**The Whole Story**

Acts 6-7

The kids did a great job today reminding us of the major stories in the Old Testament! The Bible is amazing, isn’t it? And our kids are amazingly cute, aren’t they?

We spent all of 2019 going through the whole Bible and we learned that ***the Bible is one story and it all points to Jesus***. We often think of “Bible stories” as if the Bible is a collection of random tales. But it isn’t! It is one unified message, provided through 40 authors over a period of around 1600 years. So the unity and continuity of the Bible is itself a miracle and testament to God’s faithfulness to make Himself known to every generation.

Today we witness the **first Christian martyr** after John the Baptist (who was technically the last Old Testament martyr). Stephen was just appointed as one of the first seven deacons for the early church because he was known for his faith and godliness. But you wonder how many meals he got to deliver before he was suddenly accused by a Jewish sect who became jealous of the attention Stephen was getting as a preacher and miracle worker.

Stephen’s speech in Acts 7, which is a summary of the whole Old Testament, is framed by his trial and execution. And this trial and death are ***extremely reminiscent of the trial and death of Jesus***.

**Stephen’s Christ-like Suffering**

“And they stirred up the people… and they set up false witnesses…all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” Acts 6:12-13,15

Though accused of speaking against Moses, the law and the temple, it is clear to everyone there that ***Stephen is innocent***. The high priest allows Stephen to speak - and in the one contrast with Jesus (who remained silent), Stephen gives a long speech.

**Stephen’s Christ-like Suffering**

“When they heard these things they were enraged… and stopped their ears and rushed at him. They cast him out of the city and stoned him.” Acts 7:54,57

Just as the Jews ***refused to listen to Jesus*** or accept him, so they would not accept Stephen. Just as the Jews came together to ***demand the execution of Jesus***, so they came together and actually killed Stephen themselves. Just as they took Jesus ***outside of the city*** to kill him, so they took Stephen outside of the city. And just like Jesus, listen to ***the last words of Stephen***:

**Stephen’s Christ-like Suffering**

“‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” Acts 7:59-60

Just as Jesus gave up his spirit to the Father, and just as Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him, so Stephen prayed and cried out as he died. The parallels are remarkable and intentional. ***Stephen is supposed to represent Jesus both to the Jews there in Jerusalem and to us.***

**This is the way of the cross**. ***This is what it looks like to follow Jesus.*** It is the way of the CROSS, not the way of the COUCH. Our symbol as Christ-followers is not a La-Z-Boy recliner but a cross, which was an instrument of death. And notice with Stephen there was no fear, no panic - only joy, only peace. Stephen actually saw “the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (v. 56).

There are many accounts in Foxe’s book of martyrs of those who, when being killed for their faith in Jesus, had an impossible peace and calm on their faces. Many times it was ***the way Christians DIED, even more than the way they LIVED that led people to believe in Jesus***.

One of the first detailed and documented martyrdoms after the apostles was a bishop named **Polycarp** who was a disciple of John the apostle.

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp>

At the age of 86, the martyrdom of Polycarp followed the same model as Stephen and of Jesus.

* Three days before he was arrested the old bishop had ***a dream*** of his head on fire on his pillow and predicted to his followers that he would be burnt alive.
* Knowing he had been ***betrayed by a friend*** and the Romans were coming to arrest him, Polycarp did not flee but said, “God’s will be done.”
* When the guards came to arrest him he gave them food to eat and asked for ***an hour to pray***, which they granted.
* Soldiers ***led him on a donkey*** into the city and into the arena for his execution. On the way into the arena a voice from heaven said, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man!”
* The proconsul told the bishop to ***renounce Jesus*** and save his own life, to which Polycarp responded:

“86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, c. 155 A.D.

* He was threatened with ***wild animals*** but would not recant. He was **threatened with fire** and still refused to save his own life by denying his Lord.

“You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.” Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, c. 155 A.D.

* The fire was prepared around him and he was tied to the stake. And listen to how the old Bishop prayed:

“O Lord God Almighty… I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life… May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice.” Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, c. 155 A.D.

“I praise you for all these things, I bless you and glorify you, along with the everlasting Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. To you, with him, through the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and forever. Amen.” Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, c. 155 A.D.

* The fire was lit, but eyewitnesses testify that ***the flames billowed up in an arch*** around the old Christian and did not touch him, but made him shine like gold in a furnace. There was even the smell of frankincense, not the smell of burnt flesh.
* Seeing that the flames did not hurt him, the Proconsul ordered to have him ***stabbed with a knife*** and when he was stabbed, so much blood flowed out that it miraculously extinguished the bonfire!

Here is **the lesson to be learned** from those who wrote down the martyrdom of Polycarp and the other martyrs who preceded him:

“They had such courage that none of them let out a sigh or a groan, proving when they suffered such torments they were absent from their bodies – or rather that the Lord then stood by them and talked with them.” *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

Brothers and sisters, learn from Stephen and from Polycarp, and from the believers who die for their faith every week still today - death is a defeated enemy! ***“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”*** Our job is to glorify Jesus whether by life or by death.

That is the frame around Stephen’s sermon - the example of this deacon who lived for Jesus and died for Jesus.

Stephen’s Christ-like suffering shows what it looks like to **live** for Jesus and to **die** for Jesus.

“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” Acts 6:7

When believers live and die for Jesus, the church grows and multiplies. ***We don’t get to determine how long each of us lives.*** We get to choose how we live the days and minutes the Lord gives us.

Let’s look at Stephen’s sermon now and be inspired by the **three Bible heroes** he mentions and ***the promise each received*** which was fulfilled in Jesus. Here is the overview:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Abraham (2000 B.C.) | God promised a Child |
| Moses (1500 B.C.) | God promised Salvation |
| David (1000 B.C.) | God promised a Kingdom |

***Three promises*** - these sacred promises are called **COVENANTS**. There is more to it for each of these covenant promises, but the central promise to Abraham was of a child who would bring blessing to the whole world. The key promise to Moses was a prophet like him who would bring salvation from sin and death. And the key promise to David was of a kingdom that would last forever - a kingdom centered around worship of the Lord at His holy temple. Let’s look at each of these in turn and we will see how they provide ***key moments in the Bible story that point so clearly to JESUS!***

**Abraham - God Promised a Child**

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham… promised to give [the land] to him and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.” Acts 7:2,5

Stephen was **accused of speaking against the law and the temple**. He closes his message by addressing the temple, but he opens by talking about ***Abraham as “OUR FATHER.”*** Stephen is acknowledging himself as a Jew - a descendant of Abraham - and the Jewish council as his family. So Stephen is connecting with their common ancestry and the foundational story that was central to their Jewish identity.

**The story of Abraham**. At first he was Abram - a 75 year old man, married to a 65 year old woman - and they had ***no kids***, because they were infertile. Their time was up. The buzzer had sounded. Game over. No kids. Infertility is sad still today, but in those days it was devastating. It was your whole identity, your whole value, your social security and retirement wrapped into one.

So Abram was ***the least likely candidate*** on earth for God to choose to be the founding father of His holy People. But God promised to take this old man with no children and build from him a great nation that would inherit the beautiful land of Canaan - and through one of his offspring bring blessing to the whole world. Fully 25 years after the original promise, when Abraham was 100 years old and his wife, Sarah was 90 - ***God gave them Isaac***, the child of promise!

**Abraham - God Promised a Child**

“And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac… and Isaac became the father of Jacob…” Acts 7:8

From one old man ***God built the great nation of Israel***. It wasn’t a quick and clean process, as Isaac’s wife was also barren and then Jacob’s story got even more complicated with four wives. But throughout history God protected Israel, always preserving a remnant so that down through the ages this promise would be fulfilled:

**Jesus is the Child of Abraham who brought blessing to the world**

“In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” Genesis 22:18

Jesus is the long awaited child of Abraham. Through Jesus, God has taken the biological family of Abraham - the Jews - and expanded that family to include people from every nation on earth. ***Jesus brought the blessing of forgiveness, eternal life*** and relationship with God to all who will come to Him in faith. So now, as God promised Abraham, his children truly are as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand at the seashore. That’s the first promise. Second, Stephen moves from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Moses.

**Moses - God Promised Salvation**

“He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand.” Acts 7:25

***Pharaoh tried to have Moses killed*** along with all the other Jewish baby boys, but Moses’ parents placed baby Moses in a basket-boat and loathed it along in front of Pharaoh’s daughter, who spotted the baby and took him in as her own adopted son. So Moses, instead of being killed as a baby, was raised with all of the advantages of life and education in Egypt.

At the **age of 40**, that invincible age when you actually do know everything, Moses tried to intervene and accidentally killed an Egyptian slave supervisor. He thought he covered up the murder, but was quickly corrected when the next day he tried to step into a quarrel between two Hebrews and they immediately mentioned the killing. So ***Moses fled from Egypt to the wilderness*** where he lived for 40 years and raised a family. Turns it, it was helpful that Moses had these years in the desert as he would be back in that area pretty soon.

At the **age of 80**, God spoke to Moses from a ***burning bush*** and sent him back to Egypt to lead the Hebrew nation out of slavery and into their destiny.

**Moses - God Promised Salvation**

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people… and I have come down to deliver them.” Acts 7:34

So God sent Moses back to the place he had grown up to confront Pharaoh and ***save God’s people***. The one the Hebrews had rejected as “ruler and judge” over them became their ruler and judge.

**Moses - God Promised Salvation**

“This Moses… God sent as both ruler and redeemer… This man led them out, performing wonders and signs.” Acts 7:35-36

Through ten ***terrifying plagues*** and then by dividing the Red Sea in half, Moses led the people out of Egypt. This deliverance provided a pattern for God’s people to prepare them for their ultimate salvation in Jesus.

* Moses was **saved from death** as a baby, even as Jesus would be.
* Moses did **powerful signs** and wonders, as Jesus would do.
* Moses **spoke to the people** for God, as Jesus would speak.
* Moses protected God’s people from death by having them sacrifice the **Passover lamb** - Jesus would be the ultimate Passover lamb who would give his own life to save us from death!
* And Moses **led the people out of slavery** and oppression, through the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land - as Jesus would deliver us from slavery to sin all the way to eternal life in heaven!

**Jesus is the Savior like Moses who can Deliver us from Sin and Death**

“God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.” Acts 7:37

Moses delivered the Law of God. ***Jesus fulfilled the Law of God.*** Moses was a mediator, speaking to God on behalf of the people and speaking to the people on behalf of God. ***Jesus is the ultimate mediator***, His body becoming the bridge to eternal life, reconciling sinful people with our holy God.

And just as the nation of Israel was quick to rebel against Moses, so they rebelled against Jesus, and so they rejected Stephen too. We are foolish to expect different treatment ourselves.

In the end, **Moses could not really save Israel** because he could not change their hearts. He could tell them about the glory of God and the holiness of God, but Moses was not able to remove the sin of Israel, ***he could only REVEAL the sin of Israel*** through the Law.

But Jesus came not just to reveal sin, but **to REMOVE it forever** through His own precious blood. Jesus is the true Savior, the only Savior. He CAN change us completely, giving us a new heart and a whole new life. Jesus can save us from sin and death forever!

**Jesus is the Savior like Moses who can Deliver us from Sin and Death**

“He himself likewise partook of [flesh and blood], that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” Hebrews 2:15

The Israelites were sojourners in Egypt and then slaves, and Moses led them out of that slavery into a new era of freedom and blessing. We were slaves to sin and therefore subject to death - but ***Jesus set us free from sin and death forever***, breaking the hold of sin over us and bringing us into a new experience of freedom and blessing in Him!

Jesus is the child of Abraham, the Savior like Moses and one more. Jesus is the King like David!

**David - God Promised a Kingdom**

“David… found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.” Acts 7:46

All three of these heroes were **underdogs**.

* **Abraham was an old man with no kids**, but became the most famous father and grandfather of all time.
* **Moses had a stutter** and hated public speaking, but became the most famous prophet of all time, delivering the entire Law of God to His people.
* **And David was the youngest** of eight brothers - short, not impressive; a shepherd.

But ***David is the one who took on Goliath*** and defeated the giant with just a sling and a stone. David is the one God chose to become king of Israel, and through whom God brought Israel into its most glorious time of peace and blessing.

To this David, this young man - a shepherd, a dreamer, a musician - **God promised a kingdom that would last forever**. David wanted to build a house for the Lord - a great and glorious temple. But God said, *“You won’t build a house for me, but I will build a house for you - a family and a royal dynasty that will last forever!”*

Just as Jesus fulfilled the promises to Abraham and Moses, so ***He is the fulfillment of God’s promises to David!***

**Jesus is the King like David**

“Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Acts 7:56

As he died, Stephen saw ***the glorified Christ*** standing in His position of glory and power at the Father’s right hand. This is what Peter proclaimed in Acts 2, quoting Psalm 110:1 as a prophecy of King David about Jesus, the Messiah:

**Jesus is the King like David**

“‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Psalm 110:1

Through his resurrection and ascension, Jesus was glorified to take His seat at the Father’s right hand. And so God confirmed that ***Jesus is the true King of Israel***, the Lord of heaven, the Ruler of all things.

**Jesus is the King like David who is making us into the temple of God**

“It was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands.” Acts 7:47-48

Here Stephen ties back to ***what he was accused of*** - speaking against Moses, the Law and the temple. As Jesus predicted that the temple would be torn down, Stephen may have quoted Jesus at some point, giving some legitimacy to those accusations. But here Stephen concludes his sermon by saying, “***The temple was never about the temple - it was always about GOD***… about His holiness… about the place where He would dwell… which was never really supposed to be a building. It was always supposed to be the hearts of His people.”

And that is what Jesus accomplished as the ultimate King like David, He built a huge, glorious, **holy temple called THE CHURCH**. WE are the temple Jesus is building - living stones coming together as one to worship the Lord together.

**Jesus is the King like David who is making us into the temple of God**

“In whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” Ephesians 2:21-22

So here’s our lesson for today - **Jesus is the fulfillment of everything in the Old Testament**. The whole Bible is one story and it all points to Jesus.

That’s what **Christmas** is all about - ***the fulfillment of God’s promises*** in the sending of His Son.

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| Abraham (2000 B.C.) | God promised a Child | **JESUS** |
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On Christmas morning in Bethlehem ***the long awaited baby*** was born through whom blessing would come to the whole world - fulfilling the promise to Abraham.

Through the incarnation Jesus became ***the perfect God-Man*** who would be able to give His fully human body as the sacrifice that would bring salvation to the world - fulfilling the promise to Moses.

And when Jesus was born, ***the wise men*** from the east recognized that this was a special King - THE special King - whose arrival was shown to them in the stars - fulfilling the promise to David.

The whole Bible is about Jesus. Stephen’s life was about Jesus - and His death was for Jesus. **WHAT ABOUT YOU?**

* Can we all say the same? ***Are we living entirely for Jesus?***
* Are we willing to serve and suffer and even die, if need be, for Jesus?
* Can we say with Paul the Apostle, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”?

Listen to the opening words of the Martyrdom of Polycarp as we close today.

“Almost all the events that led up to it reveal it to be another martyrdom in the divine pattern that we see in the Gospel. For he waited for his betrayal, just like the Lord did, so that we might follow him, in looking out for the needs of others as well as ourselves. True love desires not only one’s own salvation, but the salvation of all our brothers.” *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, c. 155 A.D.

May we follow the example of Stephen as he followed Christ - looking out for the needs of others and desiring their salvation!

Let’s pray.