

## **“When Your World Is Rocked”**

**Acts 7:51-8:4**

**June 22, 2008**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

A husband arrives home from work one day to find a number of people from his church waiting for him. At first he thinks it may be some kind of surprise party, except that his birthday is still several months away. Then he notices that no one is smiling. Upon asking, “What’s up?” he’s told that his wife was killed in an auto accident just a couple of hours ago, leaving him with two small children to raise all by himself. His world is rocked. That husband was a member of our church in Maryland.

Or consider the case of another member of that church. Bill is the son of a pastor, and he had always admired his parents’ marriage and had looked forward to having a marriage like theirs. But after having been married only two years, he discovers his wife in an adulterous relationship. His world is rocked.

The characters in Acts 7 had their worlds rocked, too. But they responded very differently. The most obvious was Stephen, whose world was rocked in both a literal and figurative way. As everything in his world came crumbling down, leading to the loss of his life, he was filled with joy, confidence and a heart of love for others. There is another group who also had their world rocked, but who did not respond so well. It’s the group called the Sanhedrin, a group who heard Stephen’s last sermon. It’s the longest sermon Luke records in this book that is filled with sermons. It is through Stephen’s sermon that the world of the Sanhedrin was rocked. The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish ruling council, and they had brought Stephen in for questioning after he had been falsely accused of speaking against the temple and the law of Moses. He defends himself by saying that it is actually his accusers, and the Sanhedrin itself, who is guilty of defiling the temple and violating the law of God. They had done so by their rejection of Jesus. Listen to the way Stephen’s sermon rocks their world. **“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered”** (v. 51-52). It was the same kind of preaching Peter had done before this. In all three of Peter’s sermons recorded in the first five chapters of Acts, he had reminded his hearers that they had crucified Jesus, the very one God had appointed as the Messiah. The response was never neutral. It led either to conversion or murderous anger. It was the latter in Stephen’s case, resulting in his becoming the church’s first martyr.

I would like for us to consider this morning the two responses that are possible when our world is rocked. These are the two responses summarized in the hymn we will sing at the conclusion of this service. Edward Mote is the author of the hymn *My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less*. He was a 19<sup>th</sup> century British cabinetmaker who had been converted to faith in Christ at age 18. In the first stanza of his well-known hymn he speaks of the two responses I would like for us to consider today. "I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name." The Sanhedrin responds by trusting in a sweet frame, while Stephen responds by leaning wholly on Jesus' name.

## I. The Sanhedrin's Wrong Response

The wrong response of the Sanhedrin to the shaking of their world was to trust in themselves, to trust "the sweetest frame" in the words of the hymnwriter. In order to see this, let's consider a little more carefully Stephen's sermon. He had been accused of speaking words against the temple and against the law of Moses (6:13-14). What Stephen had been teaching was that Jesus was the new temple of God and the fulfillment of the Old Testament law. He had been proclaiming Jesus from the Old Testament, and they had misinterpreted it to mean that he was speaking against these things. Stephen defends his views by going back to the Old Testament and tracing Israel's history, claiming that the Sanhedrin has misread their own history. So he reviews their history and offers the correct reading of it, with a view to two points that correspond to their two accusations, about the temple and the law.

The first theme Stephen draws from their history concerns the temple. The Jews had taken pride in their temple, viewing it as the place where God's unique presence was to be found. So Stephen reviews the places where God shows up throughout Israel's history. He shows up in Ur to call Abraham, in Egypt where Joseph was sold into slavery and in the wilderness where God called Moses. Then in the forty years of Israel's wilderness wanderings, God was constantly on the move. The temple did not find a permanent location until the days of Solomon. But even then, Stephen points out, God's dwelling was not centrally in a man-made house of worship. **"Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool"** (7:49). John Stott says it like this. "The connecting feature of these four epochs is that in none of them was God's presence limited to any particular place. On the contrary, the God of the Old Testament was the living God, a God on the move and on the march, who was always calling his people out to fresh adventures, and always accompanying and directing them as they went" (p. 130-31). A quick application before moving on would be to be emotionally prepared for change as we follow this God who is consistently on the move.

The second point he makes as he traces Israel's history is that they are the ones who are guilty of violating Moses' law, not him. Stephen stood in the line

of Moses, as indicated by his shining face, which was reminiscent of Moses' shining face (6:15). He points out that they are just like their forefathers, who rejected Moses when he first appeared to them. Referring to the time when Moses defended an oppressed Israelite from an Egyptian, **"He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand"** (7:25). Instead, when he tried to reconcile a dispute between two fighting Israelites the very next day, they rejected him and said, **"Who made you a ruler and judge over us"** (7:27). And it was Moses who had said, **"God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers"** (7:37). This was a reference to Jesus, whom they were now rejecting. So they rejected both Moses and the prophet like Moses, leading to Stephen's conclusion in verse 53. They were the ones who **"received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."**

Why was Stephen preaching in such a directly challenging way? Was he just being mean? Or was he simply responding in kind to their accusations against him? No, he was doing none of that. He was preaching in a manner that was common in the early church, challenging the very foundations of people's lives in order that they would forsake those shaky foundations and come to Jesus. What were their foundations? Verses 41 and 48 tell us what was happening in their hearts. **"And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands."** The root of their sinful hearts was the fact that they derived their joy, their fulfillment, their sense of identity, in what they did for God rather than in what he had done for them. They were behaving as if all the important things of life must be secured by our own hand, because God can't be trusted for something so important.

This is what Edward Mote is talking about when he says that we dare not trust "the sweetest frame." He's talking about trusting in ourselves, and the danger is that such self-trust is sweet-tasting initially. What are some of the "sweetest frames" in our lives? They are abundant. It could be something as simple as using the good sense of humor God has given you to deal with the brokenness of life instead of going to God in faith. I've told you before what the most common "sweet frame" is for me. I tend to deal with the brokenness of life by seeking refuge in getting tasks accomplished. I'm just like Stephen's stone-throwing enemies, who rejoiced in the work of their own hands instead of in God. Others seek it in religious "rightness", as was the case with the Sanhedrin. A more secular version of the sweet frame is money or accomplishment. What is your sweet frame? When God rocks your world, he is trying to get your attention so that your sweet frames might be exposed and found wanting before it is too late.

The residents in Gulfport, Illinois were not too concerned when the water level of the Mississippi River began rising a few weeks ago. The town of 750 residents had been told that their levee was sturdy enough to withstand a

historic flood. Many had dropped their flood insurance. The banks had confidence in the levee too, and many of them had dropped their requirement for flood insurance on the houses on which they had made mortgage loans. This past Tuesday, the levee broke, and now the town is under ten feet of water. We dare not trust the sweetest frame because, like that levee, they will fail catastrophically. Further, when we trust them, we make ourselves the enemy of God, just like the Sanhedrin did here.

Is God shaking the foundation of your life right now? If so, consider it his patient call to you to forsake the sweetest frame and wholly lean on Jesus' name. God is so patient with us. I notice that Stephen says of his hearers that **“you always resist the Holy Spirit”** (7:51). One of the things we learn from that is that God had been at work a long time to shake them loose of their trust in the work of their own hands. But they had resisted repeatedly. This should serve as a warning to us to heed God's call as he shakes our foundations. There is an end to God's patience. Verse 42 says that God turned away and gave them over to the worship of demons.

## **II. Stephen's Right Response**

Stephen shows us what it is to wholly lean on Jesus' name. You cannot begin a relationship with Jesus without doing this, and you cannot continue a relationship with him without this kind of trust. How do we learn to do this? We must come to see that he is a God who is full of grace. The last words from Stephen's mouth show this. He prayed for those who were stoning him, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”** (7:60). That's a familiar prayer, isn't it? Jesus had prayed the same thing just before his death. It is possible that Stephen was one of the early converts in the church who came to faith at Pentecost. That group, you will remember, were some of the same ones who had called for the crucifixion of Jesus when Pilate had offered to let Jesus go, and they had asked instead for the release of the criminal, Barabbas. Stephen, very possibly, had shouted out, “Crucify him!” But God had been merciful to him. The prayer of Jesus that this evil deed would not be counted against those guilty of it was answered in Stephen's case. His sins were forgiven by the grace of God. The crucifixion he had called for was the very thing God used to provide his forgiveness. The result is that Stephen became one who was **“full of grace”** (6:8). To wholly lean on Jesus' name is to come to him as a God of grace.

The outcome of leaning fully on Jesus is seen in the death of Stephen. Death by stoning would not be a pleasant way to go. The body would have to endure many painful blows before enough blows to the head would cause the person to lose consciousness. Death is always an enemy and never pleasant even in the best of circumstances. But for those who lean wholly on Jesus' name, it is transformed into our friend, as are all things.

My mind has thought more of death in the last week and a half, due to the fact that there have been four deaths or news of imminent deaths among the parents of our church members during the past ten days. Note the way Jesus transforms death in this passage. Stephen was confronted with a very ugly sight: a crowd of angry men rushing to stone him. But what did he see? **“But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God”** (7:55). Much has been written about why Jesus is pictured here as standing, when the rest of the Bible reports that he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father. So why is he standing here? Suppose a beloved family member has been gone on a long journey that has taken him away from home for a long time. Then on the day of his return, it’s getting late at night and you are waiting up for your loved one to return. Then you finally hear the sound of a car on the driveway and a door being shut. What do you do? Do you remain seated and wait for the person to come in? Not if there’s any love at all. You get up and go meet him. That’s what Jesus is doing here, welcoming his child into his presence. For those who lean on Jesus, death is transformed into the path that takes us to Jesus and into eternal joy in his presence. Notice the prayer of Stephen. **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** The arms of Jesus open wide to receive his children into his presence. And if we still don’t get the point, Luke describes this awful, violent murder of Stephen as a falling asleep. **“And when he had said this, he fell asleep”** (7:60). When we lean on Jesus, death becomes as temporary as falling asleep. It is a state from which we will awaken into eternal life.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Edward Mote wrote the words to our closing hymn in 1834. He was on his way to his cabinet-making shop when the words to the chorus came to him—**“On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.”** Throughout the rest of that day he wrote four of the verses, and then shortly after that two others. The very next week, he was walking home from church when he met a friend whose wife was very ill. His friend asked Mote if he could pay a visit to his wife. The two of them went to see her, but neither had a hymnal, and it was her desire that a hymn be sung. So Mote sang to her the one he had just composed. She liked it so much that she asked him if she could have a copy for herself. Mote decided to have a thousand copies of it printed, to give out not only to her but to others as well. For many years now this hymn has encouraged the faith of many as it describes Jesus as the solid rock upon whom we can find refuge.

Is your world being rocked right now? Then let this upheaval have its intended divine purpose, teaching you not to trust even the sweetest sources of support. Our need is to find Jesus even sweeter, and to wholly lean upon him. May God teach us to do so!