is there for my repose?

What is not my hand which made all these things?

If you continue to read the next verse from that quote in Isaiah 66 it says "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at my word."

POINT: it is a call to humility to think that we could possibly make a building that could contain God or house God Almighty is ludicrous. A building is only holy because God chooses to show up, not because its beautiful or feels right. The council was proud and instead of finishing Stephens well known quote of Is 66 he starts hammering home that they are a proud bunch of two-timing, hypocrites that are far more concerned with flexing their own religious power muscles than they are of being obedient to God.

The root evil in many was that they derived their joy , their fulfillment and sense of satisfaction from what they could achieve with their own hands. V.41 “They rejoiced in the work of their hands” They wanted a kind of God and a kind of worship that highlighted their own strength and power and wisdom, their own righteousness and morality, their own religious zeal. They got their joy, not from God, but from what they could achieve. The temple had become a symbol in Israel of what they could achieve, the work of their hands. And the worship had become a subtle form of self-worship...all looking very religious. Two timing using all the right language but coming from heart and ear that are stiff and proud and unrepentant.

POINT: Don't get your fulfillment from the works of your hands or from the achievements of your own strength. Our new church building is years away in the making but even in the making it must not become a point of glory or satisfaction as a work of our own hands. We must rejoice in God and not a building. We must not turn a symbol of God's work into a form of self worship.

v.51 You men who are stiff-necked (one who blatantly refuses to bow before the Lord.)

uncircumcised in the heart
and ears

are always resisting the Holy Spirit (never had they exposed their life to the glory and grace of God. They were defiled and yet refused to repent.

....you are doing just as YOUR fathers did.

Truth allows no neutral ground. You either accept it or fight it. Truth will always drive you to one side or another. Jesus said in his ministry “I did not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword, I have come to divide people. That is what happen to these leaders that were faced with the truth. They had to either accept or reject, to kiss or kill...they chose to kill.

They had the ritual of circumcision performed on their bodies but they had no actions that backed up their heart dedication to God that was separated unto God for righteousness. Their heart wasn't seeking after God and their ears refused to listen to God's message or God's messenger. They resisted the drawing compelling influence of the HS. Their fathers did that and so was all the council doing that same thing right then. By this time Stephen had built up a head of steam. He saw so clearly what they were blinded to so he opened both barrels and let it rip.

v.52 Go ahead he said, give me an example. Tell me which one of the prophets did YOUR FATHERS NOT persecute?

And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the righteous one,

whose betrayers

and murderers you have now become:

YOU who received the Law as ordained by angels,

...and yet did not keep it.

Stephen now blatantly accuses them of not keeping the law. Accuses them of murdering God's messengers and betraying the trust that God has placed in them by being called priests and leaders.

POINT: Man's dead traditions have been replaced by God's living truth.

v.54 They don't seem to be very teachable here. They are hacked off. They were cut to the quick, and began gnashing their teeth at him. Literally "sawed in half" Stephen's words ripped apart the veneer of their false spirituality and exposed them for the hypocrites they were.

v.55 BUT being full of the Holy Spirit,

he gazed intently into heaven

and saw the glory of God, (v.2 Begins his speech with the God of glory and all the time he spoke his face radiated glory. Why glory mentioned? Because God's glory came down in the form of his son, but the nation as a whole rejected him. John 1 we beheld his glory of the only begotten full of grace and truth ...v.11 and his own did not receive him.) Stephen wanted to return the focus of glory to God where it belonged and not to the temple or religious tradition or political power.

and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (why not sitting? Elsewhere in scripture it tells of Jesus seated at the right hand in terms of His finished and complete redemptive work.

Stephen sees Jesus standing to show His concern and readiness to welcome Stephen into heaven.

v.56 (So Stephen decided to tell them what he saw)

Behold, I see the heaven opened up

and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

(why use the term "Son of man?") To say that Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews was one thing. To claim that Jesus was the son of God was worse to them, but to give Him the title son of man was more than they could tolerate. To the Jews that meant Stephen was claiming Jesus to be the savior of all mankind and not just the Jews. Ezekiel uses the term son of man to the one who would be the savior of the whole world. If

Jesus was the son of man then it marked the end of their position priority and privilege and the truth of it cut too close to home.

There were no chairs in the Jewish temple signifying that their work was never done. They were continually offering sacrifices. Jesus redemptive was done and complete he had received the right to sit down. His work was done.

This phrase exhausted any tolerance the council may have had for Stephen as it took them back to the trial of another prisoner. Jesus was accused of Blaspheme as well and yet kept silent. When the high priest in frustration finally demanded he speak, "I adjure you by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ the son of God. Jesus replied, "you have said it yourself, nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. Jesus claimed he would be at the right hand of the throne of God and Stephen claims he see him standing there. They are forced now to execute him too or admit they were wrong when they had Jesus murdered.

v.57 But they couldn't handle this latest news. If they were gnashing the teeth before now they are screaming their heads off.

They cried out with a loud voice

And covered their ears (yes these same uncircumcised unteachable ears. Cover up ears and sing the national anthem real loud)

They rushed (same word used to describe the rush of demon possessed swine that rushed over the cliff into the Sea of Galillee) on him with one impulse. (unity in their anger)

And when they had driven him out of the city (can't stone in the city)

They began stoning him

Stoning somebody as young and healthy as Stephen is not an easy job. You don't get it done with the first couple of stones and rocks. And even after you get the man down it is a long hot business. To prepare themselves for the workout, they stripped down to the waist and got somebody they knew and trusted to keep an eye on things for them until they were through. The man was a fire breathing young arch conservative Jew named Saul who was there because he was in full agreement with what they were doing.

POINT: The Lord does not always offer us safety, but he does offer us strength. Our task is obedience and it may lead to difficulty, but he will give us the power to stand.

"My strength is sufficient for thee. For my strength is made perfect in weakness.

v. 58b And the witnesses laid aside robes at the feet of a young man named Saul

v.59 and the went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord,
and said "Lord Jesus receive my spirit
and falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice,
Lord do not hold this sin against them.

And having said this he fell asleep.

So why did God let this happen? Why do good people suffer? The people of the early church must have asked this question because many others had been miraculously spared, freed from prison etc. But not Stephen. Why? He had been the leader of the new wave of disciples to follow after Jesus. Why?

Don't underestimate the power of God, neither should we overestimate the power of the enemy. God was not finished when Stephen died. God had barely begun. The persecution of the church cause the believers to scatter across the known world. Stephens death forced independence and a physical break from what Judaism had become. His death forced them out into the gentile world. His death was a mighty wind that would blow the seed of the gospel open and spread across the world and multiply by millions. The blood of the martyrs in indeed the seed of the church.

Wiersbe in Why do the good die young? P.93 and Olgivie p.83

Illustr. Pastor ton in Romania. Peters fathers church in Russia.

Joan of Arcs last words.

Jesus predicted this persecution and even to the point of death was going to come. If you wish to follow me...look where I am headed....to the cross. He was clear. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Put in modern day terms. Stop being so self-centered, be ready to sit in the electric chair if needed. Follow my example. As Jesus was ready to lay down his life for others so that we might have life. Jesus calls us to a life of commitment and sacrifice. Stephen understood that clearly do we????

Do I dare trust Christ unreseveredly and completely?