

May 31, 2020

Acts 7:1-53

Outward Church:
Israel's Biopic & Ours

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What do you think it would be like to have a **biopic** made of your life? A biopic is a movie made about someone's **life story**. I recently watched *Ford v Ferrari*, which is a biopic of **Carroll Shelby**, a **car designer**, and **Ken Miles**, a **British race car driver**, building the **Ford GT40** to beat the **Ferrari** racing team at the **24 Hours of Le Mans**, a long and difficult endurance race in **France**.¹ Shelby is played by Matt Damon and Miles is played by Christian Bale.

You must really have to **know a person's life** to make a movie like this. You **can't include everything**, as that would turn into **reality TV**, **nor** do you want to **just happy moments** as that wouldn't be very interesting. A director has to make specific choices about what to include and what not to include. If a director were to come along and say, "I want to make a biopic of **your life**" what events do you think they would choose? It would depend on the director. A movie of your life directed by **Steven Spielberg** would look very different than a movie directed by **Wes Anderson**. What actor would you want to play you? Obviously, I'd either be played by **Denzel Washington** or **Michael Caine**. Doctor Fauci joked that he wanted Brad Pitt to play him on SNL and Brad Pitt did. It's that easy. So Denzel, you're the perfect fit.

Today's passage is a lot like a **biopic of Israel**. It's the **story of their people**, emphasizing a few key moments that tell a story. The **director of Israel's biopic** is an early church leader named **Stephen**. Here's what we know about Stephen. He's a **Greek-speaking Jewish Christian** who helped take care of the Greek speaking widows. He's like a Deacon. He's servant-hearted and the entire community respected him. He was known to be full of faith, full of the holy Spirit, full of God's grace, and full of God's power (Acts 6:5, 8). He "performed great wonders and signs among the people" and was sharing about Jesus Christ with great wisdom (Acts 6:10). He was so **on fire** for God that the religious leaders in Israel had him arrested and put on **trial** before the **Sanhedrin**, which was like the **Jewish supreme court**. Those who **oppose him don't fight fair**. They use **false witnesses** to accuse him of wanting to destroy the temple and the law.

Acts 6:13 (NIV) They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

Acts 7:1 (NIV) Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

When **questioned**, what does Stephen do? He doesn't **cower in fear**. He is full of the Holy Spirit. Instead, he stands up and begins to tell Israel's story. Much like a director chooses certain moments in a person's life to **highlight**, Stephen begins to tell a **biopic** that tells us about Israel as a people. As **Stephen chooses** these moments he begins to **make points** that **don't** make his opponents or the Sanhedrin **look good**. It's like if someone made a biopic of your life and they chose all your **most embarrassing moments**—that time you **lied**, that time you **stole**, that time you got **arrested** or **cheated**.

That sounds pretty **miserable**, and it was, but it was for a **good reason**. Stephen was showing them that their life was **headed a certain direction**, and they needed **repent** and **turn to Jesus**. Today I want us to reflect on our own lives and the direction **we're headed**. **Where is your biopic headed, towards God** or away from him? Do you need to repent and return to Jesus?

Movies, even biopics, typically have **three acts**, a **beginning**, a **middle**, and an **end**.² The first act introduces us to the characters and what is going on in the story. The story opens with **Abraham** and **Joseph**:

Act I - God is good to his people and present with them. (Acts 7:2-16)

Stephen directs our attention to Israel's forefather, the father of all the Hebrew people, Abraham.

2 To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 3 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

God chose to be with Abraham by his grace. God is going to **lead** him where he wants him to go. **Genesis 12** tells us God **promises** to make Abraham into a **great nation** and through Abraham's descendants **bless all people on earth** (Gen 12:2-3).

4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans (that's the land of **Babylon**) and settled in Harran (modern day **Turkey**). After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land (the promised land), even though at that time Abraham had no child.

God is promising to give Abraham the land of Israel. God is **good to his people** and **present with them, even in hardship**. If you **know Jesus**, you can trust that **God is good to you** and **present with you**, no matter what.

6 God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' 8 Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

Despite being taken to a foreign land, God is promising to **maintain relationship** with the **descendants of Abraham**. They will "worship me" (v.7). Like a **film director** puts **details** in a **movie** to set up what comes next, Stephen mentions **Jacob** who is the father of **twelve brothers**, including Joseph.

9 "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

At the **culmination** of this **biopic** Stephen is going to **critique** the Jewish leader's **love of their temple** and their **rejection of Jesus** as the **Messiah**. Here he is **highlighting** an **embarrassing story**. It's like the **family story** of the **crazy uncle** you don't want anyone to know about. The **twelve** brothers who launched the twelve tribes of Israel sold their **youngest** brother Joseph into slavery even though God had **chosen Joseph to save them**. Their **rejected God's chosen one** and they've **done it again by rejecting Jesus**.

11 "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16 Their bodies were

brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

Despite all their sins, God is still good and God is still present with his people. Let's take a **moment** and think about our **own lives**, our own **biopics**. **Where** has God been **good to you**? Where is God **sticking with you** despite your **sins**? Have there been times when you **rejected God** but he **didn't reject you**? Let's **thank God** and **worship him** and ask him to **change us**.

At the start of *Ford v Ferrari* the **British race car driver Ken Miles** is **prideful** and **arrogant**. It's all about him. He always **does things his way**, which **messes everything up**, but **Carroll Shelby stays with him**. Shelby **fights for him** when no one else believes in him, even when they **Miles punches Shelby in the face**, Shelby **doesn't leave him**. **Shelby sticks with Miles** and that **changes him**.

At the end of the biopic Miles is racing so well he is going to win the **24 Hours of Le Mans** by miles. But the leadership at Ford decides since this is a **team sport**, and it's all about **advertising** to them, they want Miles to slow down for the **other two Ford drivers** so all three of them can cross the **finish line** at the **same time**. Miles and Shelby are **heartbroken**. How could you do this to Miles. He has worked so hard. That **old self** begins to rise up in Miles and since he still has **hours to go** he sets a couple **track records**. But as he heads towards the end **something changes** in his heart, he slows down, he lets his team mates catch up, and they cross the finish line together. It **cost** Miles the **win** as the judges declared one of **teammates** the **winner**. In the biopic, **Shelby stuck with Miles** and it changed him so that Miles wanted to stick with Shelby. **God sticks with us** and that **changes us** so that we want to **stick with him**.

Maybe you don't believe in Jesus or any of this stuff but you **sense God hasn't given up** on you. You're right. God hasn't given up on you. God **sticks with us not** because we **deserve it** but because **he loves us**. *Act I - God is good to his people and present with them.* That's the **beginning** of the biopic. What's next?

Act II - God's people reject him over and over again. (Acts 7:17-50)

Act two of Israel's biopic opens with a **wide-angle shot** of Israel in Egypt for four-hundred years.

17 "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. 18 Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.' 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

The peoples' very lives are at stake but God raises up **another leader**, Moses.

20 "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. 21 When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

The **Egyptians educating** Moses doesn't appear in the OT, but comes from **Jewish tradition**. The **point Stephen is making** is that God raised up an **unexpected leader** and **savior**, just like Jesus. Maybe this is **your story too**. Maybe Jesus is going to be **your unexpected savior**. Israel rejected God **two ways**:

1. God's people rejected him by rejecting his chosen leader.

23 "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. 24 He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. 25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue

them, but they did not. 26 The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

27 “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28 Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’

29 When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

Instead of receiving **God’s chosen leader**, this Israelite says, “**Who made you ruler and judge over us?**” God did, but they don’t see it that way. How many times have **we responded** to God like this? “Who made you ruler? I didn’t agree to this!” And yet, God **mercifully extends his hand** again and again. The only reason **we can reject God** time and time again is because **he offers himself to us** time and time again.

30 “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. (God is still **with** Moses and his people!)

33 “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’

35 “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

Once again Stephen is emphasizing that **God chooses Moses** as **ruler** and **judge**, and the people **rejected** him. Moses, Jesus, and now Stephen all performed **wonders** and **signs** but the people rejected them (Acts 2:22; 6:8). Maybe you’re someone who thinks if God would give you a **miracle**, you’d believe in him. I doubt it. **We’re too skeptical** to believe even if we saw it with **our own eyes**. We need someone to come and **change our hearts**. **Moses promised** God would send **a prophet like him** (Deut 18:15).

37 “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ 38 He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

Stephen is saying, “**Jesus is the prophet Moses promised**. You were **supposed to listen** to him.” *God’s people rejected him by rejecting his chosen leader. **Have we ever done that?*** Turn away from those God has given us to **lead** and **care** for us **spiritually**? What do we **miss out on** when we do so?

2. God’s people rejected him by worshipping idols.

39 “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 40 They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ 41 That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. 42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?
43 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek

and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.
Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

The **golden calf-incident** is a **huge blemish** on Israel's history, and things **didn't get better** in the **wilderness**. Verses 42-43 tell us the people were **still worshipping false gods** (Molek and Rephan) and **idols while they wandered** in the wilderness. Those who **opposed Stephen** were **idolizing the past**. They had **manufactured** it into **something it wasn't**. We do this when we idolize **periods** and **events** in the past. As **Christians**, I think we can be **especially susceptible** for wishing that we could recapture some of the "**glory days**" of **Christianity** in our **culture**. If we were to **look closely** at those glory days, we'd see there was an **awful lot** of **idolatry**, an awful lot of **worshipping the false god** of **money** or **self** instead of **loving others**. We'd **discover** people were just as **sinful** and **broken back then** as they **are today**.

We can **idolize** the past in our **own lives too**, a **particular time** or **period** when we felt **especially close** to **God**, and **obedient**. Are you idealizing **a part** of your **own life**? Chances are we **weren't as obedient** as we thought we were, and we might be **closer to God** now more than ever. We reject God where we **least expect it**. I knew I was close to God when I was **reading my Bible** or **serving** or **obeying my parents** or **praying** or at **church**, which are all **good things**, but can also be done out of a sense of **self-righteousness**. The Israelites also reject God where they least **expect** it, in the place they **held most dear**, the **temple**.

44 "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

The **tabernacle**, which was a **tent** in the wilderness, and then the **permanent temple structure** is Israel's greatest victory. It's the place of one true **worship**. It's the place where God's **glory** dwells. **Or is it?**

48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

49 "Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

50 Has not my hand made all these things?"

God's presence doesn't dwell in a building. Their **charges** against him are **kinda right**. He could **care less** about the **temple structure**, because God dwells within **his Son, Christ Jesus**. Jesus is the temple where **God's glory dwells** in all its **fullness** and they **rejected him** (John 1:14). They've **committed idolatry**, **caring more** for a **building** than **loving God**.

When a **good thing** becomes an **ultimate thing** in our lives, we've committed **idolatry** too. We reject God by loving our **family members more than him**. It's never wrong to love our family. It's simply wrong to love them more than God. At the end of Act II Stephen's biopic **builds to a crescendo**.

Act I - God is good to his people and present with them. Act II - God's people reject him over and over again. For Stephen's third act his directing style changes from a film you might see on the **history channel** to something **directed** by **Martin Scorsese**. It's a **massacre**.

Act III - You resist God and killed the Righteous One! (Acts 7:17-43)

51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” (NIV)

In **Exodus** God over and over again called the Israelites a “**stiff-necked people**” (Exod 32:9; 33:3; 34:9). Stephen’s accusation must have cut them like a knife—that they are **no better** than their forefathers who worshipped a **golden calf**. But it get’s worse. You killed the **Righteous One**, the **Messiah, God in the flesh!** God told Israel to circumcise their **hearts** but he knew they couldn’t (Deut 10:16). We have the **same problem** as the Israelites. We can’t circumcise our own hearts. We need God to **change our hearts**.

Have you rejected God? Have you rejected his **leadership** in your life? What are you **worshipping**? What **matters more** to you **than knowing Christ Jesus**? Do you **stand with Stephen**, **marveling** at the **face of Jesus**? Or do you stand with his accusers **condemning** the **Righteous One**? **How will your biopic end?**

At the end of our lives we will have to **give account**. When your **biopic rolls on heaven’s screens** **what will God say?** Will he say, “Wow! You were a **good person!** Come into heaven?” For him to say that you have to live a life **as good as his Son Jesus**, who never lied, never sinned, always obeyed his Heavenly Father, and **died** on a **cross**. If you can do that, you’re all set. Have you always obeyed God? I know I haven’t.

But what if a **different biopic could play on judgment day**? What if at the moment you are standing before the **throne of God** he reviewed a **different life** instead of yours? What if instead of your life playing out before God for his review **the biopic of Jesus** played out? What if instead of watching all your **sins** and **rebellion** you could watch the biopic of Jesus with all his **self-sacrifice, self-giving goodness** and **holiness**?

That’s kind of like what happens if you **repent** of your **sins** and believe in Jesus for **forgiveness** and **salvation** and give your life to him. Instead of God judging your life for salvation he will judge Christ’s, and Christ’s biopic is **perfectly good, the best of biopics**. **If you want Jesus, pray with me.**

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”
Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)

“Message me on Facebook if you want to talk or email me at jonathan@cornerstonewestford.com.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message on Facebook Live during the 2020 COVID-19 (Coronavirus) lockdown in Massachusetts. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. Who would you want to play you in a movie?
2. What film or television would you want to direct a movie about your life? Why?
3. How can God’s presence change our lives over time?
4. Have you ever rejected God’s leadership in your own life? Why?

5. Where do you see things you love more than God in your own life? The Bible calls this idolatry.
6. Are there places in your life where you have resisted God? How can God change you?
7. Would you like to have Jesus' biopic play instead of your own? Whether you or a longtime Christian or believing for the first time, repent of your sins and believe in Jesus.

¹ Wikipedia contributors. (2020, May 13). Ford v Ferrari. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 19:56, May 14, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ford_v_Ferrari&oldid=956388657

² Alyssa Maio. What is the Three Act Structure? No Formulas Necessary. Studio Binder. Published December 9, 2019. Accessed May 14, 2020. <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/three-act-structure/>