

You cannot prove that you are innocent.

Subtitle: What kind of witness are you?

Sometimes when you are covering a range of scriptures, you have to speak about a scripture that is so on target that you just think, that is a God thing. You know? That's what I am thinking this morning, and realize this scripture was picked for today's sermon months ago, but absolutely ties up in today's world.

Today's sermon is entitled "You cannot prove that you are innocent"

How can you prove you didn't do something? This is where we need to be really careful. Someone suspects you did something wrong, and they tell someone that you did something wrong. Notice it has already gone from suspects you did it to you are guilty of doing it. That person tells someone else, and they tell someone else. Now you have gone from someone thinking you might have done something wrong, to people telling others that you are wrong. You are considered guilty until you can prove your innocence.

Testimony:

Years ago, I was accused of something vile. I was accused of having child porn on my computer. The police showed up and confiscated my computers, cameras, my phone, whatever they could find. They told television stations and newspapers of their suspicions. The TV newscasters and the newspapers reported that I had child porn. Notice the suspect to guilt in one step? All I could do was insist that there was no child porn. The reports went on. I lost my job, my family turned against me and I was forced into homelessness. I was in despair. I was suicidal. My life was ruined. Three months or so later the police gave out a one paragraph press release that nothing was found on my computers that could be used to prosecute me for child porn. It was not mentioned on the TV, but the newspaper ran the one paragraph retraction on page 5.

Folks, they could have screamed it from the rooftop that I was innocent, and there would still have been people screaming to put me in jail. I won't even say my accusers were malicious in their accusations. They thought they were doing right. They thought they were protecting our community!

It's like that old game of telephone though. You say one thing and it gets misquoted or misinterpreted to the next person. The story changes each time someone hears it and repeats what they thought they heard.

That's the way it is with rumors or accusations. That's why the bible tells us how to deal with others we have a difference with. First there has to be several witnesses. Then you go to the person who offended you. If that doesn't work, take the elders with you. If that doesn't work

go to whole body. Make sure you are not spreading rumors or passing on information to someone who doesn't need it.

Last week we studied about how and why Stephen was arrested, and the false witnesses that testified about his actions.

We read from Acts, Chapter 6:8-15 – this is from last week

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

We talked about this last week, and saw that this Stephen was what we would call a deacon. He was not one of the Apostles. He had been appointed and prayed over by the Apostles to deal with the day-to-day distribution of food, and dealt with the ministry of the church in a very hands-on way.

But, Stephen had power. The Holy Spirit filled Him and was using him to do great works for God. This upset the establishment, who falsely accused him of horrible things, including:

That he was speaking blasphemy against Moses and God.

That he was speaking against the synagogue and the law

That Jesus would destroy the temple

That Jesus will destroy the customs that Moses gave us.

In front of all of them, his face was as an angel.

I don't know what an angelic face looks like. But I would suppose it would be above the fray, showing no concern or anger, only peace and grace. He had the knowledge that God would win this, but I still don't think it ended the way he would have planned for.

Please stand for the reading of today's scripture, it is a lot of scripture that is known as Stephen's defense. So, it all goes together. Last week and the next couple of weeks will act as a miniseries showing how Stephen dealt with his accusers and the result of their actions.

Acts 7:1-16 (wait for people to stand / open Bible) Acts 7: starting in verse 1

And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" ² And Stephen said:

"Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. ⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ⁷ 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' ⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so, Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹ "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Let's Pray: Simple prayer. Father, you are God and we are not God. Lord, help us understand and apply the lessons learned here today.

You can have a seat.

Way after this time, a much older Paul sent some information on with Timothy. We can find this in Timothy 3:10-17

¹⁰ You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. ¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom^[a] you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,** ¹⁷ that the man of God^[b] may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Let's say that last part again:

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God^[b] may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I mention this section of scripture, because it reminds us to teach the hard parts too. We can't just jump over the long parts and go for the quick lesson. God has more for us!

Studying Stephens reaction here will give us ideas on how to defend our belief when questioned by others. It will teach us how to live our life. It will correct us where we were wrong, and teach us what right is, making us ready to do God's work in this world.

I. The Preparation of the Witness (Acts 7:1-5)

1: And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Stephen was brought before the council and the High Priest. There is a good chance that the high priest and rulers here are still Annas and his son in law, the High Priest Caiaphas, and John and Alexander from Acts 4, the same ones who presided over the trial of Peter and John, and probably even the trial of Jesus. The council would have been made up of the elders, scribes and rulers.

I am surprised that the High Priest asked basically the same question he asked of Peter. One rule lawyers have taught me, is to never ask a question that you don't already know the answer

to. But the high priest asked him, so “are these things so?” opening up a way for Stephen to glorify God and defend his actions.

The High Priest and his fellow rulers had accused Stephen of Blasphemy against Moses and God, against the temple, and against the law. Stephen needed to make that right.

He could have said something like, “who are my accusers,” or “no, I didn’t do any of those things. I’m innocent!” But, Stephen started by giving a panoramic view of Old Testament history. He tried to prove he was innocent. He tried to show that he also was Jew among Jews. He was a believer in the Scriptures and was knowledgeable not just of the history, but the application. Even though Stephen was not one of the rulers, he had been well schooled. Stephen was not instructing the Sanhedrin on points of Jewish history, but rather was emphasizing some point that they may have not considered: That God did not confine Himself to the temple, and that Jewish people throughout history had a habit of rejecting those God sent to them.

You see, Stephen was not so much defending himself as much as he was trying to portray Christ in a way the judges, elders and rulers would understand.

Stephen seems to know that the old order was passing away, and a new order was coming. He was paving the way for presenting the Gospel to the Gentiles, which starts in the next chapter of Acts.

Such a speech as this was in no ways meant to secure an acquittal before the Council. It is a pure defense of Christianity.

Going on starting in Verse 2

² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. ⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.

Stephen was reminding them of who God is. He was making them remember that God showed up for Abraham when he was a young man, and carried him through ‘till he was old.

A. Understanding the Call

1. God's selection of His people

The Glory of God appeared to Abraham. God chose his people to receive the land while they were still in the city of Ur, in the land of Mesopotamia in the country of the people called the Chaldeans, before they dwelt in Haran, and years before they arrived in Canaan. I think Stephen is pointing out that God can be anywhere he wanted to be, not just in the temple, or in Jerusalem, or even Israel as a nation.

2. The significance of Abraham's faith

Abraham believed by faith and acted on God's revelation, leaving Mesopotamia, moving to Haran and finally to Canaan. He didn't do it all at once, that took many, many years. Even so, Abraham's partial obedience did not take away God's promise. They were not yet a great nation, just a large family and a number of servants. Still Abraham had faith.

B. Embracing the Journey

1. Leaving comfort for God's promise

In Mesopotamia, in the city of Ur, Abraham had luxury. His father, whose name was *Terah*, was a wealthy merchant, where managing supply chains and sales was important.

Genesis 11:27-28 says

²⁷ Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans.

So, Abram's father had three sons. Abram (whose name was later changed name to Abraham) Nahor and Haran. Haran had a son named Lot. Yeah, that Lot. Haran died early, and Lot became part of Abraham's family.

Abraham's father was a seller of idols. Terah, Nahor and Haran all worshipped idols. Thus, Abraham learned of different religions and Gods that were popular at the time. Somehow, in all of that, Abraham found God and rejected the rest.

The covenant renewal at Shechem, found in Joshua 24, goes over this, the genealogies, and how God promised Abraham and had fulfilled his promises.

This was not just talking on Stephen's part; it was letting the judges know that he was not rejecting the old covenant. It was key to his defense because the false accusers were spreading lies about Stephen.

2. Trusting in God's direction

God had promised Abraham children, land, and blessings. Here was Abraham, an old man, people in the know had to be laughing behind his back. Yet, Abraham remained faithful to God.

So, you see, Stephen was emphasizing a relationship with God based on faith and not outward evidences like a temple or the institutional religion and its customs.

Abraham was a pilgrim, an alien in a strange land, where he waited for God to fulfill His promise.

II. The Proclamation of the Witness (Acts 7:6-8)

Look with me now in verses 6 through 8, we are still in Acts chapter 7

⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ⁷ ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ ⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so, Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of the twelve patriarchs.

A. Sharing the Story

I love the way God just speaks the foundation of a country into existence, including thousands of years of what is now history. God knows everything, the plans, hopes, dreams of the nation and the people, as well as knowing how it will actually come to be. Stephen brings up the covenant of circumcision.

The Hebrew people had been practicing circumcision for hundreds of years. What Stephen did not talk about here was the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, but I think that was not mentioned on purpose.

Stephen goes on in verses 9 and 10. Everyone, assumed Stephen, had heard of Joseph and his coat of many colors, how he was left for dead by his brothers who were jealous, and sold into slavery in Egypt. In Egypt he gained knowledge and influence and became a very powerful person in the Pharaoh's service.

1. The history of God's people

We see here in verses 9 and 10 what happened to Joseph.

⁹ “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.

B. Declaring God's Faithfulness

1. God's deliverance in difficult times

Why did Stephen bring this up? Because what God has promised will come to pass! It may take a while to see the full answer, but we can count on it happening just as God said.

2. The importance of remembering God's works

It is important to periodically review what God did in order to see what He is doing now. Knowing that God was in control will give you a basis for your belief that He is still in control! Stephen was letting the council know that what he was doing had basis in the Scriptures.

III. The Perseverance of the Witness (Acts 7:11-16)

Stephen doesn't need to fill in the blanks of what happened then. Every member of the council would have been taught these stories since they were young children. Even so, he reviews a little more.

Read with me verses 11-16

¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Stephen is letting them know again, that God is in control. He was in charge here, in charge of Pharaoh, in charge of Jacob and the brothers. The brothers brought their children, 75 people in total. God provided for them in Egypt. Not just Jerusalem.

Again, Stephen emphasized the spiritual presence of God, that God was with Joseph all the time. Joseph did not have to be close to the temple, had there even been a temple yet, for God to be there too. God was with Joseph all the time.

Stephen had at this point in his defense, never mentioned Jesus. He was setting up the supports for a later argument. He had told the story of Abraham through Joseph in a concise manner, but clearly thought out to set up what was coming next.

What is witnessing?

So, what is witnessing? It is the sharing of what you know, and what you have seen and heard. By telling the story here, Stephen is, in effect, a witness for his own defense. He is trying to get the judges to see him as falsely accused, He is trying to show them that God is bigger than the box they had built. They had so many rules and customs that God had to work against His own people to get His will done!

I'll tell you though, that you cannot prove you are innocent. You can prove something happened, but you can't prove that something didn't happen. That's why conspiracy theories can take hold. Someone makes an accusation. Others repeat it. People hear it so often that it becomes fact in their minds, even though it never happened.

Rumors and gossip are able to destroy people. It has happened to me, it is happening here at Sierra Vista, and was happening to Stephen 2000 years ago. There were men running around spreading false accusations and riling the crowd up to a frenzy.

(said sarcastically) Of course, we are above all that. We would never tell gossip even if it was true, and certainly we would never spread rumors. As 21st century Americans we have learned that honesty and truthfulness will always pave the way to justice. Yeah, right!

I'm sure this has happened to many of you in this room too. Malicious rumors cost me a job once, and false accusations cost me another one. I worked at a grocery store, and I had a close friend at work who was black, and we were both fired for being prejudiced. We were accused, the rumor mill was on full throttle, and we were fired without a hearing.

At least these judges were making a show of justice to Stephen.

You know though, God was still in charge when I was fired! I might have made a career of Grocery Store management, instead I went on to college and became a teacher. Then I retired from teaching and moved to New Mexico, which puts me soundly in the place I am now.

Just like Stephen, you cannot witness for your own defense. Stephen is calling witnesses when he calls out Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Pharoah.

Stephen did not bring this up, but I will.

Exodus 23:1-3 and 6-9

23 "You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. ²You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, ³nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.

⁶ “You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. ⁷ Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. ⁸ And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

⁹ “You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

In order to support claims of wrong doing, you had to have multiple accusers.

Deuteronomy 19:15-17

¹⁵ “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. ¹⁶ If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, ¹⁷ then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days.

You shall not bring a false report. The rumor mongers and gossips brought a false report against Stephen. The High Priest and his council had heard these things. Without questioning the witnesses though, they should not have believed what they heard.

But, give the High Priest his due. I can imagine the crowd pressing in accusing Stephen of blasphemy. The High Priest heard it all without questioning the accusers, then turned to Stephen, and asked, “are these things true?”

We heard in chapter 6 of Acts how the rumors spread and were believed. I think the people who were accusing Stephen really believed what they were saying. The one thing the accusers did not do, is to see if Stephen was right.

Stephen could have said “All these stories are untrue, bring my accusers so they may tell what they saw.” Instead of defending himself in this way, Stephen went on to prove that he was right, not wrong. I’m confident that Stephen was speaking in the power of the Holy Spirit when he brought up his arguments.

Stephen was still teaching, still witnessing, still trying to see these people come to an understanding of what was going on. Stephen continued being a witness for God, even though the people did not want to hear it.

In fact, they took offense to Stephen’s strategy. We will find out next week what happened and wrap up Stephen’s defense.

Who and what are our witnesses?

Every day, people are watching us to see the story we tell.

Stephen called the scriptures in as his witness. Do you know who the witness is that we can call on when we are sharing or defending our faith?

When the world, our friends, enemies and circle of influence, see us, they are judging us as to whether this Jesus “thing” is real.

They have expectations far above our knowledge as to how a Christian should act.

Going back to some of Paul’s later writing. Let’s look for how we should behave as Christians. If you do this, there is no law that will come against you.

Galatians 5:13-15 says

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

So, here Paul is talking about how to defend yourself and how to avoid legal troubles that would stem from your belief. He goes on to name names and attack those who were spreading lies in 16-26

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, ^[d] drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do ^[e] such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Even people who claim to be Christians, can be lured away with these desires.

Have you ever noticed that military and musicians will walk in step. For those of us who were good at this, what did it take? Good instruction and Practice. If we are going to keep in step with the Spirit we have to study and apply these principles in our lives. We have to stay away from evil and cling to that which is good.

Look again – We are still in Galatians 5, looking at verses 22-23

22: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Have you ever thought, “You are the only Jesus people will see today?”

When you are cut off in traffic, do you mutter and wave, you all know the one finger wave, right? When you are shopping do you get short with the salesperson and demand a manager? When someone tells stories about you, do you get upset? If your spouse is upset, do you go hide rather than help?

Do we behave any differently than the world? Do we love one another in such a way that the world wants to know what is happening?

Look again at Galatians 5:13-14

Galatians 5:13-14 says

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

What is your witness like?

(Miguel and worship team come up here)

Let’s do a recap really quick here, and drive the point home.

Stephen has been accused of Blasphemy and is brought before the court.

He mounts a defense, arguing that The Scriptures portray a God who is not little, boxed up or to be relegated to the temple.

Stephen is calling his witnesses. Abraham, Jacob and Pharoah, The Patriarchs; that is the fathers of each of the 12 tribes of Israel.

I see the parallel here of Stephens defense and that of our life as we live it in today's world. I tied the teaching of Paul and the fruit of the spirit into our story, letting us live in such a way as to Glorify God, but also to protect ourselves when we are falsely accused.

Folks, look at these things again. These are the things we need to avoid and things we need to do that set us apart from the world.

I encourage you to print out this scripture in Galatians 5, memorize and practice it. Rehearse and practice walking in step with God.

By the way, God is a forgiving God, yes? If you have done any of the things here, God will forgive you of your sins. Now it is our chance to forgive as He has forgiven us, completely.

Can you forgive yourself? God will teach you how.

Can you forgive others? God will teach you how.

I'm asking our tech team to put this scripture up on the wall, and I'm going to ask you all to read it out loud with me.

Galatians 5:22-23 (keep this on screen during the prayer)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Let's pray:

God, you are God, the father and creator of the universe. You know all that is going on and love us anyway.

I need forgiveness.

Please forgive me of the things I have done that have separated me from you. Forgive my sins and make me whole.

Help me forgive myself for the things I have done. Don't let me dwell on my mistakes to the point that I am not effective for you.

Help me to live so that my life will exhibit the fruit of the spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Amen

Miguel?