

ACTS CHAPTER 7

This is the longest address in the book of Acts and one of the most important. In it, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel and the contributions made by their revered leaders: Abraham (vs. 2-8), Joseph (vs. 9-17), Moses (vs. 18-44), Joshua (vs. 45), and David and Solomon (vs. 46-50). But this address is more than a *recitation* of familiar facts; it was also a *refutation* of their indictments against Stephen and a *revelation* of their own national sins. Stephen proved from their own Scriptures that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those they had accused him of committing.

Vs. 1 – Presumably the high priest was Caiaphas, the man who presided over the Sanhedrin’s trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:57**). The high priest invited Stephen to explain himself in light of the accusations recorded in **Acts 6:11-14**. Stephen was accused to speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God, and against this holy place (the temple) and the law. Additionally, they accused him of saying that Jesus would destroy both the temple and the customs delivered by Moses.**

Vs. 2 – Stephen launched into a long speech about Israel’s relationship with God. From Old Testament history he showed that the Jews constantly rejected God’s message and His prophets and that the council had rejected the Messiah, God’s Son. He made three main points: (1) Israel’s history is the history of the God’s acts in the world; (2) people worshiped God long before there was a Temple; because God does not live in a Temple; and (3) Jesus’

death was just one more example of Israel's rebellion against and rejection of God. Really, Stephen did not "*defend*" himself, he simply wanted to proclaim the truth about Jesus in a way people could understand. So instead, he took the offensive. He seized the opportunity to summarize the teaching about Jesus. Stephen was accusing these religious leaders of failing to obey God's laws - the laws they prided themselves in following so meticulously. This was the same accusation that Jesus had leveled against them. When we witness for Christ, we don't need to be on the defensive; instead, we can simply state our faith. The phrase "*God of glory appeared*" highlighted the fact God intervened in history again and again to speak to His people and it was not from the Temple predominantly especially, during the times of Abraham and Moses and the writing of the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of Moses they revered so much).

Vs. 3-5 - Stephen explained that Abraham did not immediately go to Canaan (he dwelt in Haran) and he did not immediately leave his relatives (his father came with him to Haran). Abraham's partial obedience did not take God's promise away. Instead, it meant the promise was *on hold* until Abram was ready to do what the Lord said (*God's delays are not necessarily denials for us today; but partial obedience usually holds up total blessings*). The fulfillment of the promise didn't progress until Abraham left Haran and his father behind

and went to the place God wanted him to go. (Abraham was born and raised in Ur of the Chaldees, which is in modern day Iraq. **Joshua 24:2** says that Abraham and his father worshiped idols). Regarding the phrase “*God gave him no inheritance... no child*” - Abraham was promised both the land and descendants, but had no outward proof of either. He could only trust God for the fulfillment of these things. With this, Stephen emphasized a relationship with God on the basis of faith and not outward evidences like a temple or the structure of institutional religion and its customs. And even when Abraham was in the land, he was a pilgrim. He didn't make an idol out of the blessings God had either given or promised. This was a rebuke to the religious leaders Stephen spoke to, because many among them had stopped being pilgrims and they made idols out of the blessings of the temple and the land. The Jews greatly revered Abraham and prided themselves in being his “*children.*” But they confused physical decent with spiritual experience and depended on their national heritage rather than their personal faith. Jesus and John the Baptist warned them of this sin in **Matthew 3:7-12** and **John 8:33-59**).

Vs. 6-8 - The phrase in **vs. 6** “*His descendants would dwell in a foreign land...into bondage*” - the promise would not be easy or light for Abraham or his descendants. Yet, God promised to judge the nation that put Israel into bondage. Stephen suggested the idea that God knows how to take care of and

protect His people. He rested in that assurance himself, and challenged the council to have the same assurance. And in **vs. 8** the regarding the phrase “*He gave him the covenant of circumcision...Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs*” - circumcision became the sign of the covenant for Israel, and the covenant was passed down through these descendants of Abraham (**Genesis 17:9-13**). Because Stephen summarized Israel’s history, he told how this covenant fared during that time. Stephen pointed out that God always had kept His side of the promise, but Israel had failed again and again to uphold its end. Although he Jews in Stephen’s day still circumcised their baby boys, they failed to obey God. The people’s heart was far from God. Their lack of faith and obedience showed that they had failed to keep their part of the covenant.

The Patriarchs in Egypt (vs. 9-16)

Vs. 9-16 – In **vs. 9** the Patriarchs refer to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and his twelve sons who became the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel. Stephen then mentions the factual account of Joseph because he is a picture of Jesus, in that the sons of Israel rejected Joseph, who later became a savior to them (and the only possible savior). Regarding the phrase “*God was with him*” Stephen emphasized the spiritual presence of God with Joseph **all the time**. Joseph did not need to go to the temple to be close to God because there was no temple.

Instead, God was with him all the time. In **vs. 14** it says seventy-five people but **Genesis 46:26-27** says there were 70 altogether of the family of Israel. It is obvious Stephen quoted from the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which says 75; the translators added the number of wives to the list of relatives. The primary reason Stephen lays out key events in the life of Joseph and Jacob is that these key events illustrate how Israel treated Jesus Christ. Israel rejected their Messiah when He came to them the first time (**John 1:11**); but when Jesus comes again, they will recognize Him and receive Him (**Zechariah 12:10; Revelation 1:7**). In spite of what they did to Jesus, God has not cast away His people (**Romans 11:1-6**). Individual Jews are being saved the same way as everyone else (**Romans 10:9**); but the nation as a whole is blind to the truth about Jesus Christ.

God Delivers Moses (vs. 17-36)

Vs. 17-22 – Stephen provides a factual account of Israel regarding the early life of Moses who was a “*type of Christ*” in that he was favored by God from birth, sent to be a deliverer of his people, and preserved in childhood. Additionally, Moses was well pleasing to God without the temple or the customs of institutional religion. Regarding the phrase “*was mighty in words and deeds*” - Moses was also like Jesus in that he was wise, skillful with words, and a man of mighty deeds. Stephen’s review of the history of Jewish history

gives a clear testimony of God’s faithfulness and sovereignty. Despite the continued failures of His chosen people and the swirling world events, God was working out His plan. When we are faced with perplexing issues and confusing circumstances, we must remember: (1) God is in total control and nothing surprises Him; (2) this world is not all there is; it will pass away, but God is eternal; (3) God is just, and He will make all things right; He will punish the wicked and reward the faithful in His perfect timing; and (4) God wants to use you and I like Joseph, Moses, and Stephen to make a difference in the world.

Vs. 23-29 - In vs. 23-29 Stephen states Israel rejected Moses (really the One who sent Moses – God). 40 is a very important number in Jewish history and the Bible...in the opinion of some Jewish rabbis, 40 was the age at which a man had grown to maturity. Moses’ life is divided into 3 parts: the first forty years in the palace of Pharaoh, the second forty years in the desert, and the third forty years carrying out God’s will to deliver His people. Now regarding that phrase in vs. 23 that says, “*When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren*” - at an appointed time, Moses came down from his royal throne out of care and concern for his brethren. This was another way that Moses was like Jesus who would come after him (Galatians 4:4-5**).**

Stephen’s message was plain; in essence he was saying you have rejected

Jesus, who was like Moses yet greater than him, and you deny that Jesus has any right to be a ruler and a judge over you.

Vs. 30-34 – In relating the burning bush incident, Stephen once again underscored the fact that God is free to reveal Himself to whomever He pleases. And wherever our Sovereign God reveals Himself that ground or that place becomes holy ground. Stephen again emphasized one of the main points of his reply to the Sanhedrin Council and that is; God, His glory, and His work was not confined to the temple (in the midst of this pandemic the church today must also realize this). God appeared to Moses in the wilderness, before there ever was a temple. Additionally, Stephen emphasized that God both called and commissioned Moses.

Vs. 35-36 - Even though Israel had rejected Moses and his leadership, God appointed Moses with unmistakable signs, including the burning bush in the wilderness. And although Israel rejected Moses, he was still God's chosen deliverer for Israel. Whatever God is "calling" you to do; God is going to "see you through" and wherever God guides, He provides.

Israel rebels against God (vs. 37-43)

Vs. 37-41 – In these verses we see Israel's repeated rejection of Moses. Moses promised that there would come after him another Prophet and warned that

Israel should take special care to listen to this coming Prophet. But just like Israel rejected Moses, so they were rejecting Jesus, who is the Prophet Moses spoke of. When it says, *“This is he who was in the congregation... who received the living oracles”* - Moses, like Jesus, led the congregation of God’s people, enjoyed special intimacy with God and brought forth the revelation of God. And when it says, *“They made a calf in those days... and rejoiced in the works of their own hands”* when ancient Israel rejected Moses and God’s work through him, they replaced him with their own man-made religion. The phrase in **vs. 42** *“And rejoiced in the works of their own hands”* is especially meaningful. One of the accusations against Stephen was that he blasphemed the temple. It wasn’t that Stephen spoke against the temple, but against the way Israel worshipped the temple of God instead of worshipping the God of the temple. Just as Israel worshipped the calf in the wilderness, so now they were worshipping the works of their own hands. A major application for us of these verses is every human being is going to have to give an account of their acceptance or rejection of Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Vs. 42-43 – in these verses Stephen shared God’s response to the repeated rejection of His messengers. Regarding the phrase in **vs. 42** which says, *“Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven”* - in their rejection of Moses and the God who sent him, Israel turned instead to corrupt idols,

bringing upon themselves the judgment described in the passage quoted from **Amos 5:25-27**. Stephen took the passage from Amos and changed it slightly to bring the point to his listeners. Amos said, “*beyond Damascus*” (**Amos 5:27**), but Stephen changed it to “*beyond Babylon*” because he is not talking to the people of the northern kingdom but to the leaders of Israel in the south. It is their history that he has in mind. The Apostle Paul in the N.T. builds on this theme when he said something similar in **Romans 1:24-32**.

God's True Tabernacle (vs. 44-50)

Vs. 44-46 – The tabernacle was a constant testimony of God’s presence no matter where the people went. Paul tells us that we (Christians) are the tabernacle, the temple of God in **1 Corinthians 3:16**. We can never move out of the presence of God. Stephen had been accused of speaking against the Temple (**Acts 6:13**) but Stephen’s point was that the Temple (physical building) was not more important than God. David desired to build God a Temple for the right reasons, but since he had so much blood on his hands, God did not allow David to build it, but God allowed David’s son Solomon to build the Temple.

Vs. 47-50 – regarding the phrase in **vs. 48** “*However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands*” - Stephen confronted their idolatry of the

temple. The Jewish leaders tried to confine God within the temple. Yet God is too big to fit in any temple man could make. Solomon knew this as he said it in his prayer of dedication to the temple in *2 Chronicles 6:18* and *1 Kings 8:27-30*. And listen carefully, on a more subtle level, many Christians do the same thing today, especially in this season of the pandemic. Some have totally abandoned the worship and the Word experience because it's not occurring inside a church house. Some seem to try to confine God to one place. In other words, the only place they meet God is at the church. As far as they are concerned, God is absent from the rest of their lives. In the minds and lives of some today, God might as well only live at the church. God does not want a weekend visitation right; He wants full custody of the Christian.

Israel Resists the Holy Spirit (vs. 51-53)

Vs. 51-53 – In *Luke 20:9-19* Jesus told a parable about how the Jews had constantly rejected God's messages and persecuted His messengers. True messengers of God are not going to be the most popular people; everyone is not going to love them. Most people want itchy-ear messages that are a sugar-coated gospel which really means it's no gospel at all. Now the message will be offensive to many; but the messenger must not be "offensive" sharing the message; the Gospel must be shared in love. When Stephen says, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" he was drawing on concepts

from the Old Testament, Stephen rebuked those who rejected Jesus as stiff-necked (as Israel is described in passages like **Exodus 32:9**), and as uncircumcised in heart and ears (as Israel is described in passages like **Jeremiah 9:26**). In **vs. 52** when it says, “*You now have become the betrayers and murderers*” - Stephen’s main point was unmistakable: As Israel was in its history, so you are today. God gave you the law, but you have not kept it.

Stephen the Martyr (vs. 54-60)

Vs. 54 – “*They were cut to the heart*” - the council was angry, but because Stephen’s message had hit the target. They could not dismiss or ignore what he said. The Sanhedrin reacted with rage instead of submission to the Holy Spirit. Regarding the phrase “*They gnashed at him with their teeth*” - it is remarkable to think of this response from men who were dignified, respected leaders in Israel. Seven different times, Jesus described Hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (**Matthew 8:12**). These men were prominent, successful, and appeared to be religious; yet they were rejecting God and associating themselves with hell, not heaven.

Vs. 55-56 - The fact that Stephen was *full of the Holy Spirit* shows the source of his courage, wisdom, and power in preaching. You can share Biblical truths and quote Bible verses all day long, but if you are not sharing them with the

anointing of the Holy Spirit you are merely giving a lecture or a speech.

Regarding the phrase *“gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand”* – gazing at death may be terrifying, but gazing past death to the presence of Jesus waiting for the Believer is the hope that dissolves the fear. The phrase in **vs. 55** which says, *“Jesus standing at the right hand of God”* is significant; notice it says Jesus was standing here, as opposed to the more common description of Him sitting in heaven (**Matthew 26:64, Colossians 3:1**), at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus was standing in solidarity with Stephen at this moment of crisis; Jesus does not react impassionately to the problems of His people. We might also consider that Jesus stood to give a standing ovation to Stephen, whose fate made him unique among believers. Among all the followers of Jesus, Stephen was the first martyr.

Vs. 57-58 – Regarding the phrase *“Then they cried out with a loud voice”* - When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, it was too much. The Sanhedrin reacted quickly, violently, and together. When Jesus, before this same body of men, declared that He would sit at the right hand of God, they had the same reaction and sealed his death as a blasphemer in **Matthew 26:64-66**. Look at how the Sanhedrin Council respond to Stephen *“They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one*

accord” – now these were distinguished, older men wearing long robes behaving this way. The reaction of the Sanhedrin seems extreme, but is typical of those who reject God and are lost in spiritual insanity. They wailed in agony and covered their ears at the revelation of God, which they regarded as blasphemy. It is a dangerous thing to be religious apart from a real relationship with Jesus Christ. This fulfills what Jesus warned about in **John 16:2-3** – *“They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.”* The phrase *“Ran at him”* uses the ancient **Greek** word *hormao*. This is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea after the unclean spirits went into them in **Mark 5:13**. This was an out-of-control mob rushing at Stephen. In **vs. 58** it says, *“they cast him out of the city and stoned him”* - the extent of their rage was shown by their execution of Stephen, which was done without regard for Roman law, and which was performed according to traditional Jewish custom (stoning). Jewish law forbade an execution within the walls of Jerusalem, so the Sanhedrin took Stephen outside of Jerusalem to stone him to death. And notice who was there: Saul (who would later become Paul). Saul stood there as the supervisor of the operation. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he had also approved of Stephen’s execution.

Vs. 59-60 - Stephen's life ended in the same way it had been lived: In complete trust in God, believing that Jesus would take care of him in the life to come. Notice the "familiar phrase" Stephen used as among his final words "*Lord, do not charge them with this sin.*" God answered Stephen's prayer, and used it to touch the heart of a man who energetically agreed with his stoning – even though the man didn't know the prayer was being answered. Stephen displayed the same forgiving attitude that Jesus had on the cross (**Luke 23:34**) and there was someone we know was saved right after those word of forgiveness were stated (thief on the right)...and as Stephen prayed a similar prayer, God forgave his accusers, and Saul of Tarsus is spared and has a Damascus Road – a life transformational encounter with Jesus in the next chapter. This should encourage us to pray for the unsaved not matter how evil they are acting now; God can transform anybody. Finally, notice the phrase, "*he fell asleep*" - the text describes the passing of Stephen as tenderly as possible. Instead of saying that he died, it says that he merely fell asleep with the idea that he woke up in a much better world.