

# **Following in the Footsteps of Faith 10**

## **“Desperate Reactions to the Gospel”**

Acts 6:7 – 8:4

Introduction:

Story from childhood (when I dropped the motorcycle in my grandparents barn) – Knowing You Are Wrong and deciding how to respond – hide it or make it right.

**Big Idea: The Gospel brings out the desperation of mankind and each of us must choose our reaction.**

So often when we study historical accounts in scripture, we look at it from the perspective of the hero. Almost every commentary on Acts 6 focuses on Stephen. However, the reality is that in our human nature we are all much more like the Pharisees – the villains of this story. You see, just like them, we all started as enemies of God.

*PP from Spiritual Warfare Lesson – (Enemy of Spreading the Gospel)*

Let’s examine the desperation of the Jewish Leaders from the triumphal entry to the stoning of Stephen.

Now, some of them were evil and corrupt. But, many of these Pharisees were people who wanted God to love them. They were moral. They were religious. In many ways they were like many of us. Their big problem was that they thought too highly of themselves. They thought they were too good to do the things they were doing. They were probably shocked at the depths of their own depravity.

1. At the Triumphal entry the Jewish Leaders were filled with jealousy. The people were giving Christ the welcome that they wish they got when they walked down the street. (Commandment # 10 – Shall not covet) (Emphasize Possible Feelings of Guilt)
2. Throughout the week, they could sense their power over the people slipping away bit by bit. Turning to meter by meter. Their lust for power led to the sin of envy. They were covetous of Christ’s influence. They wanted the crowds to love and admire them that way and since that was not the case they were willing to do anything to take it away from Christ. (Emphasize Possible Feelings of Guilt)
3. They slandered him with lies. (Commandment #9 – shall not bear false witness/lie)
4. (Emphasize Possible Feelings of Guilt)
5. They murdered the King of Kings by hanging him on the cross as a common thief (Commandment # 6 – shall not murder). When Pilate confronted them with the innocence of Christ they responded, “His blood be on us and our children.” – Matthew 27:25
6. They tried to cover up what they had done. – Sealed the tomb. Then one lie led to another. Now they lied about his body being stolen. (Surely they at last had Feelings of Guilt, but how could they ever come clean.)
7. They harass the lame beggar who was healed in Jesus name in Acts 3
8. They arrested Peter and John in Acts 4.
9. They arrested all the apostles and beat them in Acts 5.

What was their motive for all this? They wanted to erase every memory of this man named Jesus. They wanted to squash this infant faith known as Christianity. Only the wise Rabbi named Gamaliel understood how unwise it was for them to keep trying to cover up what he and the other Pharisees had done. (Read Acts 5:38-39).

These reactions to Jesus of Nazareth were more than just mistakes. These reactions were vitriolic, born out of the basest part of the sin nature and fueled by pride.

There are possible reactions just like these to Jesus Christ today.

In our selfish sinfulness, we fight for authority in our lives. We don’t want anyone, not even our Creator God, to tell us what to do or how to live, but the Gospel – Christ’s salvation threatens that. When we sense that internal struggle, we can respond in the following three ways as well.

### **1. Desperate Acceptance of Freedom in Christ Ch. 6:7**

## 2. Desperate Attempts to Maintain Control Ch. 6:8-7:50

## 3. Desperate Attempt to Stifle Our Guilt Ch. 7:51-8:3

Let's examine these closer because we all need to understand them.

The Christian must understand them so we know how to minister to a world that is hostile to the very Prince of Peace who, out of love, came to die so they could live.

The unbeliever needs to understand them so that they choose the right course of action when confronted with both their guilt of sin and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Big Idea: The Gospel brings out the desperation of mankind and each of us must choose our reaction.**

Read Acts 6: 7-15

### 1. Option 1: Desperate Acceptance of Freedom in Christ Ch. 6:7

Exposition:

- 1) The Word of the Lord continued to increase
  - a. The Apostles were freed-up by the deacons to focus on studying, teaching and preaching the word of God.
  - b. Those that they were learning from the apostles were living out their beliefs and part of living it out meant teaching it to others also.
  
- 2) The number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem
  - a. Based on the numbers listed in Acts 2 and Acts 4:4 we know there were at least 8,000 men. That is not even counting the women and children that we see referenced in Acts 5:14. Prior to Acts 6 it appears that the church in Jerusalem could have numbered more than 20, 000 people.
  - b. Now it tells that the number of disciples increased greatly. How many, the Bible doesn't say, but we know it wasn't just a few. Why? Because it MULTIPLIED and it MULTIPLIED GREATLY.
  
- 3) A Great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.
  - a. The lower ranks of the priesthood numbered in the thousands. Many of them were poor. Priests such as Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, would have been part of these lower ranking priests.
  - b. These priests at the lower level most likely recognized the sacred nature of their job. They had not succumbed to the corruption that the upper level priests had embraced. These men existed to speak to God on behalf of man and now they realize that they had followed their earthly leaders rather than the God they existed to serve. They see that they had broken the first commandment and made a god out of their traditions.
  - c. Now, after witnessing the crucifixion of Jesus, the vile reactions of their superiors, and the godly reactions of Jesus' followers they decide to make a change.
  - d. It is likely that these poor priests had taken note of the atmosphere of love amongst the Christians in Acts 2 and 4 and recognized that their own environment within the Jewish Priesthood was the exact opposition. Now, as they continue to watch perhaps they were further attracted to Christians by their charity of the church provided by the newly appointed deacons in Acts 6:1-6.
  - e. Notice the words used to describe how these Priests became Christians. It doesn't use negative terms, like, they defected from Judaism or they rebelled against their leaders. Rather, notice the use of the positive terms, "They became obedient to the faith."
  - f. You see, these priests should have recognized their God and Savior when he stood in their presence, taught in their synagogues, and worshipped His Father in the temple, but they didn't. They may not have plotted against Jesus as their leaders had, but they had

also not followed Jesus or defended him when he stood condemned. They were guilty of the blood of Christ.

- g. They exchanged the counterfeit for the genuine.

Illustration: Girl exchanging her fake pearl necklace for a real one.

Application: Perhaps you are here today because you have heard of Kitwe Church and the atmosphere of love among believers. Maybe you didn't think such a thing was possible, but you were attracted by the hope of experiencing such love and you see that it is real and that Jesus is the only source of such true peace, joy, and love.

Like these priests you have seen that it is real, but there is so much more than peace and joy. There is forgiveness offered from the Holy God that you have offended. There is the opportunity to have a right relationship with God. Like these priests, you stand guilty of the blood of Christ because of your sin. Yet, He stands ready to declare you justified (just as if you had never sinned and just as if you had done everything right). Now, today you face a decision – a crisis of belief. Will you let go of the thoughts, beliefs, and traditions that you have been trusting in and become “obedient to the Faith?”

This is the choice that all of Jerusalem faced. A “Great Many” of the priests made the decision to become obedient to the faith, but others made the decision to reject forgiveness. This left them in their desperation. Some of them chose Option 2.

## 2. Option 2: Desperate Attempts to Maintain Control Ch. 6:8-15

Exposition:

- 1) Notice the title of those who opposed Stephen – the Synagogue of the Freedmen. How ironic.
  - a. The Freedmen (also known as the Libertines) were the descendants who had previously been in bondage but had won their freedom from Rome.
  - b. So, they had obtained their earthly freedom, but were still in spiritual bondage and were trying to silence the messenger who was sharing with them how they could experience lasting spiritual freedom. Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” That is the Freedom these people needed, but refused and even fought against.
  - c. Some that opposed Stephen were visiting Jews from other locations that joined the debate on the side of the Freedmen. They were from North Africa (Cyrene and Alexandria) as well as Cilicia and Asia. Saul (later known as Paul) was from Tarsus in Cilicia. He was likely participating in this debate with Stephen and even this intellectual giant could not match or resist the wisdom and power of Stephen. (V10)
- 2) When they couldn't win in a fair debate the Freedmen decided to fight dirty
  - a. Secretly instigated false witnesses – spreading of rumors from person to person, house to house (Commandments # 9 Again)
  - b. Publicly stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes v. 12 (sounds like the tactics of a political party during an election year).
  - c. Publicly seized him and put him on trial (Does this sound familiar? This is the same tactic that they used against Christ himself just a few months before. In fact, they took him before the very same council (The Sanhedrin – 70 members plus the High Priest) that had tried and executed Jesus.) If it worked once, why not try it again. These so-called “Freedmen” heaped guilt upon guilt.
  - d. Public accusations from false witnesses v. 13-14– Notice that the lies were actually half-truths. They twisted the quotations of Christ that Stephen had been using to explain the gospel. They took them out of context and used the good news of freedom to try to condemn a loving and godly man to an unjust death.

Application: These self-righteous religious people were rejecting and fighting against the very thing they needed. And you know what, they are just like us!

- We think of ourselves as free and yet willingly allow ourselves to be enslaved to sin.
  - Galatians 5:1 – “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”
  - Galatians 5:13 – “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.”

- Romans 6:16 – “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness.
- Let me ask you, what things are enslaving you?
  - Lust of the flesh – pornography, adultery, drunkenness, drugs, gluttony
  - Lust of the Eyes – materialism,
  - Sins of the Pride of Life – anger, bitterness, doubt, fear, arrogance
- There is not one of us in here who is not tempted in a multitude of these areas. All of these areas appeal to our old sin nature that will be with us until the day we die. But, that does not mean we have to give in to these temptations or be become enslaved to these sins. We have a choice!
- Sadly, some of us refuse freedom in Christ even when it is right in front of us.
  - When godly people lovingly confront our error in order to turn us off of a dangerous path of sin we get offended and decide to attack them.
  - Spread doubt in their character by private rumors
  - Stir up the church against this person
  - Finally, make a public scene and call for others to kill their testimony and influence. Why? So they can continue in their so-called “Freedom” that they use as an excuse to sin. Just like the Freedmen of Acts 6, we have people who have deluded themselves into believing they are free when in fact they are slaves who passionately defend their captors.

Illustration: Song – O Church Arise

- Non-believer –
  - V. 3 Come see the cross, where love and mercy meet, as the Son of God is stricken.
  - V. 3 – This victory march continues till the day every eye and heart shall see him
- Believer –
  - V. 1 With shield of faith and belt of truth we’ll stand against the devils lies
  - V. 2 – Our call to war – to love the captive soul, but to rage against the Captor (Satan and Sin – these are our enemies)
  - V. 3 - This victory march continues till the day every eye and heart shall see him
  - V. 4 – So Spirit come, put strength in every stride, give grace for every hurdle. That we may run with faith to win the prize of a servant good and faithful.

This is exactly what Stephen did this day! Read Acts 6:15-7:2a

Summarize Acts 7:1-50 – Stephen the Accused Becomes the Judge

This is what Stephen says about the Pharisees:

- They misunderstood their own spiritual roots (v. 1-8)
- They rejected their God-sent deliverers (v. 9-36)
- They disobeyed their law (v. 37-43)
- They despised their temple (v. 44-50)
- They stubbornly resisted their God and His Truth (v. 51-53 read this one)

### 3. Option 3: Desperate Attempt to Stifle Our Guilt Ch. 7:54-8:3

Exposition:

- 1) V. 54 After hearing Stephen’s sermon that ripped apart the veneer of their false spirituality these Pharisees were infuriated rather than repentant. They ground their teeth at him like vicious dogs growling at thieves to keep them outside of a gate.
- 2) V 55-57 show us the contrast in responses to the Word of God. Stephen had spiritual sight even in his darkest of moments when death was looming. However, the Pharisees were spiritually blind despite being presented with yet another clear exposure to the light of God’s Word.
- 3) Their problem was not exposure to the light. Their problem was an inward problem. It was their hard, calloused hearts that refused to see or even hear what could have been their saving grace. Verse 57 says they covered their ears and then rushed upon Stephen. They made their choice. This man’s voice had convicted them of wickedness and sin. They felt the prick of their conscience, as their guilt was laid bare for all to see. They could have repented, but instead they chose to silence the truth by murdering Stephen.

- 4) V. 58 says they cast him out of the city and threw stones at him until he died. Now, interestingly, it is here that we are first introduced to a young man named Saul who held the coats of the mob as they assaulted Stephen under the pretense of protecting spiritual purity. You can almost sense the pride, rage, and bitterness in the hearts of each man that participated in this heinous act.
- 5) Yet, in V. 59-60 we again see the contrast in character as Stephen with a sense of serenity and compassion prays for his attackers. He intercedes for them that God would not hold this sin against them. Talk about Christ-like character!!! Stephen was not only tried in a manner similar to that of our Lord, but he also died with similar prayers on his lips.

Illustration:

- 1) A heckler once shouted to a street preacher, "Why didn't God do something for Stephen when they were stoning him?" The preacher replied, "God did do something for Stephen. He gave him the grace to forgive his murderers and to pray for them!" Oh, that God would do such a work in our own hearts today!

Exposition:

- 1) V. 8:1-4 shows what happens to the heart of a man who refuses to become obedient to the faith when clearly presented with his guilt over sin.
- 2) You cannot stay neutral. You cannot stand still. You must either retreat in repentance or rage on in rebellion. You either join the cause of the Savior whose blood you are guilty of or you continue to try to stomp out his purpose and his name in an attempt to make yourself feel righteous and look right in the eyes of others.
- 3) However, here is the problem.
  - a. You will Never be Satisfied
  - b. The attempt to cover your guilt causes more and more people to hurt
  - c. AND all of this for nothing – because you can never win against God. You can never erase past guilt by heaping up more guilt.
  - d. Notice what happened
    - i. 8:1 – Saul approved of Stephen's Execution
    - ii. 8:1 – A great persecution of the entire church arose – more were being injured and killed. People had to flee their homes and their hometown just to survive
    - iii. 8:2 – Stephen was mourned by devout men. He was gone, but not forgotten. Even to this day he stands as an icon of the faith as we look at his example today.
    - iv. 8:3 – Saul ravaged the church. This word means to destroy, damage, or ruin. This is the only time this word is used in Scripture. Saul literally tore the church apart like hyanea's attacking the soft underbelly of a wildebeest. He was vicious! This act would haunt him for the rest of his life so that he felt utterly unworthy to be called an apostle.
    - v. 8:4 – However, he failed to extinguish the flame of the gospel, because Jesus himself would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against this advance. No, as the church was scattered the flame of the gospel that started in the single light of Jesus' life now spread from village to village, town to town, city to city, country to country as the disciples scattered and preached the word wherever they went.

Conclusion:

In this last month we have been going back and forth between Acts and James and we see just how well they work together. Last week Phil asked us to examine our lives to see what kind of faith we have. Let's conclude the same way this week as we consider what desperate reaction to the Gospel is present in us or in those we are endeavoring to minister to.

- 1. Desperate Acceptance of Freedom in Christ Ch. 6:7 = Dynamic Faith (intellect, emotions, & will)**
- 2. Desperate Attempts to Maintain Control Ch. 6:8-7:50 = Dead Faith (Intellect Only)**
- 3. Desperate Attempt to Stifle Our Guilt Ch. 7:51-8:3 = Demonic Faith (Intellect & Emotions)**