

Lesson 10: Acts 6:8-7:60 Stephen's Speech

Introduction

God chose Stephen as a leader for the Greek-speaking Jews among the newly born Church of Jerusalem. Stephen was a man full of grace and power, wisdom and faith and most importantly full of the Holy Spirit. Stephen participated in the distribution of funds to widows. Like the Apostles, he performed great wonders and signs among the people, and he boldly proclaimed the Good News of salvation through Jesus the Messiah.

Stephen's signs of power may have won him favor in the Greek-speaking community. But his fruitful proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior won him enemies; enemies who secretly spread about false charges of blasphemy to stir up opposition against him. This tactic led to Stephen's arrest and ultimately his death.

Luke reported to us what happened to Stephen. But not only what happened. He has also recorded for us Stephen's speech at his trial. And it is the longest recorded speech in the book of Acts; twice as long as the part of Peter's speech at Pentecost that Luke gave us in chapter two, and twice as long as Paul's defense before King Agrippa. Why did Luke choose to give us all of Stephen's defense?

It is easy to skim through the speech as an Old Testament history refresher. But as helpful as that might be for us, the members of the Sanhedrin did not need refreshing on the Old Testament from Stephen. Stephen was making a point. And Luke found that point valuable enough to be retold in full.

The best place to start with the question, "Why is this speech here?", is with the context of the trial. Charges have been leveled against Stephen. The high priest asks in 7:1, "Are these things so?" "What about the charges, Stephen? Are they true? What do you have to say for yourself?" That question from high priest is our question, too. Is Stephen going to defend himself against the charges?

Let's remind ourselves what those charges were. Acts 6:13-14,

"This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

The general accusation has been one of blasphemy. The specific accusations have to do with the Temple and the Law of Moses. They say that Stephen claims Jesus will destroy the Temple and Jesus will alter the customs handed down in the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. The Temple in Jerusalem and the Law of Moses are crucial components, not only of Jewish religion, but of Jewish identity.

Focusing on those ideas of Temple and Law, we have moved past the central theme of the first major section of Acts. Peter's speeches have all focused on Jesus as the crucified and glorified Messiah. He is the son of God. Salvation is found in no other name.

If we accept Peter's witness of Jesus as the Messiah to be true, what implications does that truth have on the Temple as central to Jewish worship, and on the Law of Moses as central to ritual and moral obedience? We have seen the witness to Jesus clash up against the Jewish establishment. We are now taking another step, asking, "What are the theological implications to orthodox Jewish religion if Jesus is the Messiah?" What does that change? What does that affect?

That's the importance of Stephen's defense. What happens to traditional religion when Jesus is recognized as central?

Stephen is not going to defend himself against the charges. Stephen recognizes that a more fundamental question must be addressed before we can address the effect of the Gospel on traditional worship and traditional customs. Stephen is going to provide a defense of his position but he's going to do it by going on offense against his accusers.

The question is not, “Has Jesus taught an abolishment of the Temple and the Law?” but rather, “Why have you not yielded in your mind and heart to Jesus, who is God’s Messiah?”

Who is Jesus Christ and what is your response to him? That’s what we should be talking about. If you reject Jesus Christ, you will reject the implications of the Gospel on traditional Judaism. If you accept Jesus Christ, then we can delve into questions about the Temple and the Law. Is Jesus God’s appointed leader? And have you yielded to him as God’s appointed leader?

In retelling Old Testament history, Stephen shows that God has chosen Israel by grace and promised salvation to Israel. God accomplishes that salvation through leaders he has chosen and appointed to the task. Israel has regularly repudiated God’s chosen leaders, leading to exile. And yet, salvation has still been obtained by grace and is offered to all who would yield to the salvation provided. Abraham, Joseph, and Moses all foreshadow Jesus.

We start with Abraham, who Stephen uses to provide context for God’s promise of salvation. This is Acts 7:2-8.

Abraham (7:2-8)

² And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’ ⁴ Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, *God* had him move to this country in which you are now living. ⁵ But 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 DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. ⁶ But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. ⁷ ‘AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,’ said God, ‘AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.’ ⁸ 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.”

At first glance this appears to be a retelling of common history. But Abraham’s story spans 14 chapters in Genesis. Stephen condenses that to one paragraph. He chooses which parts to emphasize. And he ends up covering a lot of ground in a very short amount of text. Notice these seven points Stephen has just established.

- (1) First, the God of glory chose Abraham, appearing to him and giving him a commission.
- (2) Second, Abraham obeyed. God said, “Leave.” Abraham left.
- (3) Third, God made a promise of grace, a promise of land, and descendants.
- (4) Fourth, God foretold a period of exile.
- (5) Fifth, God foretold deliverance from exile.
- (6) Sixth, after exile Israelites would serve God in the promised land. To serve in this sense includes the idea of worship.
- (7) Seventh, God made a covenant with Abraham. This covenant was made in addition to the promise and included stipulations. The primary, symbolic stipulation of circumcision is the one mentioned here.

We can summarize these points into three themes the reoccur through Stephen’s speech: (1) the theme of God-appointed leadership, (2) the theme of promised deliverance from exile, (3) and the theme of covenant obedience, or covenant disobedience as we will see in the next two examples.

Next, Stephen passes over Isaac and Jacob quickly to get to Joseph, his second example of God appointed leadership. The covenant people comes to be through Abraham. The covenant people will be saved through Joseph. This is Acts 7:9-16.

Joseph (7:9-16)

⁹ “The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction *with it*, and our fathers could find no food.¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers *there* the first time.¹³ On the second *visit* Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh.¹⁴ Then Joseph sent *word* and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons *in all*.¹⁵ And Jacob went down to Egypt and *there* he and our fathers died.¹⁶ *From there* they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

Stephen’s first point about Joseph is that his brothers sold him into Egypt out of jealousy. Stephen wants to show us this. Not only has God appointed leaders for the salvation of Israel. Israel has repeatedly rejected the leaders appointed for their salvation.

We know the story of Joseph’s covenant obedience. We remember what he said to Potiphar’s wife, “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” Now, everybody there knows that Joseph is a covenant keeper. God’s hand remains with Joseph. And at each point he is granted favor and wisdom. God develops him into the leader he needs to be for the deliverance of Israel.

Jacob’s move to Egypt with his whole family sets the stage for a long exile. Stephen affirms the ongoing connection to the Promised Land by mentioning the burial of Jacob and Joseph in Shechem.

Abraham and Joseph have set us up for Stephen’s primary example of Moses, another leader appointed by God for the deliverance of Israel, and yet, rejected by Israel. The rejection of Moses is significant because it is also a rejection of the Law God delivered through Moses.

In Stephen’s summary, Moses is chosen by God and rejected by Israel twice. We start with the first choosing of Moses in 17-22.

Moses (7:17-43)

Chosen by God (17-22)

¹⁷ “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,¹⁸ until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.²² Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.”

Stephen returns to the promise to Abraham. God promised Abraham descendants and he promised Abraham that those descendants would live in the promised land. God also foretold the exile in Egypt and deliverance from exile. Stephen established all of this when he mentioned Abraham. The time for fulfillment is now under Moses.

Through this whole example, the language referring to Moses foreshadows the salvation that comes through Jesus. What do you think the language, “as the time of promise approaches” would mean to a first-century Jew if they did not know you were talking about Moses? “As the time of promise approaches...?” What time of promise did they believe was approaching? They would hear that language as a reference to the Messiah. He is the promised one they were looking for in their generation.

As the time of promise approached back then, the Israelites experience oppression by a king who knew nothing about Joseph. That is another suggestive choice of words to quote from Exodus.

Pharaoh, “knew nothing of Joseph” and so the people of God were oppressed. Oppression follows a lack of knowledge about God’s appointed leader.

In light of that oppression God provides a new leader. Moses is described as “lovely in the sight of God” and as “educated in all the learning of the Egyptians”. He is “a man of power in words and deeds.” We can imagine Jesus described as “lovely in God’s sight...a man of power in words and deeds.” And Moses foreshadows Jesus.

And in the life of Moses, God’s sovereignty is clear. God chose Moses. God arranged for Moses to gain exposure to the high court of Egypt while somehow still being nurtured by his own mother. So he knows Egypt, he knows Israel. Moses is God’s appointed leader for the salvation of his people. But he will be rejected, verses 23-29.

Rejected by Israel (23-29)

²³ “But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. ²⁴ And when he saw one of *them* being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them **deliverance** through him, but they did not understand. ²⁶ 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?’ ²⁷ But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘**WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US?**’ ²⁸ ‘YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?’ ²⁹ At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

Stephen does not wholly justify Moses in striking down the Egyptian. He says that Moses’ idea to visit his brethren “entered his mind”, not that God told him to visit to brethren. He also says that Moses “supposed his brethren understood that God was granting deliverance through him.” Stephen does not say that this was God’s plan for Moses to now deliver Israel. In the Exodus narrative, I believe we are to assume that Moses acted rashly, not outside of God’s calling for him, but outside of God’s timing.

Stephen’s language allows for us to understand fault in Moses, but for the purpose of his argument to the Sanhedrin, he does not focus on Moses’ immaturity in his initial attempt to deliver Israel, just like he didn’t focus on Joseph’s immaturity in telling his brothers about his dreams. Instead, Stephen focuses on another point that clearly comes out in the original text. He focuses on the Israelites’ rejection of Moses by recalling the quote, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” That’s what they are asking. Well, God. God has made him ruler and judge.

But God was not done with his sovereign preparation of Moses at this point. Moses needed to learn how to shepherd Israel, how to survive in the wilderness and above all, how to be humble. Stephen skips over those forty years of training to the point where God is ready to affirm his choice of Moses by calling him and giving him the commission to deliver Israel from Egypt. This is Acts 7:30-37.

Called by God (30-37)

³⁰ “After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look *more* closely, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² ‘I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. ³³ BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, ‘TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. ³⁴ ‘I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.’ ³⁵ This Moses whom 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. ³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.’

The God of glory does not live in the land of Israel. He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. He later appeared to Moses at Mt. Sinai in the Midian wilderness. If you could travel to that spot today you would not find anything particularly special about it. It's scrub land. It's rocky. The ground is holy at that moment because God is there. Stephen's examples of God appearing to Abraham and Moses outside of Israel support the point he is getting ready to make in a minute, that God is not confined to a Temple made by men. God's holiness is wherever God is. And God is everywhere.

In calling Moses, God had decided that it was now time to fulfill his covenant promise to deliver Israel. And he determined that Moses would be the leader he would use to accomplish that purpose. Stephen repeats the earlier questioning of Moses' authority. He says now, "This Moses whom 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."

Stephen has intended for us to see both Joseph and Moses as forerunners of Jesus. Joseph was appointed by God. Rejected by his family. And still used to deliver Israel. Moses was appointed by God. Rejected by the Israelites. And still used to deliver Israel. Jesus was appointed by God. Rejected by the Israelites. And still used to deliver Israel. You can hear the words that those Israelites put into the mouth of Sanhedrin, "Who made you (Jesus) a ruler and a judge?" Stephen's answer, "God did."

The comparison to Jesus has been implied. It's there but it's not stated directly. Stephen gives us a clear hint that he means us to be thinking about Jesus when he quotes Deuteronomy 18:15 saying, "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.'" That quote does not support any point that Stephen has yet made in the story. Why is he now talking about the prophecy of a prophet? It only makes sense if we recognize Stephen as saying, "This is the Moses who told us to expect a prophet of a New Covenant who would one day come to save us from our sin. Jesus. Moses was talking about Jesus." That's what Stephen's saying here. Stephen is not being that direct. But he does not need to be. In the context of early Jewish witness for Christ, everyone was looking for the Prophet and the Christians were saying Jesus is the Prophet. He is the one Moses talked about. Peter made that point. He quoted the same Deuteronomy passage back in Acts 3:22 during his speech about Jesus after the healing of the lame man.

Moses foreshadows Jesus who is to come as the mediator of a New Covenant. Moses was the mediator-prophet of the Old Covenant. One like him is going to be the mediator of the New Covenant. The people of Israel, questioning, "Who made you ruler and judge?" foreshadow the response of the Sanhedrin to Jesus. Stephen emphasizes the repudiation of Moses and the law delivered by Moses in verses 38-43.

Repudiated by Israel (38-43)

³⁸ "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and *who was* with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. ³⁹ Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰ SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' ⁴¹ At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² 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? ⁴³ 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

Not only was Moses the leader appointed by God. God delivered directly to him the words of the Old Covenant that were passed on to Israel. Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision when he spoke of Abraham. Now he comes back to the idea of Law. God's deliverance is established by a promise. Along with his promise, God also communicates expectations for his people through

Covenant. The promise is the basis for Covenant relationship. It is received by grace through faith. Having been accepted through grace, the stipulations of Covenant show the people how to live in relationship with God.

Moses received these Covenant stipulations and he communicated them to Israel. Israel rejected both Moses and the teaching God delivered through Moses. Again, this is how Stephen describes it.

³⁹ Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰ SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' ⁴¹ At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

God's word provides definition for who God is. You know, make no idols. I don't want you to consider me as an idol. Worship no other gods before me. I am not one of many. I am The One. So, to receive God by faith means receiving God according to the way God has defined himself, not according to how we would define him. We worship God according to who he says he is. When we turn away from that definition, when we make God, when we make an idol with our own hands, with our own minds, we turn to false worship, whether we call the object of our worship God or not. If we've made that image, then it is not true worship of the true God. The people of Israel, along with their leaders, including Aaron, turned to false worship while Moses was still up on Mt. Sinai. He is up there, getting the Tabernacle pattern.

Paul in the letter to the Romans makes the connection with our vision of who God is and our behavior. Turning away from God's revelation of himself impacts the human mind and heart, leading to a degradation of our behavior. There is consequence to turning away from God. Paul says it this way in Romans 1:21 and 24.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened...Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

That language of God giving them over to their sin, it's not original with Paul. Stephen uses that language right here long before Paul did. He says,

⁴² But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; - you see, that's not God turning away first; they turned away from God and made an image with their own hands, and then 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?' ⁴³ 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

Israel turned away from God. God gave them over to their false worship, turning himself away from them. Stephen connects the turning away at Sinai with an abiding thorn in the flesh of Israel, with idolatry. From the time of deliverance from Egypt to the second exile in Babylon, the Israelites continually struggled with idolatry. And they would do well for a time and then fall right back in, over and over. A remnant would remain faithful to God through Old Testament history, but the majority were more often given over to idolatry than not.

Stephen's reference to Moloch and Rompha points, I believe, to a time later in Israel's history. He is quoting from Amos 5:25-27, who wrote during the time of the Assyrian threat about 800 years after Moses. The temptation to idolatry is displayed at Sinai. The quote of Amos reminds us that it carried through the history of Israel, eventually resulting in Babylonian exile.

Stephen's quote uses the Greek Septuagint translation of Amos. F. F. Bruce explains that the terms used both by the Hebrew Masoretic text, which is not the text that Stephen quoted from, and the

terms used by the Greek translation, the Septuagint, they both indicate the worship of Saturn.¹ Serving the host of heaven here refers to worship of the various gods and goddesses represented by the planets and the stars. No distinction is made by the ancients between the god and planet. They're pretty much one and the same. And in this text both Moloch and Rompha seem to refer to Saturn. And I don't think we're supposed to believe that the people of Israel during the wandering in the desert were worshiping the god of Saturn. This is Stephen conflating the idea that idolatry began in the desert and it was a problem, and so it's as if this worship of the host of heaven started there. It's going to be an on-going problem that God allows. He gives his people over to this problem because of their continual rejection of him.

By bringing his account of history all the way up to the Babylonian exile, Stephen has brought us to two present realities. First, Israel seems to have kicked the idolatry habit after Babylon. Jesus never gets onto the leadership of Israel, to the Sadducees and the Pharisees and all the other people he rebukes for idolatry. He doesn't rebuke them for idolatry. Temple worship and obedience to the Law have become the new idol. This is their way to bring about the coming of Messiah. If only enough of Israel will fully commit to full obedience, the Messiah will come. There is even this idea: if on one Sabbath all of Israel would be obedient for one Sabbath, Messiah would come. So, there's a strong focus on Temple worship and on obedience to the Law to bring about the will of God. Second, we should recognize the first-century perspective that Israel was not out of exile. There is this idea that the Babylonian exile wasn't fully over. The people had returned to the land. The Temple had been restored, but kingship had not. And that final element is crucial. Israel has not been freed from foreign domination. And Israel would not be fully out of exile until Israel was independent, ruled by her own king, the promised Son of David.

Stephen's hearers would have been much more attuned to this theme of exile than we are. I think they would have noticed it from the beginning in Stephen's first words about Abraham. Stephen connected the story to his present audience when he said, "God removed Abraham to this country in which you are now living." He connects the history to them. Then he says, "But God said 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." The Jews of Stephen's day would filter that story of exile through their own experience. They know he is talking about Egypt, but they're going to be thinking Babylon, and they're going to be thinking a present problem. As God delivered from Egypt, God will deliver us. As God brought us back from Babylon, he will free us from bondage in our own land. When Stephen said, "And whatever nation to which they shall be in bondage I myself will judge," that promise? There must have been people in his audience immediately thinking about that promise as the promise to judge Rome who was holding them in bondage. We don't quite get this. We think that Stephen is giving us a history lesson but as soon as he starts talking about Abraham, and the land, and the exile, this present audience is listening closely. The language of exile was present in their minds, and they thought about it according to their current situation and their current hopes.

They were the ones in exile. They did not see it as an exile to sin, but an exile to Rome. Foreign domination. And they were looking for the Messiah, not to set them free from sin. They thought they were doing pretty good with that. They were the righteous ones. But they need freedom from Rome. And this is the rebuke Stephen is setting up with the exile language. Your hope is for Messiah. Messiah has come to end the exile. But you murdered him.

Stephen has established this pattern.

God has provided Israel with a promise, a covenant, and faithful leadership. Israel has repudiated God's leaders and proved unfaithful to the Covenant. In spite of Israel's disobedience, God has fulfilled the promise to save.

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 145.

With that pattern in mind, Stephen considers briefly the charges leveled against him. First, concerning Temple worship. Let's read 44-50.

Temple Worship (7:44-50)

⁴⁴ "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. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ *David* found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. ⁴⁸ However, the Most High does not dwell in *houses* made by *human* hands; as the prophet says: ⁴⁹ 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?' ⁵⁰ 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

Stephen recognizes the special grace God extended to Israel in his provision of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple built by Solomon. That's a special place. It has a special purpose. However, as he has already hinted at by the God of glory appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia and Moses on Mt. Sinai, "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands." He is not limited to a locality.

The New Covenant understanding of Temple does not reject the value of the physical Temple. The New Covenant recognizes the fulfillment of the Temple's purpose now that Jesus Christ has come. It is a shadow of something more real. It is symbolic, and its purpose is fulfilled. This understanding is in line with the Old Testament recognition that the Temple is symbolically God's home, not actually God's home. Stephen makes this point by quoting Isaiah 66:1-2.

The prophet says: ⁴⁹ 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?' ⁵⁰ 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

Stephen could say a lot more about the New Testament understanding of Temple, but he determines to address the heart condition of his opponents, rather than defending a right understanding of Temple. Addressing their heart condition is going to be Stephen's response to the charge that he promotes a change to the Law of Moses. Stephen does not really answer that accusation. He turns the accusation around. This is in verses 51-53, the end of the speech, and this concerns the Law.

Law Obedience Now (7:51-53)

⁵¹ "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵² Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen uses Mosaic language, calling these men stiff-necked and uncircumcised. You can check out Deuteronomy 10:16. He has reminded his hearers of Israel's betrayal of Joseph and rejection of Moses. He adds here the ongoing persecution of the prophets. He has classed these member of the Sanhedrin with the unfaithful shepherds of Israelite history. They are even worse. Whereas those who came before rejected God's servants, they have murdered God's son, the Righteous One. Concerning the charge of changing the Law, Stephen responds by describing his accusers as those, "who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen is not going to address charges about what Jesus said concerning the Temple and the Law until the Sanhedrin addresses the charge against them of murdering the Messiah. The brothers sold Joseph. The Israelites betrayed Moses. You have killed the Messiah. The question, "Who is Jesus?" must be answered before Stephen can address the relationship of the New Covenant to Temple and the Law.

Did Stephen need to speak so directly and so strongly? It is not clear that he spoke more directly or strongly than Peter did. Though his words about the Temple and the Law may have cut an even deeper wound in the twisted identity the Jewish leaders and people had created for themselves. Traditional religions hold on tightly to certain ideas, certain traditions. There are just certain things you do not criticize, like Mary with Roman Catholics or cookies with Moravians. You just don't go there. Some things are sacrosanct. You can't talk about them as though they are theological ideas because people hold on to them so closely. I see a connection with the riot Paul is going to stir up in Ephesus when the people get the point that his Gospel denounces the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. When they get that, then they're just thrown into this riot because it affects the identity of what makes us important. And just as they identified with the temple of Artemis, the people of Jerusalem identified with the Temple of Yahweh. People who have grown up in strongly traditional religions sometimes lose sight of God as the one who gives them their definition. They define themselves instead by their history, and traditions, and rituals, and behaviors. And they come to believe that that's the definition God has given. They don't see that those are man-made traditions. And sometimes they're good traditions, and it's okay that it, in some sense, defines who you are in a secondary sort of way. But not if you grasp hold of it contrary to what God says about you.

Stephen's approach to traditional religion is to step back and begin and again with Jesus. Okay, you guys are holding on to the Temple and holding on to the Law, and we'll get there, but let's step back for a minute. He challenges the human religious attitude that seeks to define God and theology from a human perspective, to make God out of our own hands. Stephen starts with Jesus Christ at the center.

I am not saying that we need to put Jesus and the Gospel at the center and develop our theology from there. That's close but that's not exactly what I'm saying. I am saying we need to recognize that Jesus is the center. We don't put him there. And we to receive our theology from him. We don't create it. And yet, we're going to have to do a lot of human work trying to understand it and trying to put it together. But we've got to hold it a bit loosely. We have to recognize that our theological systems are all going to leave the bounds of Bible at some point. And so, we hold that loosely because our theology is received. The Word is our authority. We do not define God. We don't define Jesus. God defines God. God defines Jesus. We do not define Temple worship. He does. We do not define morality. He does. We do not define the Covenant expectations. He does. We don't define theology. He does.

We do not put him in the center and then figure out our theology from there. We recognize he is in the center and work to understand the theology we receive from him through his Word.

This is the problem Stephen faces. He cannot debate the right worship of the Temple and the right observance of Mosaic Law, while his traditionally religious opponents interpret the Bible according to their humanly developed traditions and reject the newness that comes through Jesus Christ. Not only does Stephen need his opponents to intellectually recognize Jesus as the center. He needs them to yield in heart to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and give themselves over to understanding the Scripture as received from Jesus. And he needs to see in them the fear of Abraham, the fear of Joseph, the fear of Moses, to receive from God. They need to say, "Forgive us Lord!" And then, "Teach us Lord!" It's an intellectual response and a heart response.

A believer who begins with Jesus and the Gospel at the center and then strives to understand the world according to the teaching received from God in his Word, that kind of believer can engage with someone who holds to a strongly traditional religion, whether it's Jewish or a traditional Christian

church. But at some point, the believer is going to have to be very clear that Jesus must be acknowledged as man and God, and salvation must be recognized as a gift of grace received through faith, and the Bible must be acknowledged as the one truly authoritative source for life and practice. Otherwise, you can't go further together. Without those three things - that Jesus is man and God, that salvation is by grace through faith, and that the Bible is the one truly authoritative source - we can't really move forward together. We can only have side discussions.

Stephen recognizes what is at stake both for the Christian movement and for the non-believing Jews in Jerusalem. And this is a difference between communicating with traditionally religious believers, who are just believers in the system, and communicating with the leaders, who are maintaining that system and refuse to let it go. The traditional religion of Israel held on to by these leaders, the members of Sanhedrin, will keep the people of Israel bound under a false hope. So Stephen is not just witnessing to anybody. Stephen is being put on trial by the highest court and he feels the responsibility to publicly call this court to account. But for the glory of God, for the sake of Christian movement, and for the sake of all the people of Jerusalem, Stephen is not willing here to compromise. Jesus is the Messiah and before we go further together, you have to acknowledge that.

As witnesses for Jesus Christ, we will have to do the same. The Gospel preached by Peter through the first major section of Acts, will not yield to traditional religion. Jesus is the Christ. Forgiveness comes through faith in him. There is no other name by which a person can be saved. Traditional religion must yield to the Gospel of Jesus Christ or be called to account.

Reflection questions

Observe Stephen's speech in stages with these three primary questions in mind.

1. Does Stephen attempt to answer the charges brought against him?
 2. What answer does Stephen give to the charges brought against him?
 3. What is Stephen's aim in this speech other than answering the charges brought against him?
-
1. Read Acts 7:1-8. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 2. Read Acts 7:9-16. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 3. Read Acts 7:17-43. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 4. Read Acts 7:44-53. What is the main point or points of this section? What stands out as problematic or confusing?
 5. After observing the speech, how would you answer the three primary questions suggested above?