

The Witness of Stephen

Jeremy Bell

October 31, 2021

Acts 6:9–15

[9] Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. [10] But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. [11] Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” [12] And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, [13] and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, [14] for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” [15] And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (ESV)

Acts 7

Stephen’s Speech

[1] And the high priest said, “Are these things so?” [2] 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, [3] and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ [4] 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. [5] 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. [6] 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. [7] ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ [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.

[9] “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him [10] 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. [11] Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. [12] But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. [13] And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers,

and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. [14] And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. [15] And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, [16] 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.

[17] "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt [18] until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. [19] He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. [20] At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, [21] and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. [22] And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

[23] "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. [24] And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. [25] He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. [26] And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' [27] But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? [28] Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' [29] At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

[30] "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. [31] When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: [32] 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. [33] Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. [34] 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.'

[35] "This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. [36] This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. [37] This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.' [38] 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. [39] Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, [40] 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.’ [41] And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. [42] 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?

[43] 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.’

[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?’

[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.”

The Stoning of Stephen

[54] Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. [55] 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. [56] And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened,

and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” [57] But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. [58] 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. [59] And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” [60] 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. (ESV)

- In our text today we’ll see that God continues to move powerfully among His people.
- Many signs and wonders are being done through the apostles.
- The work that God was doing through them stirred up jealousy in among the religious leaders, such that the apostles get thrown in jail again for preaching Jesus (Acts 5:18).
- And this time they get beaten, but the apostles rejoice in being found worthy to suffer for the name of Christ (Acts 5:40-42).

Introduction

- Stephen begins his message with an overview of Israel’s history.
- He understood that the temple was destined to pass away, and his speech prepares the way for the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Abraham (7:2-8)

- God appeared to Abraham outside of Israel.

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was still in Mesopotamia (verse 2)”

- Mesopotamia is not in Israel – its outside of Israel. God is not limited to geography.

Joseph (7:9-16)

- The way the patriarchs treated Joseph, in one sense, was reflective of their treatment of Jesus.
- Joseph’s brothers around him became jealous, and got rid of him. Yet Joseph became their redeemer, in essence, and gave them life by his generosity.
- He provided the food they desperately needed. Apart from this provision, they would have perished.
- God was with Joseph in Egypt, away from Israel

Moses (7:17-43)

- God chose to give the law through Moses
- His life is broken down into three (3) 40 year segments

- Egypt
- Midian
- In the Wilderness

The Temple (7:44-50)

- Stephen illustrates that God was with Israel in the wilderness through the impermanent tabernacle – God’s Spirit dwelt in the tabernacle.
- Then under Solomon the temple was made – and God’s Spirit dwelt there as well. But even the temple was temporary.
- With the coming of Christ, the days of the temple were drawing to a close.
- Because all that the temple represented – the making of blood sacrifices through animals, the priestly intercession for the sins of the people – all of that pointed forward to Jesus.
- When Jesus died and was raised to life again, all of that was completely fulfilled in Him.
- No longer did people need the priest as a go-between God for them – we go straight to Jesus; that’s why the temple curtain was torn in two – we have direct access to God.
- Jesus is the complete fulfillment of the temple! Now, the meeting place with God is through Jesus!

Stephen boldly speaks the truth (7:51-53)

- Filled with the Holy Spirit (v.55), Stephen speaks the truth in the midst of these false accusations.
- They follow in the pattern of their unbelieving fathers. They have hated the messengers that God had sent beforehand, and now they have taken the Son of God and put Him to death.
- He reminds them at the end that they are the very people that God had favored by giving them the law, yet it meant nothing to them.
- This was a scathing, yet accurate, pronouncement by the power of the Holy Spirit

Application

What does this passage tell us about God?

- God deals graciously with people
- We can be in proximity to God yet not know Him

The Final Witness of Stephen

- Rather than be cut to the heart and repent, the religious leaders were filled with rage, and ground their teeth in hatred towards Stephen.

- Stephen experienced a particular sight afforded by God Himself, as he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father.
- They cast him out of the city and began to throw stones to kill him.
- In his last moments, Stephen reminds us of Christ. He utters “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” which is similar to that which Christ uttered from the cross (Luke 23:46) and then “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” This recalls Jesus prayer in Luke 23:34

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints” – Psalm 115:16

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 8:35, 37-39

The effect of Stephen’s martyrdom

- Stephen’s death profoundly affected Saul (Acts 22:20).
- Great persecution came on the church as well. It marked the beginning of a season of great flourishing of the gospel as it began to go out to the Gentile community.
- God was now bringing the message of the gospel to the four corners of the globe. We’ll increasingly see this as Acts progresses – the unstoppable gospel marches on!

Conclusion

- How do we keep our focus on Christ, so that we don’t get caught in a trap of religiosity?
 - We turn to Jesus!
 - We repent of our sins.
 - We declare Him as Lord.
 - We don’t tolerate sins in our hearts, but confess them.
 - We turn from sin, and towards our Savior.
 - We trust in nothing but Christ alone!
- How do we keep our focus on Christ, right up to our dying breath?
 - We say to our God – give me Jesus. God enabled Stephen to see Jesus. And Jesus welcomed Stephen home.
 - God will give us the grace we need, He will give us Jesus. He is the One we need!

Questions for Discussion/Application

- Take a few minutes and as a group seek to summarize the text-- Acts 6:9-7:60. What observations and insights do you have from this passage?
- How does this story affect you personally?
- Read the notes above about the temple. How did Jesus fulfill God's purposes for the temple?
- Because Christ fulfilled the temple, we now have direct access to God. What are the implications of this truth for us as Christians?
- What lessons can we learn from Stephen's example of boldness?
- How do we keep our focus on Christ throughout our lives, until our dying breath?
- Consider taking time to pray for the persecuted church around the world. [Here is a great resource](#) from Voice of the Martyrs. Consider also taking time to pray that God would grant us boldness to faithfully proclaim Christ to those who don't know Him.