

Stephen the First Christian Martyr (Acts 7:1-8:3)



A. Background

1. The early church survived the first major test that could have broken up the church – the grumbling within. Now the church deals with the theological clarity needed for the gospel to break out to the rest of the Greek-speaking world. Although the church experienced explosive growth at the start, they were still localised in Jerusalem and tied to the temple. The apostles prayed and preached in the temple area. People from the surrounding region poured into Jerusalem to hear their message and were healed of diseases (5:16), but the gospel was not actively preached outside of Jerusalem.

Then questions began to arise. What was the large number of converted priests to do? Give up their ministry job of sacrificing animals and tending to the temple duties? What were the believing gentiles to do? Do they need to be circumcised and keep the law like the Jews?

Acts 7 shows Stephen understood more clearly than anybody else the link between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Stephen's message and his ultimate sacrifice provided the clarity the church needed so the gospel would be freely preached outside of Jerusalem.

2. Stephen's message here is one of the most important sections in Acts, the longest sermon. It is a crash course and an overview of the prophetic history of Israel – the Old Testament theology in a nutshell. Why did Stephen speak so long? Was he trying to buy time with tedious disjointed details to acquit himself? Why did he suddenly turn around and sharply rebuke the listeners to his demise?

(a) It was a *masterful defence of the Gospel*. He answered all the false accusations levelled against him – blasphemy against God, Moses, the law, and the temple (6:11, 13). Stephen exposed their wrong understanding of the land, the temple, and the law. Judaism had become something God never intended in the Old Testament. Stephen provides the crucial break between 'Judaism' and the 'Christian faith.'

(b) It is also a *masterful apologetic and an understatement* or even a non-statement. It is as much about what he does not say as what he clearly says. Stephen's accusers did not understand him at first, thus did not take immediate offense. But by the time Stephen was finished, they got it as clear as daylight! He only mentions Jesus once in the very last sentence (7:52), but the penny dropped with a loud thud. Suddenly they all saw Stephen never was aiming for his acquittal. It was not self-defence. Stephen was using his trial in the Jewish court to expose Judaism's superstitious view of God. And he was charging them with the murder of Jesus, who was the promised Messiah prophesied by the very law they were so proud of.

3. Stephen stood before the high priest. (Either Caiaphas or Annas. Jesus stood before both.) He quoted from the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament). His message (7:1-53) deals with four main subjects central to Judaism.

B. Patriarchal Period (7:2-36) [Main Theme: Land]

Here Stephen deals with the charge of blaspheming God (6:11) by retelling the history of Israel, starting with the Abrahamic covenant. It provided one proof of his orthodoxy.

1. **Abraham's Greatness** (7:2-8) – He opens politely with 'brethren and fathers.' His theme here is the 'God of glory' (v2 c.f. Ps 29:2 – the majesty of God is in the *voice of God*). The first mention of God's glory and His voice starts with Abraham in Ur of Chaldea in Mesopotamia, not Jerusalem. They derived great pride and 'orthodoxy' from 'proximity to Jerusalem'. Note the Hebraic Jews' snobbery over the Hellenistic Jews. Stephen is historically accurate (Gen 15:7; Neh 9:7). Abraham's greatness as the father of faith was not in his connection to the promised land. God didn't give him even an inch of the land yet (7:5), but Abraham was willing to obey the voice of God by faith even if it meant leaving his homeland.

The Covenant of Circumcision – God told Abraham his descendants would go through 400 years of slavery in Egypt, but He would rescue them because of His covenant with Abraham. God would punish their oppressors and deliver His people. The sign of this special covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants was circumcision. His comeback later was the true meaning of circumcision – the condition of our hearts - *'you are uncircumcised of heart and ears!'* (7:51)

Timeline: 1875BC - Jacob moves to Egypt, 1845BC - Israelites enslaved, 1446BC – Exodus, giving of the law, 1395BC - Conquest completed. (i) 1875-1446BC - 430 years sojourn in Egypt (Gal 3:17); (ii) 1845-1446BC - 400 years of bondage in Egypt (Acts 7:6); (iii) 1845-1395 - 450 years of bondage, wandering and conquest (Acts 13:19-20). God of glory gave the Abrahamic covenant which contained the land (7:2-4), seed (7:5) and blessing (7:6-7), and sealed this blessing with a sign of circumcision (7:8).

2. **Joseph's Exaltation** (7:9-16) – Joseph is one of the clearest prophetic figures foreshadowing Jesus. Joseph was God's chosen deliverer, but his brothers, the twelve tribes of Israel, were 'jealous of Joseph' (Gen 37:11) and sold him as a slave to Egypt (Gen 37:28). One of Jesus' twelve disciples sold him for a price of a slave. But God was with Joseph had made him a ruler over Egypt and all of the Pharaoh's house. So also, the twelve tribes of Israel rejected Jesus God's deliverer because of jealousy. But during the famine, Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers and forgave them. So, Israel will one day recognise the Messiah whom they have pierced (Zech 12:10).

Shechem (7:16) – Why did Stephen mention Shechem where Joseph's bones were buried when the promised land was conquered by Israel (Josh 24:32 c.f. Gen 33:19)? What was the point? In Stephen's day, Shechem was in the Samaritan territory. Their ancient deliverer's bones were buried in the land the orthodox Jews despised and avoided. The Jews deliberately took a longer route to travel to avoid the 'defiled Samaritan area'. Stephen is implying, '*Jerusalem is not the only place God works.*' Maybe now his accusers were getting a little uncomfortable?

75 or 70 moved to Egypt? The Septuagint (LXX) cites 75, and the Hebrew text cites 70. LXX includes Joseph's 7 grandsons and omits Joseph & Jacob because it is the 'family of Jacob & Joseph' (1 Chr 7:14-15, 20-25). The Hebrew text includes Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's 2 sons, Ephraim, and Manasseh, in total 70 (Gen 46:26-27; Ex 1:5). Gen 46:8-26 enumerates 66 names excluding Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's two sons.

C. Moses (7:17-43) [Main Theme: Law]

Stephen deals with the charge of blaspheming against Moses (6:11) and the law (6:13)

1. Moses (7:17-36) was a prophetic figure of Christ. His life divides into 3 periods of 40 years (7:23, 30, 36).

The 1st 40 years: He was born a deliverer in the 'fullness of time' just like Christ (7:17; Gal 4:4). Pharaoh tried to destroy him at birth just like Herod tried with Christ (7:20-21; c.f. Matt 1:18-21). Moses became mighty in word and deed just like Jesus. He was educated in the wisdom of Egypt, and Jesus too grew up in Egypt (7:22; Acts 10:38). The main point is, Israel rejected Moses, their chosen deliverer, just like they rejected Joseph and Jesus (7:23-29).

The 2nd 40 years: Moses was wandering in the school of wilderness for 40 years and received *B.D. degree*. (Backside of the Desert). God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commissioned him as the deliverer and the lawgiver. Where did God appear to Moses and told him that he was standing on holy ground? (7:33) In the land of Midian on Mt Sinai (7:29-34). It was also in Mt Sinai Moses received the law (7:38). Not Jerusalem. The blessings of God are not limited to Jerusalem.

The 3rd 40 years: God sent Moses to Israel (who rejected him) to be the ruler and judge, and Moses delivered Israel from slavery with great signs and wonders, just like Jesus (7:35-36). (Israel was tested in the wilderness for 40 years due to disobedience, but Jesus was tested in the wilderness for 40 days because of his perfect obedience.) Can you see the parallel between Moses and Jesus? Jesus is the promised 'prophet like Moses', only greater.

2. The Law (7:37-43) – 'This Moses' (emphasis x 2, 7:37-38) who received the law himself prophesied in the law that one day God would raise up the ultimate prophet among the Jews who would be like Moses, then all Israel must listen to His voice otherwise they will be cut off (7:36; Deut 18:15, 18-19).

From the beginning, Moses and the law pointed to this Ultimate Prophet who is to come. Now, what was Israel's response to receiving this holy law? Did they obey the law? No, they have rejected the law by committing idolatry with the golden calf, the Egyptian sun god 'Ra' (7:39). Their high priest Aaron even helped them! So, God 'gave them up' to their idolatry to worship the sun, moon, and stars. (Horoscope today?) Eventually God evicted them out of the holy land and sent them to Babylon as captives where

they could have their fill of idolatry. Astrology, sorcery, witchcraft, etc. originated in Babylon (7:42-43; Amos 5:27). When we reject God's revelation, God 'gives us up' to degrading sin. Stephen stood before Caiaphas and Annas, who delivered Jesus to death and says, 'Now with the help of your high priest, you Sanhedrin, have rejected Jesus who is the greater Prophet Moses spoke of. Now, who then is truly rejecting the law?' Not Stephen, but the high priest and the accusers. This was Stephen's answer to their charge against him - blasphemy against Moses and the law (6:11, 13).

D. Temple (7:44-50) [Main Theme: Temple]

Stephen now deals with the charge of speaking against the temple (6:13).

1. God gave detailed instruction in the law on building the dwelling of God. And it was the 'tabernacle', the mobile tent because God was always on the move. Not the 'temple' which Solomon built for God. God has accepted Solomon's temple, but the temple was never meant to 'capture God' or 'house God' (7:44-47 c.f. 1 Kings 8:27). Even Solomon who built the temple understood this.
2. Then what God is looking for? (7:49-50; Is 66:1-2) Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2, '*Heaven is My throne, and earth is my footstool. What house will you build for Me?*' From Isaiah's prophecy, Stephen concludes, '*God does not dwell in temples made with hands.*' (7:48) God cannot be contained by any temple or any religion. If you can get God 'captive' inside the temple, you can do anything outside. You need to get a bigger view of God.

Then what is God looking for as His dwelling place? '*But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.*' (Is 66:2b)

E. Stephen's Indictment (7:51-53) [Main Theme: What God Always Wanted]

1. Uncircumcised of Heart – Is 66:2b is what the hearers expected to hear from Stephen, but he does not quote the rest of Is 66:2, but charges them boldly with, '*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.*' (7:51). Note 'our forefathers' (7:2, 11-12, 15, 19, 39, 44-45) vs 'your fathers' (7:51-52), i.e., 'idolatrous rebellious ones.'
2. Murder of the Just One (the Prophet like Moses) – Stephen goes on to charge them of murdering Jesus in the presence of Caiaphas and Annas, '*Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...*' (7:52). Stephen's final point was, '*You may be circumcised in your flesh with great pride, but you are uncircumcised before God because and you are unrepentant murderers of your chosen Messiah.*'
3. Stephen was never going for his acquittal. He was defending the faith of the Christians, and charging Caiaphas and the accusers for murdering the One who was sent to them as prophesied by Moses as the greater Prophet. What boldness and wisdom!

F. Stephen's Death (7:54-8:3)

1. Death of Stephen – Stephen's words produced a violent reaction in the hearers. They were 'cut to the heart' (Gk. 'diaprio', 'sawn through'). The result was a spontaneous illegal public mob lynching, which the Sanhedrin did not have authority to carry out. Jewish law also forbade executing a person on the same day as his trial (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:1). But they gnashed their teeth in fury, cried out with loud voices, blocked their ears, ran at Stephen, and threw him outside the city to stone him to death (7:54-58). They would have pushed him off the hill, then drop large boulders on him until he died. They quickly abandoned Gamaliel's advice, who counselled them to wait out the Christians and not do anything rash (5:35-39).
2. What Did Stephen See? - Stephen did not see the contorted faces of the mob, but he saw the glorious face of Jesus in an open vision. Jesus said, '*You will see the Son of Man at the right hand of God in glory.*' Stephen said, '*I can see Him there.*' He saw the throne of God similar to Isaiah and John (Is 6; Rev 4-5). (Stephen is possibly the first New Testament prophet.) But there is something unusual about Stephen's vision of the throne. Jesus is 'standing' at the right hand of God instead of sitting on His throne (Ps 110:1; Heb 1:3). Why? Jesus wanted to personally welcome Stephen home as the first Christian martyr. What did Stephen say with the last breath? He prayed. '*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*' (7:59 c.f. Luke 23:46). This

would have been the fitting climax for a saint, but there was more. *'Lord, do not charge them with this sin'* (7:60 c.f. Luke 23:34). The whole dreadful turmoil finished in strange peace, *'Then he fell asleep,'* to wake up again on the day of resurrection.

3. What it Meant to the Church – (a) Message: Stephen showed that everything in the Old Testament, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Prophets, etc, pointed to the ultimate coming of the Messiah Jesus whom all must obey. He alone forgives sins and saves both Jews and Gentiles. (b) The gospel need not be tied to the temple and the law. No temple, no religion could ever contain the uncontainable God, but God has always been on the lookout for humble hearts that tremble at His word. (c) By murdering Stephen, the Jewish authority (Sanhedrin) officially rejected the gospel. Now the Christian faith becomes unhinged from Jerusalem and the temple, and freely moves outside of Jerusalem into the Hellenistic culture.
4. Unintended Consequence - A handful of devout men mourned for Stephen's death and gave him a proper burial (8:2). And a young man named Saul, a student of Gamaliel, was there. He consented to the stoning of Stephen and held the executioner's garments as a witness. What did Saul think of all these? Immediately he began to persecute the believers. He wasn't ready to say, 'I was wrong.' Saul went from house to house dragging the believers out of their homes and putting them into prison. But this young man later became the greatest missionary in the history of the church. Paul must have been a similar age to Stephen. Stephen died around 34AD probably in his mid-30's. Paul died in 68 AD. It is as if Paul took on Stephen's message and mantle and developed it to its fullness and took to the whole Gentile world. What the church history proves over and over again is that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

G. Question

How about my faith? Would I have the grace to pay a heavy price for my faith? A wise man said, *'If only you are faithful in lesser trials in daily life - embarrassment, accusations, etc. - then you will find the grace to be faithful in a much greater trial.'*

I have one question for myself. Stephen quoted Isaiah, *'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool...But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.'* (Is 66:1-2)

Do I have a poor and contrite spirit? Do I tremble at God's word? These are the people God is looking for to dwell with. Jesus said, *'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words.'* (John 14:23-24)