

Ministry of Grace Church

The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 7

Preface:

Last time we read about the dispute that occurred within the new church because the Hellenistic Jews felt like their widows were being treated as second-class citizens when it came to the distribution of money donated to the church. This problem arose because the apostles were handling all of the distribution as well as the preaching of the word. In order to rectify the situation, the apostles had the people select seven men to handle the distribution. The men they selected were all Hellenistic Jews

One of the men selected was Stephen, who also was a mighty witness for the Lord. He boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and he performed miraculous signs and wonders. Nobody was able to refute any part of his message as they debated him. However, because his preaching offended some of the people, he was brought before the Sanhedrin and accused him of two things: (Slide 2) (1) speaking against the Temple, saying that it will be destroyed, and (2) speaking against Moses and the Law, saying that the customs delivered by Moses would also be destroyed.

In Stephen's speech, he shows that the old order of things was passing away and a new order was coming. This becomes particularly clear when he talked about the temple. It was revered by the Jews, but it was destined to pass away. This speech is a transition speech that paves the way for presenting the gospel to the Gentiles, which begins in the very next chapter of Acts. More than a plea for acquittal, Stephen's speech was a defense of Christianity as God's intended way of worship.

Stephen's Speech – Abraham the Chosen One

Acts 7:1-8

¹And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" ²And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. ⁵Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ⁷'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' ⁸And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

Notes:

The High Priest, who was the presiding member of the Sanhedrin, asked Stephen to plead his case. What follows is the longest speech recorded in the New Testament. (Slide 3) Stephen's presentation is a masterful mixture of a strong defense against the two charges and an irrefutable accusation against the religious leaders of Israel.

(Slide 4) Stephen presents his case in the form of a history lesson of Israel, beginning with Abraham, who at the time was called Abram. First off, Stephen demonstrated that God reached out to Abram outside the Promised Land. Abram was living in Ur of the Chaldeans when God first called him. If you read the account of God's calling of Abram in Genesis chapter 12, it appears that God spoke to him while he was in Haran. However, Stephen makes it clear that God first called Abram while he was in Ur (before he lived in Haran.) (Slide 5) Stephen shows that God brought Abram into the land of promise. God did not give the land to Abram at that time, but He promised that he would give it to him and his offspring after him. Notice, at the time of this promise Abram had no children. Nonetheless, in Genesis chapter 16 we learn that Abram believed God's promise and his belief, that is, *his faith*, was credited to him as righteousness.

Since the Temple was one of the areas of dispute, we see that not only was the temple not necessary for the revelation of the God of glory; the Promised Land itself was not necessary. God was greater than either. A single thread runs right through the first part of this defense, which is, the God of Israel is a pilgrim God, who is not restricted to any one place...If he has any home on earth, it is with his people wherever they are.



Stephen emphasized that the relationship with God is on the basis of faith and not on outward evidences like a temple or the structure of institutional religion and its customs. Stephen even emphasized the pilgrimage aspect of faith. Even while 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 was speaking to, because many among them had stopped being pilgrims and had made idols out of the blessings of the temple and the land.

God then predicted that Abram's descendants would be sojourners in a foreign land for 400 years. At the end of that period, God said He would judge the nation that subdued them and bring back Abram's descendants to the land that had been promised, and that they would worship God there.

Then, about 15 years later, God appeared to Abram again and changed his name from Abram (Exalted Father) to Abraham (Father of a Multitude). At this time, he made a covenant with Abraham and the sign of the covenant was circumcision for Abraham and all of his male descendants. Pay particular attention to the fact that Abraham's righteousness was not based on his obedience or on the covenant, but on faith and faith alone. Abraham was declared righteous many years before he received the sign of circumcision. (Slide 6)

Stephen's Speech –Joseph, the Chosen One Rejected

Acts 7:9-16

⁹And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹²But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Notes:

In Stephen's speech, he then skipped ahead to Abraham's grandchildren, focusing specifically on Joseph. Every Israelite knew the story of Joseph. He was rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery. The irony of this is the fact that the Israelites were the ones who went into slavery – after having been rescued by Joseph.

Why did the sons of Israel reject Joseph? Because, they were jealous of him. They were jealous because he had the favor of their father. Joseph was the chosen son and was rejected by his own people. This was a not-so-subtle jab at the members of the Sanhedrin who rejected Jesus of Nazareth, the chosen one, the one who was favored by the father, the one who had been sent to save them. (Slide 7)

Here's another subtlety that many people miss. Remember, Stephen had been condemned because he was speaking against the Temple. The religious leaders believed that God dwelt inside the Holy of Holies, above the Ark of the Covenant between the two cherubim. They believed that they were

blessed because the Ark was in the Temple and the Temple was in Jerusalem. They believed that the Temple was the center of God's presence and blessing. To refute that, Stephen pointed out that Joseph was God's chosen savior and God blessed the children of Israel through Joseph *while in Egypt*, without the ark and without the Temple. (Slide 8)

Stephen's Speech – Moses is Rejected

Acts 7:17-29

17But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt **18**until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. **19**He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. **20**At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, **21**and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. **22**And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. **23**“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. **24**And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. **25**He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. **26**And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ **27**But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’ **28**Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ **29**At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.



Notes:

God had promised Abraham that he would have descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore. And he informed him that his descendants would be temporary residents in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. In his speech to the Sanhedrin, Stephen reminded them that as the time for redemption drew near, the children of Israel were mistreated and enslaved, just as God had predicted. But – God miraculously raised up Moses, even making him an adopted grandson of Pharaoh. He was given the kind of education that only the wealthiest and most important people were given.

One of the most amazing things about Moses' upbringing is the fact that he never lost his connection to his heritage. Stephen recounts the events in which Moses stood up against the Egyptian who was abusing one of the Israelites. But on the next day, when he stepped in to adjudicate between two Israelites, he was rebuffed. This is a significant point in Stephen's speech. Even though God had raised him up in the household of Pharaoh against all odds, and had sent him to rescue the Israelites, they rejected their redeemer. (Slide 9A) (Do we sense a pattern developing here? First, Joseph, and now Moses sent by God as a redeemer, but rejected by the people he came to save) Stephen's message was plain: "You have now rejected Jesus of Nazareth, who was like Moses yet greater than Moses, and you denied that Jesus had any right to be **a ruler and a judge** over you, just as your forefathers did with Moses.

This covered the first 40 years of Moses' life, his time of secular training, where he was taught how to be a military leader. For the next 40 years, Moses was being trained by God, who was teaching him how to be a shepherd.

Stephen's Speech – Moses

Acts 7:30-38

³⁰“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³²‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’ ³⁵“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ ³⁸This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

Notes:

At the end of Moses' second 40 years of training, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a burning bush while he was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro. This occurred in the area of Mt. Horeb (Mt. Sinai). Because the presence of the Lord was there, it was a holy place, so God instructed Moses to remove his sandals. God then sent Moses back to Egypt to deliver the children

of Israel. Clearly, this was a holy place and it was not in Jerusalem. Once again, Stephen demonstrated that the Sanhedrin's obsession with the Temple and Mt. Zion as the only holy place was false. God, along with His glory, and His work cannot be confined to a building made with hands.

Stephen then made a very strong statement when he said,

This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge?"—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

This is now the second time that Stephen has pointed out that the one who the people (the forefathers of the Sanhedrin) rejected was, in fact, the one whom God had sent as a redeemer.

But – Stephen didn't stop there. He also quoted Moses as saying, "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers." What he didn't say, but what everyone knew, was what God said to Moses after that. God said,

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." (Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin that Moses had warned about another prophet who would come. (Slide 9B) Although Stephen didn't name him, it would have been clear to the Sanhedrin that he was referring to Jesus of Nazareth, who was referred to as a prophet by many people. And – by quoting Moses' words from Deuteronomy, Stephen was warning them that their beloved Moses had warned them to not reject the coming prophet, their Messiah.

Stephen's Speech – Israel's Idolatry in the Wilderness

Acts 7:39-43

³⁹Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' **⁴¹And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. (Slide 10) ⁴²But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ⁴³You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'**

Notes:

Having just admonished the Sanhedrin not to reject the coming prophet predicted by Moses, Stephen next demonstrated that the forefathers of the Sanhedrin had rejected Moses, the very person who the religious leaders were now claiming to revere. And – not only had their forefathers rejected the deliverer sent by God, but they had also exchanged the glory of God and His savior for something physical – an idol made with their own hands. The comparison would have been

very clear that the members of the Sanhedrin were worshipping the man-made Temple as the dwelling place of God instead of worshipping the God of the dwelling place.

Stephen went on to show the religious leaders that because their forefathers had rejected Moses, God gave them over to worshipping idols. Not just the golden calf, either – they worshipped Moloch, a god of the Ammonites to whom children were sacrificed. They also worshipped the star-gods, including Rhephan (also known as Saturn). (Slide 11)

He even quotes Amos who said,

and I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts. (Amos 5:27)

But Stephen made a subtle change in Amos’ prophecy. Stephen said “beyond Babylon,” instead of “beyond Damascus.” The reason for this is that the prophecy of Amos was originally made against the northern kingdom of Israel who were carried away to Damascus. But he was now talking to the descendants of the southern kingdom of Judah who had been carried away to Babylon. The significance of this prophecy cannot be overlooked. This was a judgment against Israel because of idolatry and Stephen was now accusing the religious leaders of idolatry regarding the Temple.

Stephen’s Speech – Rebellious Israel in the Promised Land

Acts 7:44-53

⁴⁴“Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen.⁴⁵Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David,⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for him.⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by 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 what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰Did not my hand make all these things?” ⁵¹“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵²Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Notes:

Stephen now peels back the onion one more layer regarding the Temple. In the wilderness, the Israelites had the tabernacle, exactly as God had instructed Moses to make it. When they came into the Promised Land, they brought in the tabernacle as well. And it stayed with the Children of Israel until the time of King David, who wanted to make a permanent dwelling place for God. And his son, Solomon, built the temple per David’s desires.

At this point, I imagine that many members of the Sanhedrin would be saying, “Yeah! Yeah! That’s right!” They would be cheering Stephen on, because the Temple was built as a permanent

“tabernacle” It had become a place where they knew they could encounter God and it eventually became even more important than God, Himself.

However, Stephen then lowered the boom on them. He reminded them that God does not dwell in temples (or houses) made by hands. (Slide 12) The phrase “*the works of men’s hands*” is commonly spoken of idols in the Old Testament. So, those same members of the Sanhedrin who would have been cheering Stephen on just moments earlier, would recognize that Stephen was equating the Temple and Temple worship with idol worship.

Stephen is now finished defending his statements about Moses and the Temple, so he proceeded to lay down his charge against the religious leaders.

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. (Acts 7:51-53)

Obviously, they recognized exactly what Stephen was saying and they were not willing to admit that he was correct.

The Stoning of Stephen

Acts 7:54-60

⁵⁴Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Notes:

Having heard Stephen’s condemnation of them, the members of the Sanhedrin were “enraged.” This is the same word used to describe their anger after hearing Peter and the apostles defending their teaching in Solomon’s Porch (see Acts 5:33). It is translated from a word that means “to be sawn in two.” Metaphorically, it means to be extremely angry. As a result of their anger, they “ground their teeth at him.” Incidentally, the words, “ground their teeth at him” are expressed in the imperfect tense, indicating continual action in the past. So, apparently, this was not a sudden reaction, but one that had been building throughout much of Stephen’s speech.

The idea of gnashing at him with their teeth also brings to mind Jesus’ imagery of Hell. Seven different times, He described Hell as a place of *weeping and gnashing of teeth*. These members of the Sanhedrin were prominent men, they were successful men, they were men revered by the people, and they appeared to be religious men; yet they were rejecting God and associating themselves with hell, rather than with heaven.

In contrast, Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit.” J.B, Phillips, in his translation, expresses it as, “*Stephen was filled through all his being with the Holy Spirit ...*” And, looking into heaven, Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” It is significant that he sees the Son of Man “standing” rather than sitting. First of all, as we have said before, the expression “the Son of Man” is a direct reference to the Messiah. Every Jew knew that, and they also knew of David’s reference to the Messiah:

The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” (Psalms 110:1)

Stephen was clearly referring to the Messiah, but he claimed he saw Him standing. No one knows for sure what this signifies. However, it could signify several things: a) He was standing in solidarity with Stephen, b) He was standing in honor of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, c) Jesus was standing before the Judge, pleading Stephen’s case, redeemed by His blood, or d) Stephen has been confessing Christ before men and now Jesus is confessing Stephen before the Father.

The reaction of the Sanhedrin was as swift as it was illegal. If you remember from our study in the book of Matthew, the reason the Sanhedrin took Jesus before Pilate was because under Roman law, the Jews could not execute even the most violent of criminals. Yet – they didn’t even hesitate to take matters into their own hands and swiftly carried out the stoning of Stephen.

Dr. Luke then throws a tidbit of information our way in preparation for one of the next phases of the growth of the church. He tells us,

... And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:58b) (Slide 13)

Incidentally, the word translated “young man” refers to a person who is not yet 40 years old. It typically implies a person in the “prime of life.”

So What?

If we compare the twelfth chapter of Genesis with this seventh chapter of Acts, we discover that God actually called Abraham twice. Once, while he was still in Ur of the Chaldeans and once while he was in Haran. In the first call, God instructed Abram to leave his country, his family, and his father’s house. He obediently left his country, but he did not leave his family nor his father’s house. It wasn’t until Abram fully complied with God’s instructions that he received his blessing.

Certainly, we can’t equate ourselves with Abraham, but I wonder how many times God has spoken to our hearts, asking us to do something and we only partially complied. Our lack of complete obedience may not have resulted in chastening from our Heavenly Father, but we may never know what blessings we have forfeited by not submitting completely to His will.

The other thing that is glaringly obvious from this seventh chapter of Acts is that the religious leaders of Israel revered the house of God more than the God of the house. Stephen squarely confronted them about their idolatry of the temple. The Sanhedrin tried to confine God within the temple itself. Yet God is too big to fit in any temple that man could make. Although there may be some, I doubt there are very many Christians today who revere the church building more than our God.

However, on a more subtle level, many Christians today do just that. It may not be in the form of worshipping a church building, but it is in the confinement of 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. They have a spiritual encounter with Him on Sunday morning, but He is ignored the rest of the week. The nice thing about only encountering God when we're in church is the fact that the remainder of the week, we don't have to be concerned with obedience. As long as we can keep God at arm's length, we can live our "secular" lives however we want. Is that really any different from what the Sanhedrin did?

Now What?

Our men's group is currently going through a little book entitled, "The Practice of the Presence of God." It serves as a good reminder that we are ALWAYS in the presence of our God, whether we are in the bedroom, the living room, the garage, our place of employment, at a party, at the grocery store, driving our car, walking the dog, or just sitting at home watching TV or reading a book. We are always in His presence and He sees and hears EVERYTHING we do.

Let's not confine God to the church building. Let's have an encounter with the God of all creation every day of the week. Let's invite Him to participate with us in everything we do!

Let's pray.

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