

OPEN HEAVEN

Part 4 • July 14, 2024 • Pastor Jason Smotherman

Forerunners are the foundation for any move of God. In the secular world, they would be called early adopters. Forerunners create the atmosphere of expectancy. They don't create the trend, they are the trend. The atmosphere of expectancy is the breeding ground for miracles. Think - Joshua and Caleb vs the other spies

In that expectancy, full of faith, God not only meets the faith-filled but confronts the faith-less. It creates a pressure cooker environment. Jerusalem in those days was filled with pressure. "Negotiations" must have been ongoing on what to allow and not allow. Stephen's message shattered the idea that the gospel fit with the current practices of Judaism. Had the Sanhedrin admitted the truth of Stephen's teaching, all of Jewish life would have changed. The Sanhedrin's growing rejection and hatred of the church (Acts 5:33) needed only the trigger of Stephen's ministry to release its full hatred. In the Sanhedrin law, it was stated that you could not mourn for anybody who was stoned to death. When Peter notes that they mourned greatly, he was noting the adverse environment for the moving of the Holy Spirit.

Stephen was an example of a forerunner.

His life's purpose was to introduce the greatest man in the NT outside of Jesus to what an Open Heaven looks like. They have the ability to lead not just themselves to Open heaven, but others. Stephen positioned himself as a servant. Servants see the miracle, consumers just partake of the miracle. If you want to see miracles, place yourself in the seat of a servant. At the end of the road of servanthood is the place called friend.

JOHN 15:15

¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

Like a scene out of Hollywood. The atmosphere of Open Heaven, confronts a young person named Saul. Jerusalem was a "Pressure Cooker". A hotbed of "insurrection" and religious-state sponsored killings. Jesus, now Stephen. Soon to be most of the other apostles.

The gospel cannot coincide with religion. They will always be the odds.

Most will never see the move of God, Open Heaven, because most can't stand the pressurized atmosphere of a move of God. It's not all rainbows and unicorns.

ACTS 7:54-60

⁵⁴When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. ⁵⁵But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" ⁵⁷Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen's words in 7:56 are significant. "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

"Open" is a perfect participle (*diēnoigmenous*), stressing a state of being, "standing open," meaning the last days have truly begun.

We can look at the atmosphere killers that tried to oppose Stephen's ministry.

1. RELIGIOUS JUDGMENT

ACTS 7:39

Our fathers refused to obey him (Moses), thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt.

Stephen pointed out the pattern of holding on to yesterday's tradition even when God is inviting you to experience something new in Him. You are on team Moses now, but your fathers weren't. They rejected the promise land and in their hearts they turned to Egypt.

MATTHEW 7:1-3

¹Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. ³And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?

The biggest open heaven Killer is hearts that judge improperly. They create a divisive environment that stifles the gospel.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:14-16

¹⁴But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. ¹⁶For "who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

2. RELIGIOUS FORM

ACTS 7:51

You stiffed neck people

They were non pliable. Unmoving from tradition to what God was doing.

2 TIMOTHY 3:1-5

¹But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: ²For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ³unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, ⁴traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

3. WILLING IGNORANCE

ACTS 7:52

Which of the prophets did you not persecute?

Leaving people ignorant leaves them in a state of bondage. The Mayans practiced this. We practice this. Information is power. Once you have the information, you have the responsibility.

HOSEA 4:6

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge...

ROMANS 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.

4. SHAME AND CONDEMNATION

ROMANS 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit

Condemnation - the expression of very strong disapproval; censure:

Shame and Condemnation make you feel like you want to hide but never can. Freedom gives you rest which feels like hiding in a secret place.

Shame is a weapon of control. (Whom the Son sets free)

PSALM 91

¹He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust." ³Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler And from the perilous pestilence. ⁴He shall cover you with His feathers, And under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler. ⁵You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, Nor of the arrow that flies by day, ⁶Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday. ⁷A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; But it shall not come near you. ⁸Only

with your eyes shall you look, And see the reward of the wicked. ⁹Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, Even the Most High, your dwelling place, ¹⁰No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; ¹¹For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. ¹²In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone. ¹³You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot. ¹⁴"Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name. ¹⁵He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. ¹⁶With long life I will satisfy him, And show him My salvation."

5. SILENCE

There is no such thing as camouflage Christianity.

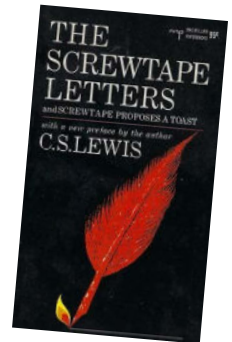
ROMANS 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

MATTHEW 10:32

³²Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Among the great number of books authored by C. S. Lewis is the highly provocative *The Screwtape Letters*. In it the profound Englishman had the devil brief his nephew, Wormwood, on the subtleties and techniques of tempting people. The goal, he counsels, is not wickedness but indifference. Satan cautions his nephew to keep the prospect, the patient, comfortable at all costs. If he should become concerned about anything of importance, encourage him to think about his luncheon plans; not to worry, it could induce indigestion. And then this definitive job description: "I, the devil, will always see to it that there are bad people. Your job, my dear Wormwood, is to provide me with people who do not care.



Repentance is the vehicle by which Open Heaven is realized.

2 CHRONICLES 7:14

¹⁴If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

Repentance is not our enemy. It's the vehicle of transformation. Repentance is the life declaration that nothing is off limits. A declaration that I want to live a life fully Open to him.