

# Bible Study July 21, 2021

## ACTS 7 (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

### Stephen's Address before the Sanhedrin (1-53).

Stephen's defense is the longest discourse in Acts. It is a selective recital of OT history, including sections on Abraham (vv. 2–8), Joseph (vv. 9–16), Moses (vv. 17–34), and Israel's apostasy (abandoned the faith) (vv. 35–50). It was cut short when Stephen applied his history lesson to Israel's present rejection of the Messiah (vv. 51–53). Stephen responded to the charges by turning them on his accusers: they were the ones who were really disobeying God because they rejected his appointed leaders.

### The Martyrdom of Stephen (54-60).

Stephen's testimony was cut short as the enraged Sanhedrin turned on him (7:54). Their anger intensified as he shared his vision of the exalted Christ (7:55–57). They stoned him (7:58), and he died praying for them (7:59–8:1a). His martyrdom triggered a general persecution against the church.

-ESV Study Bible

### Stephen's Speech

**<sup>1</sup> And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" <sup>2</sup> And 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, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'***

This high priest was probably Caiaphas, the same man who had earlier questioned and condemned Jesus (John 18:24).

***<sup>4</sup> Then 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. <sup>5</sup> Yet 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. <sup>6</sup> And 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. <sup>7</sup> 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' <sup>8</sup> 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.***

Circumcision was a sign of the promise, or covenant, God made with Abraham and the entire nation of Israel (Genesis 17:9-13). Because Stephen's speech summarized Israel's history, he told how this

covenant had fared throughout that time. Stephen pointed out that God had always kept his side of the promise, but the people of Israel had failed again and again to uphold their end. Although the Jews in Stephen's day still circumcised their baby boys as a sign of their commitment to God, their hearts were actually far from God. Their lack of faith and lack of obedience showed that they had failed to keep their part of the covenant.

The Jewish rite of circumcision, like Israel's regular sacrifices and annual feasts, was intended to be a very meaningful event. As with all religious rituals, circumcision was designed to serve as an outer symbol of an inner reality. Those who participated thoughtfully would be reminded of profound spiritual truths. But we know from our own experiences of repeating the church creeds, saying the Lord's Prayer, or celebrating ordinances like baptism and the Lord's Supper that we can find ourselves sometimes merely going through the motions. We are often guilty of participating passively and mindlessly in religious exercises. Make it your goal to give God your full attention (body, soul, and spirit) the next time you pray, take Communion, or take part in a church ceremony.

**<sup>9</sup> “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him  
<sup>10</sup> and 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.  
<sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, <sup>16</sup> and 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.**

**<sup>17</sup> “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt <sup>18</sup> until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph.**

Stephen's review 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 faced with a confusing array of circumstances, remember these truths: (1) God is in control—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 things right, punishing the wicked and rewarding the faithful; and (4) God wants to use you (like Joseph, Moses, and Stephen) to make a difference in the world.

**<sup>19</sup> He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. <sup>20</sup> 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, <sup>21</sup> and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.**

**<sup>23</sup> “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> 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?’<sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’<sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’<sup>29</sup> At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.**

**<sup>30</sup> “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. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> ‘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. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I 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.’**

**<sup>35</sup> “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. <sup>36</sup> This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. <sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’**

The Jews originally thought this Prophet was Joshua alone. But Moses was also prophesying about the coming Messiah (Deuteronomy 18:15). Peter quoted this verse in reference to the Messiah (Acts 3:22).

**<sup>38</sup> This 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.**

Stephen used the word *ekklēsia* (translated “assembly”) to describe the people of God in the wilderness. This word was also being used by the first-century Christians to describe their own community or assembly. Stephen’s point was that the giving of the law through Moses to the Jews was the sign of the covenant. By obedience, then, they would continue to be God’s covenant people. But because they disobeyed (7:39), they broke the covenant and forfeited their right to be the chosen people.

Galatians 3:19 and Hebrews 2:2 seem to indicate that God had given the law to Moses through angels. Exodus 31:18 says that God wrote the Ten Commandments himself (“written by the finger of God”). God likely used angelic messengers as mediators to deliver his law to Moses.

**<sup>39</sup> Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, <sup>40</sup> saying 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.’ <sup>41</sup> And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. <sup>42</sup> But 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?**

**<sup>43</sup> You 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.'***

Now Stephen gave more details of the idolatry referred to in 7:40. These were idols worshiped by the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 32:4). Molech was the god associated with child sacrifice, and Rephan was an Egyptian god. Amos also names Assyrian deities worshiped by Israel (Amos 5:25-27).

***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. 45 Our 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. 47 But 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?  
50 Did not my hand make all these things?'***

Stephen had been accused of speaking against the Temple (6:13). Although he recognized the importance of the Temple, he knew it was not more important than God. God is not limited; he doesn't live only in a house of worship, but in hearts of faith that are open to receive him (Isaiah 66:1-2). Solomon knew this when he prayed at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 6:18). God wants to live in us. We need not wait to pray or worship just once a week in church. God's Spirit resides in the hearts of all believers, and we can worship him wherever we are.

***51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 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, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."***

Stephen launched into a long speech about Israel's relationship with God. From Old Testament history he showed that the Jews had constantly rejected God's message and his prophets and that this council had rejected the Messiah, God's Son. He made three main points: (1) Israel's history is the history of 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 at the hands of the religious leaders was just one more example of Israel's rebellion against and rejection of God.

Stephen didn't really defend himself. Instead, he took the offensive, seizing the opportunity to summarize the history of Israel and their rejection of God's ways over the centuries. 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 Jesus, we don't need to be on the defensive; we can simply share our faith.

Indeed, many prophets were persecuted or killed, including Uriah (Jeremiah 26:20-23), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:1-6), Isaiah (tradition says he was killed by King Manasseh; see 2 Kings 21:16), Amos

(Amos 7:10-13), and Zechariah (not the author of the Bible book but the son of Jehoiada the priest; see 2 Chronicles 24:20-22). Jesus also told a parable about how the Jews had constantly rejected God's messages and persecuted his messengers (Luke 20:9-19). The "Righteous One" is a reference to the Messiah.

### ***The Stoning of Stephen***

***<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then 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.***

Stephen saw the glory of God and Jesus the Messiah standing at God's right hand. Stephen's words are similar to the words Jesus spoke before the high council (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Stephen's vision supported Jesus' claim and angered the Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. They would not tolerate Stephen's words, so they dragged him out and killed him. Even if people do not kill us for witnessing about Christ, they may let us know they don't want to hear our message and try to silence us. Keep honoring God in your conduct and words. Though many may turn against you and against the truth, some—perhaps even years later—will turn to Jesus and follow him because of your witness. Remember, Stephen's death made a profound impact on Paul, who later became the world's greatest missionary.

Saul is also called Paul (see 13:9)—the great missionary who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. Saul was his Hebrew name; Paul, his Greek name, was used as he began his ministry to the Gentiles. At this point, when Luke introduces him, Paul was going everywhere persecuting Jesus' followers. This is a great contrast to the Paul about whom Luke wrote for most of the rest of the book of Acts, describing him as a devoted follower of Christ and a gifted preacher of the Good News. Paul was uniquely qualified to talk to the Jews about Jesus because he had once persecuted those who believed in him and understood how the opposition felt. God can reach and change anyone, even the most unlikely of people.

***<sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."***

The penalty for blasphemy, speaking irreverently about God, was death by stoning (Leviticus 24:14). The religious leaders, who were furious, had Stephen stoned without a trial. Because these men were not seeking the truth and only wanted support for their own views, they did not understand that Stephen's words were true.

***<sup>60</sup> And 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.***

As Stephen died, he spoke words very similar to Jesus' words on the cross (Luke 23:34). Many believers in the early church were persecuted for telling others the Good News of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Sometimes, as in the case of Stephen, they were even put to death. Jesus had promised his followers that living for him would lead to trouble (Luke 21:12-19). This is still true. Nothing in the Bible promises a life free from trouble. If we boldly live out our faith, the light of our

lives will expose the sinfulness of others. Our words of truth will pierce their souls. Some will be convicted and yield to the leading of the Spirit. Others will become angry and hardened in their hatred of the truth. As Jesus said, "They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the one who sent me" (John 15:21). We shouldn't be surprised or abandon our faith when we are persecuted. Instead we should let persecution fill us with the hope and promise of Jesus' return.