

group Bible Study – April 11, 2007

Read Acts chapters 7-9

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When we read Acts chapters 7-9, the first thing we run into is a speech by Stephen. Stephen has been called into the high council to defend himself: he was accused of preaching a message that was blasphemous. He was accused of teaching the people to ignore Moses and the Law that Moses had given them. So what we read in Acts chapter 7 is his defense, and his explanation of Jesus and the way that Jesus relates to the Jewish faith.

This is one of the most important passages of Acts, because in Stephen's words we begin to understand that the Christian movement was not something that contradicted the revelation of God in the Old Testament. This is not a new God, and his plan for the earth is the same as it has always been. Stephen explains that Jesus is actually the great prophet that Moses predicted many hundreds of years earlier: "This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people'" (Acts 7:37).

When he wants to explain Jesus to the council, he begins by re-telling the history of the Jewish people, and especially the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt. He then indicates that Jesus is the prophet that Moses spoke of ("a prophet like me, from your own people"). Why does Stephen focus on Moses? Why is he interested in telling the people that Jesus is the new Moses?

Think about Moses and what he did. Here was a prophet sent by God to deliver the people. In one of the most dramatic stories in all of the scriptures, Moses took the captives and led them to their freedom beyond the Red Sea. Forever after this event, the Jewish people would look back to Moses and the exodus and see the faithfulness of God, and a promise that God was on their side. This was the Great Salvation – the event that they would look back to whenever they were oppressed or persecuted (which they often were). This was the Great Hope – that God would save them again, like he did in the exodus from Egypt.

And Stephen reminds the Jewish leaders what Moses had told them: that another prophet would come, a prophet like him. Stephen told the Jewish leaders straight up that Jesus was that prophet – and they had killed him. For this act of blasphemy, they threw rocks at Stephen until he was dead. But the message of Stephen carries down through the centuries of the Christian faith: Jesus is the new prophet, the one like Moses.

Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt. So what about Jesus? How is he like Moses?

This last weekend we celebrated Easter – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is our answer. And the resurrection shows us that Jesus means so much more than even Moses did: Moses freed the people from captivity to Pharaoh, but Jesus has freed the world from captivity to death itself, the ultimate enemy of our lives and of the whole earth.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he threw open the door to a life stronger than death – a life beyond the brokenness of the world as we know it. The New Testament teaches that Jesus is "the first-born among many brothers and sisters" – which means that we can live our lives filled with hope that our destiny is the same as Jesus'. Because he was raised back to life, Jesus is the one to lead this world out of its captivity to death and illness and sorrow and brokenness. This is the sign of our salvation: Jesus resurrected. Because he lives, we may believe that in the end we will live too. Our world will be raised. God wins, death loses – that is the promise. This is the Christian faith, and it gives us a courage to live boldly even now, in this time before the world is restored.