

TAKEAWAY:

It is possible to appear religious while resisting God's work in your life.

INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever resisted help from someone because it didn't come in the form you expected? What happened?

UNDERSTANDING:

Have a couple group members read Acts 7:17-43

- How did this sermon help you better understand this passage of scripture? Is there anything that was mentioned during the sermon that stuck out to you?
- Read Acts 7:35-39. How did Israel resist Moses even while claiming to follow God?
- Israel rejected Moses before they followed him. Are there ways God might be trying to help you that you're currently resisting? What makes us push away the very help we need?
- What do you expect from God? No seriously, do you expect Him to be a genie in a bottle or do you expect Him to do His will for your good?
- Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness before becoming Israel's deliverer. How has God's deliverance in your life looked different than you expected?
- Israel turned to idols even after experiencing God's miracles. What are the "idols" that tempt you when God feels distant or His plan unclear?

APPLICATION:

- Stephen's audience appeared devout but resisted God's purposes. How can we guard against looking religious while actually resisting what God wants to do in us?
- If you are comfortable, please share something that you are holding on to and need to let go of and trust God.

GO DEEPER:

The Go Deeper section has two potential functions. It can supplement your small group discussion by providing extra discussion material.

You can also use these sections as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting and to deepen your study of our text from this week. Here are two "Going Deeper" discussion prompts that build upon the above provided questions without repeating them:

(a) Turning Back in Our Hearts & (b) Rejoicing in the Works of Our Hands: (a) Israel "in their hearts turned back again into Egypt" even after experiencing God's miraculous deliverance (Acts 7:39). (b)

Israel "rejoiced in the works of their own hands" (Acts 7:41). By way of the below questions, explore these two points.

- What does it mean practically to "turn back to Egypt" in our hearts today? Why are our hearts prone to long for old, destructive patterns rather than embracing God's new freedom? Why do past dysfunctions, sins, or coping mechanisms sometimes look appealing when we face current hardships? How does the fear of the unknown drive us back to familiar bondage? What modern "Egypt" (comforts, securities, habits) are most tempting for believers to return to? How can we actively renew our minds to desire God's promises over our past comforts?
- In terms of self-worth, etc. why is it so deeply satisfying to take pride in something we have created or achieved ourselves? How does self-reliance actively compete with genuine faith in God? In what ways do modern Christians celebrate "the works of their own hands" within the church or their careers, mistaking it for God's blessing? How does true worship of God dismantle our ego and our need for control? What steps can we take to ensure our rejoicing is centered on God's grace rather than our accomplishments?

The Anatomy of Spiritual Resistance: Stephen's primary thesis is that the religious elite, while defending the Law of Moses, were actually resisting the Holy Spirit. Resistance often disguises itself as pious orthodoxy. The Sanhedrin utilized the mechanics of religion to insulate themselves from the transformative demands of the Gospel, which among other things resulted in theological knowledge being weaponized against spiritual vitality.

- How do modern religious structures and routines inadvertently provide a hiding place for those resisting personal transformation?
- What are the subtle markers that indicate a person is using theological knowledge to build walls rather than bridges to God?
- How did the Sanhedrin's strict adherence to the Law blind them to the fulfillment of the Law being proclaimed to them?
- In personal spiritual practices, when does routine become a mechanism for avoiding genuine intimacy with God?
- What steps can a local church community take to ensure its traditions do not calcify into resistance against spiritual intimacy?
- How can absolute certainty in one's own theological correctness become an instrument of spiritual violence, as seen in the stoning of Stephen?
- The analysis of Moses' forty years in the wilderness (Acts 7:29-30) serves as the paradigm for divine preparation: God shatters human self-sufficiency before delegating spiritual authority. The Sanhedrin, conversely, had never allowed themselves to be broken by the Spirit of God. Consequently, their polished religious exterior masked a heart identical to the idol-worshipping heathens of Egypt. They were aggressively resisting God because they had never submitted to the crushing, breaking process of genuine repentance.

QUOTES:

- "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Augustine of Hippo
- "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." C.S. Lewis
- "An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.' ... If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol." Tim Keller

- "Promoting self under the guise of promoting Christ is currently so common as to excite little notice. ... The cross is rough, and it is deadly, but it is effective. It does not keep its victim hanging there forever. There comes a moment when its work is finished and the suffering victim dies. After that is resurrection glory and power." A.W. Tozer

Group Prayer: Ask God to reveal any ways group members are resisting His work, and pray for open, surrendered hearts.