

ACTS
Stephen, The Messenger
Acts 7:1-53

This morning I would like to pose a hypothetical situation. Let's just suppose you were called before the United States executive, legislative and judicial branches of government to defend your case for Communism in America. As you stood before the President, the Congress and the Supreme Court, your goal was to propose the overthrow of the American law system and the American way of life. What kind of a reaction would you get from the men in our government? They, of course, would be angry and probably would desire to put you away in some institution. Well, something just about this radical happened when Stephen was preaching Christ in Jerusalem. All of the Jewish religious, political, economic and social life revolved around the worship of the Temple. The Temple in the Jewish mind was central to everything. Stephen was preaching Christ and undoubtedly told the Jews that Messiah, Jesus Christ, had come and He was the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law, especially the ceremonial aspects. Stephen taught that the Temple was a type of Christ and that Christ and His church made up the true, spiritual temple of God. Therefore, the physical, literal Temple is no longer needed. In one sense, Stephen was advocating radical changes in the whole Jewish way of life because the Messiah had come.

The Jewish leaders could not cope with the skilled preaching and teaching of Stephen, so they found several false witnesses, paid them some money, and they claimed they heard Stephen “speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God“ (Acts 6:11). These leaders perverted what Stephen was saying. He was suggesting radical changes in the Establishment in Jerusalem because of Messiah but he was not speaking blasphemy against Moses or God. What he was preaching was Christ, the fulfiller of the Mosaic Law and the perfect type of the Old Testament Temple.

Stephen was dragged off to face the Sanhedrin, the Jewish political and religious Establishment. He was charged with teaching the destruction of the Temple and the changing of the customs of Moses (Acts 6:14). These charges were partly true and partly false because Stephen was giving a spiritual interpretation and the Sanhedrin a literal interpretation of the apparent facts.

Stephen, in Acts 7:1-50, gives his defense to the charges brought against him. This is the longest recorded sermon in the Book of Acts. This sermon is not tedious or an irrelevant tirade, but it is direct, to the point and piercing. We shall see that Stephen preached Christ without compromise. He was not a man who gave an uncertain sound in his message. He was not a man pleaser and proclaimed the truth, even if it meant his own death. Stephen gives his defense by giving a history of Israel. We see that this young man was a student of the Bible and he used the Bible to silence his opponents. He seeks to show three major points in Israel's history: (1) The presence of God is not restricted to anyone land or any material building such as the Temple; (2) God dealt with Israel before there ever was a Temple and the Temple site is no more sacred than Ur of the Chaldees, the wilderness of Sinai, the land of Median or Egypt if God revealed Himself to His people in these places, and (3) Israel has a history of rejecting its leaders and it is very obvious in their rejecting of Messiah, Jesus Christ the Lord.

This sermon begins with Stephen on trial before the Sanhedrin and ends up with the Sanhedrin on trial before Stephen. The prisoner becomes the prosecutor. Someone has said that Stephen's sermon should be entitled, “The Prisoner Who Charged The Judge and Jury with Murder.”

CONSTANT CHANGES IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY Acts 7:1-8

God At Work Outside the Land of Israel (Acts 7:1-5):

(1) “And the high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’” -- Caiphas, the high priest, asked concerning the charges against Stephen and puts this question in such a way that a “yes” or “no” answer will incriminate him. If he says, “yes“, he is obviously guilty. If he says “no“, he is guilty of lying. It appears that they have Stephen hanging.

(2) “And he said, 'Hear me, brethren and fathers!'" -- Notice the respect young Stephen has for his elders, for he calls them “brethren” and “fathers.” Notice that Stephen, full of wisdom, does not get boxed in and ignores the question all together. Instead he begins by giving the history of Israel.

(3) “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, AND SAID TO HIM, 'DEPART FROM YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.'" -- Stephen sought to get their respect, confidence and attention by going back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. God revealed Himself to Abraham before there was a Mosaic Law or a Temple. The Jews had magnified the Temple above the revelation of God to their father Abraham.

It was the “God of glory” who appeared to Abraham, who was nothing but an idol worshipper in Ur of Chaldees. Notice Stephen begins Israel's history with God revealing Himself to Abraham. Abraham is not pictured as someone hungering for and seeking after God. No, Abraham was blind, not seeking God, spiritually dead and walking according to the course of this world but God took the initiative to save Abraham and Abraham obeyed his heavenly calling. Stephen begins everything with the “God of glory” for Abraham's salvation and Israel's beginnings were a work of God initiated by God.

It is interesting to note that this chapter begins with a reference to the “God of glory” and ends with Stephen's death where he sees the “glory of God” (Acts 7:55). The only way to see the glory of God is to know the God of glory as did Stephen.

(4) “Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, God removed him from this country in which you are now living. And he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground; and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS OFFSPRING AFTER HIM.” -- Abraham experienced all kinds of changes in God's dealings with him before there was a Temple. God dwelt in no particular place in the days of Abraham but He dwelt where Abraham resided. Abraham was on the move, he had no place to call home on this earth. Yet, he was moving on towards that Heavenly City whose builder and maker is God.

The people of God are always to be subject to constant change as was Abraham. They are always on the move, pilgrims and strangers on this earth, looking forward to the New Jerusalem, their heavenly home. God's people must have no permanent earthly roots, be ready to pull up their tent stakes as did Abraham, and be on the march for Christ in this world, moving towards the Heavenly City whose builder and maker is God.

God At Work Inside the Land (7.6-8):

(1) “But God spoke to this effect, 'that HIS OFFSPRING WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS, AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY SHALL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.'" -- God was with His people when they were in bondage for 400 years in Egypt and they returned to the land of Canaan as God said it would happen. God was with His people in Egypt long before there was a Temple.

(2) “And 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.” -- Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin that God was with Isaac and Jacob and the patriarchs long before there was a Temple. God always dwells with His people.

Jesus, where'er Thy people meet,
There they behold Thy mercy-seat;
Where'er they seek Thee, Thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.

CONSTANT REJECTION OF ISRAEL'S LEADERS Acts 7:9-44

Rejection of Joseph (7:9-19)

(1) "And the patriarchs BECAME JEALOUS OF JOSEPH AND SOLD HIM INTO EGYPT. And yet GOD WAS WITH HIM, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and GRANTED HIM FAVOR and wisdom IN THE SIGHT OF PHARAOH. KING OF EGYPT; AND HE MADE HIM GOVERNOR OVER EGYPT AND ALL HIS HOUSEHOLD." -- Even the twelve patriarchs, the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. motivated by envy and hatred. rebelled against God by sending Joseph into slavery in Egypt. But God was with Joseph because he was a true believer and God went into Egypt with him. God dwells where His people dwell. Yet, even in the earliest stages in Israel's history there was disobedience to God.

(2) "NOW A FAMINE CAME OVER ALL EGYPT AND CANAAN. and great affliction with it; and our fathers could find no food. But WHEN JACOB HEARD THAT THERE WAS GRAIN IN EGYPT, he sent our fathers there the first time. And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob WENT DOWN TO EGYPT AND there PASSED AWAY, he and our fathers. And from there they removed to Shechem. and laid in a tomb which Abraham purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechen. But as the time of promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race, and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive." -- Stephen undoubtedly picked Joseph in his sermon to speak about because he is such a remarkable type of Christ. Joseph was rejected at first by his brethren, but the day came when they bowed before him and recognized his authority. Christ was rejected by His Jewish brethren but a future day is coming when Israel will bow before Christ at the second advent. Joseph and the people of God went through constant change; yet God was with them and honored them.

If Israel experienced constant change, it is not any great loss to the Sanhedrin to have the Temple removed for a higher kind of worship of Jehovah through the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Rejection of Moses (7:20-43)

(1) First Forty Years (20-29):

"And it was at this time that Moses was born and he was lovely in the sight of God; and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. And after he had been exposed, Pharaoh's daughter took him away, and nurtured him as her own son. And Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds." -- God in His providence was preparing Moses to deliver His people out of Egypt. Moses was one of the great men of ancient history. He was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter and stood in line to be Pharaoh since succession in Egypt was passed through the female. Moses was brought up in the wisdom of the Egyptians. The Egyptians were masters in mathematics, chemistry, engineering, philosophy, architecture and astronomy. The Egyptians had a highly developed culture and Moses stood in line to rule over it all. Moses had everything he wanted. - wealth, power, prestige, pleasure, knowledge and women - and yet he traded it all to be obedient to God to deliver Israel.

"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (Heb. 11:24-26).

“But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. And he supposed that the brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand. And on the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' BUT THE ONE WHO WAS injuring his neighbor pushed him away saying, "WHO MADE YOU RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN yesterday, DO YOU? AND AT THIS REMARK MOSES FLED, AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MEDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.” -- Moses, God's deliverer out of Egypt for Israel, was rejected by Israel. They said, “Who made you ruler and judge over us?” The Sanhedrin and the Jewish nation had said much the same thing about Jesus Christ who came to deliver men from sin, death and hell. They said, “We do not want this man to reign over us. We have no king but Caesar!”

Israel did not want Moses' leadership and apparently Moses was not yet ready to lead the children of Israel. Apparently Moses came to Israel in the arm of the flesh, still operating on worldly wisdom instead of divine wisdom. He killed an Egyptian and had to flee. Moses failed when he did not walk by faith and use spiritual wisdom. Instead of being a deliverer, he became a refugee.

(2) Second Forty Years (30-35):

“And after forty years had passed, . . .” -- God sent Moses on the backside of the desert for forty years. Why? God had to teach Moses His ways, for all the learning of the world could not equip him to lead God's people. Forty years is a long time but it was necessary if Moses was to be effective. As far as we know, God made no appearance to Moses for forty years. This man was learning patience in order to deal with the stiff necked Israel in their wanderings. God sent Moses to the wilderness to get a B.D. in faith and spiritual understanding; that is a "Backside of the Desert" degree to prepare him to be a deliverer.

It took forty years to train Moses to be God's leader and forty years to teach the people to accept Moses as their leader.

“AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF .MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. And when Moses saw it, he began to marvel at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' And Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT, AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO DELIVER THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.' This Moses who they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.” -- Moses was rejected by Israel and sent a second time to deliver that nation. Moses when he walked by sight, using worldly and human reasoning, failed, but after forty years and being faithful to God's command, God empowered him and taught him that his strength was God, not the arm of the flesh, and his weapons were spiritual not carnal.

(3) Third Forty Years (36-43):

“This man, led then out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red .Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.” -- It was not God's desire for Israel to wander in the wilderness for forty years but they refused to believe God and accept Moses' leadership so they spun their wheels for forty long years.

“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD SHALL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN. ’” -- Stephen has been preaching a long time to get to this one point. He quotes from Deuteronomy 18:15 where Moses prophesied that God would sometime in the future raise up a

prophet like Moses, except he would be greater than Moses. “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him” (Deut.18:15). This, of course, is none other than Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Stephen here defends the charge that he is blaspheming against Moses. Moses confirmed what Stephen was preaching. Moses was not against Stephen but for him. Therefore, Moses is against the Jews who reject his prophecy of the Messiah.

Stephen's point is that the Jews in Moses' day thought little of Moses' leadership and Moses' disciples in Stephen's day were also opposing Moses and his teachings by rejecting Messiah.

“This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him in Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. And our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.” -- Israel in the wilderness would not follow Moses because of their unbelief and rebellious spirit. They turned their hearts back to Egypt and imagined that they wanted to be back there.

Christians, do we long to go back into the world after we have been delivered out of it by the Lord? We say we deplore certain sins of the world and the flesh but then we secretly imagine ourselves back in these sins, and our sin natures love it all. Where is our heart?

“SAYING TO AARON, ‘MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT -- WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.’ And at that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.” -- Even in the wilderness, after the children of Israel had been miraculously delivered from Egypt, passed through the Red Sea, seen supernatural provisions, they refused to believe God and were rebellious. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God, the people made an idol, believing that this golden calf was an aid to worship. The invisible presence of God was not enough for them; they craved for something they could see.

How many Christians today must see and feel things before they will believe God? The life of faith is explicit trust in the invisible, sovereign God.

“But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP THEM. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.’” -- Israel's history of rebellion and idolatry began in the wilderness and continued for hundreds of years, becoming progressively worse until in the worship of the planetary divinities Moloch and Rompha. For their idolatry, God punishes them and they went into captivity for 70 years into Babylon, the center of idolatry. When Israel came out, they had their fill of idolatry and learned their lesson that the one, true, invisible God alone is to be worshipped.

This verse says that because of Israel's idolatry, God “turned away and delivered them up” to more corruption. Because they would not judge their sin of rebellion and idolatry, God gave them up and drove them into captivity. Beloved, are we secret idolaters? Do we worship fame, money, prestige, glory, materialism, someone or something? Anything we put before God is idolatry. Are we in spiritual captivity because we refuse to give God all and everything in our lives?

CONSTANT PRESENCE OF GOD FOR ISRAEL’S PEOPLE Acts 7:44-50:

The Tabernacle (7:44, 45): “Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David.” -- God gave Moses the exact plan for the Tabernacle which was to house God in the wilderness and in the land. The Tabernacle was God's idea but the Tabernacle was not permanent,

for it too passed away when King David decided to build a temple for God. All tents and buildings are temporary and transitory because God is bigger than these structures. God dwells with His people.

The Temple (7:46, 47): “And David found favor in God's sight and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.” -- The building of the Temple was first King David's idea and completed by Solomon. Apparently, the Temple originally was not in God's revealed will but was a royal whim tolerated and permitted by God because He loved King David. Even Solomon conceded that God could not be contained in any building made with human hands. “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!” (I Kings 8:27). God is bigger than buildings and the Temple was temporary and transitory.

The True House of God (7:48-50): “However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE AND EARTH IS THE FOOT-STOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME? says the Lord; OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE? WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?’” -- All buildings whether designed by God or man to house God were not permanent, and this quote from Isaiah 66:1 shows that Isaiah the prophet agrees with what Stephen was teaching. God's house is the universe, and He dwells with His people. Stephen here answers the charge of blasphemy against God. God never intended to give the idea that He dwelt in a Tabernacle or a Temple alone. God cannot be contained in a building. The sovereign, omnipotent, invisible God has made the world and all that is in it, including the Temple. Therefore, He has the right to build and destroy the Temple if He wishes. God's plan was that the Temple would be destroyed since Christ is the fulfillment of all the Temple types.

CONSTANT RESISTANCE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT BY ISRAEL Acts 7:51-53

Guilty of Rebellion (7:51): “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in hearts and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.” -- Now Stephen brings his sermon to a close by preaching to the consciences of his hearers. These Jews by rejection of Messiah were in rebellion and were resisting the drawings of the Holy Spirit. These Jews to whom Stephen was preaching were just as rebellious as the Jews in Moses' day. Moses called the children of Israel stiff-necked and the Jews of Stephen's day were also stiff-necked. They were proud, stubborn and refused to receive the yoke of God. These Jews were circumcised physically but in their hearts and ears, they were not circumcised. Their religion was only outward but the foreskin of their hearts had never been removed. They refused to have a humble, repentant, and new heart towards God's Son, Jesus Christ, the Messiah. They resisted the Holy Spirit who gave them the general call to salvation through Christ. They had been given the message of Christ by Christ Himself, by the Apostles and now by Stephen. The Holy Spirit was striving with them, bringing them under conviction but they resisted Him. Their rebellion and refusal to bend their wills to Christ showed they were as guilty as their ancestors.

Guilty of Murder (7:52): “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; . . .” -- Stephen accused the Jews as a nation of the murder of many of the prophets and the present generation of Jews of the murder of the Messiah Himself. Stephen was a brave man, and the only reason he could speak this way was that he was a man full of grace, full of faith, full of wisdom and full of the Holy Spirit. God gave him supernatural boldness through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Guilty of Breaking the Law (7:53): “You who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.” -- These Jews claimed to be ardent supporters of the Mosaic Law but they themselves broke the Law, for the Law says, “Thou shalt not kill (murder).” The very Law they claimed to believe in declared them guilty before a holy God.

What a Christian this Stephen was! What a powerful saint! What a man of conviction! He was true to his Christ, and we shall see in another message that God was true to Stephen even in martyrdom.

CONCLUSION

Is there someone who has an attitude like the children of Israel? Perhaps you have heard the gospel of Christ over and over; you know the message of salvation by heart; you realize that you must bow your will to Christ, but you keep resisting the wooing of the Holy Spirit. Are you stiff-necked, proud and stubborn? Have you shut your heart to Christ and plugged your ears to the truth? You are resisting the general call of God whereby He offers you salvation in Christ. If you continue in your rebellion and resistance to God, you become that much more hardened to Christ. If you die without Christ, you shall perish in your sins forever and go into the outer darkness of hell.

I beg you to stop resisting the wooings of the Holy Spirit on your life. Stop fighting; yield your will to Christ. Ask God to grant you grace to believe and trust your soul to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit may not strive with you forever. Your whole eternal destiny is at stake. Why resist? Yield to Christ. The Bible says, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (Psa. 110:3). Is this that day? May God grant you efficacious grace in your heart to bring you to faith in Christ.