

ACTS: THE STORY CONTINUES

ACTS 7:1–53

STEPHEN'S SPEECH: GOD'S PRESENCE, ISRAEL'S REBELLION, AND THE PROMISED MESSIAH

OPENING THOUGHT

Acts 7 contains the longest sermon recorded in the Book of Acts.

At first glance, Stephen's speech can feel like a history lesson about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the Tabernacle, and the Temple. A lot of people get confused about what Stephen's point is with this speech.

But Stephen is doing more than recounting Israel's history.

“Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 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, and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 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.” ~ Acts 6:11-14 ESV

The religious leaders have accused him of speaking against:

- Moses
- God
- The Law
- The Temple

Stephen responds by showing that they've misunderstood their own history.

As he walks through Israel's story, Stephen reveals four important truths:

1. God has always been with His people.
2. God's people have repeatedly resisted Him.
3. The Law, Temple, and Prophets were all pointing to Christ.
4. The religious leaders are continuing the same rebellion as their fathers.

As we move through the chapter today, don't get lost in the details. Stephen's goal is not simply to retell Israel's history. He is building an argument. As we study, pay attention to the themes that Stephen repeats throughout the speech.

PART 1: GOD HAS ALWAYS BEEN WITH HIS PEOPLE

READ ACTS 7:2–8

“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, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ 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. 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. 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. ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ 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.”

Question:

- Where was Abraham when God first appeared to him?

Follow-Up Question:

- Why do you think Stephen begins Israel's story in Mesopotamia rather than Jerusalem?

Discussion Thought:

Stephen intentionally begins with Abraham in Mesopotamia.

God did not wait until Abraham entered the Promised Land before revealing Himself.

The God of glory appeared to Abraham while he was still living in a foreign land.

READ ACTS 7:9–16

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

kindred, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, 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."

Question:

- Where was Joseph when God was with him?

Discussion Thought:

Stephen says:

"But God was with him."

Joseph was in Egypt.

Far from Jerusalem.

Far from the Promised Land

Yet God was still with him.

READ ACTS 7:30–34

"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. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: '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. Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 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.'"

Question:

- What made the ground around the burning bush holy?

Discussion Thought:

The ground itself was not holy.

It BECAME holy because God's presence was there.

Stephen is establishing a major theme:

- God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia.
- God was with Joseph in Egypt.
- God appeared to Moses in Midian.
- God met Israel in the wilderness.

STEPHEN'S POINT: GOD'S PRESENCE WAS NEVER CONFINED TO JERUSALEM OR THE TEMPLE.

Where God is present, there is holy ground. When God departs, His holiness goes with Him.

Question:

- Why do you think Stephen repeatedly emphasizes where these events took place?

PART 2 — GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE REPEATEDLY REJECTED THE ONES HE SENT

READ ACTS 7:23–29

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

Question:

- How did Israel initially respond to Moses?

Discussion Thought:

Before Moses ever encountered God at the burning bush, he was already rejected by his own people.

"Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?"

Israel rejected God's chosen deliverer.

READ ACTS 7:35–36

“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. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.”

Question:

- What did God do after Moses had been rejected?

Discussion Thought:

God chose Moses.

God commissioned Moses.

God performed signs and wonders through Moses.

God publicly confirmed Moses as His chosen deliverer.

Question:

- Why does Stephen repeatedly remind them that **Moses was rejected** before God vindicated him?

Discussion Thought:

Stephen's point is not merely that Moses was rejected.

His point is that God publicly confirmed Moses through signs, wonders, and deliverance, yet many still resisted him.

Stephen is preparing his listeners to recognize a similar pattern in Jesus.

READ ACTS 7:37–43

“This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ 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. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 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.’ And they

made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 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? 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.”

Question:

- *How did Israel respond to Moses after the Exodus?*

Question:

- *What happened while Moses was receiving God's Law?*

Discussion Thought:

Even after:

- The plagues
- The Red Sea
- The pillar of cloud
- The pillar of fire
- The voice of God from Sinai

The people still turned toward idols.

Stephen is showing a pattern:

- God sends deliverers.
- God sends prophets.
- God calls His people back to Himself.
- The people repeatedly resist Him.

Question:

- *Why do you think Stephen spends more time discussing Moses than anyone else?*

PART 3 — THE LAW, THE TEMPLE, AND THE PROPHETS WERE ALL POINTING TO CHRIST

READ ACTS 7:37

“This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’”

Question:

- ***Who was Moses talking about?***

Discussion Thought:

Moses himself pointed forward to another Deliverer.

The Law was never the final destination.

It was preparing God's people for Christ.

READ ACTS 7:44–50

***“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. 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, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, “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? Did not my hand make all these things?”*”**

Question:

- ***What was the purpose of the Tabernacle?***

Question:

- ***What does Stephen quote from Isaiah concerning the Temple?***

"The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands."

Discussion Thought:

Stephen is not attacking the Temple.

He is correcting a misunderstanding about the Temple.

The Temple pointed beyond itself to God's presence and ultimately to Christ.

Question:

- ***Why would this have been offensive to Stephen's accusers?***

PART 4 — "YOU ALWAYS RESIST THE HOLY SPIRIT"

READ ACTS 7:51–53

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

Question:

- ***What change do you notice in Stephen's tone?***

Discussion Thought:

Throughout the speech Stephen has been talking about:

- Abraham
- Joseph
- Moses
- The Prophets

Now suddenly he turns directly toward the Sanhedrin.

The history lesson becomes a prophetic indictment.

Question:

- ***Why does Stephen say, "You always resist the Holy Spirit," rather than simply, "You rejected Jesus"?***

Discussion Thought:

Stephen sees a pattern stretching throughout Israel's history.

He isn't saying only saying that they rejected Jesus. He is saying that they and their fathers have been resisting God along... from the very beginning.

The same Spirit who:

- Called Abraham

- Rescued Joseph
- Commissioned Moses
- Sent the prophets
- Sent His own Son...

...is the same Spirit they continue resisting now.

The issue is not one isolated act.

It is a persistent refusal to receive God's Word when He speaks.

Question:

- ***What does Stephen accuse them of doing to the prophets?***

Question:

- ***What does he accuse them of doing to Jesus?***

Discussion Thought:

Stephen's conclusion is devastating.

Their fathers rejected:

- Joseph
- Moses
- The Prophets

Now they have rejected:

- The Righteous One
- The Messiah
- The One to whom Moses, the Law, the Temple, and the Prophets all pointed

CLOSING REFLECTION

Stephen's listeners believed they were defending God, but in reality they were the ones resisting Him.

Sometimes the greatest danger is not open rebellion.

Sometimes it is becoming so attached to our traditions, assumptions, preferences, or expectations that we fail to recognize what God is doing right in front of us.

Questions for Reflection:

- Am I pursuing God's presence, or merely religious familiarity?
- Am I willing to follow Christ when He challenges my expectations?
- Are there traditions, preferences, or assumptions that I hold more tightly than Christ Himself?
- What would it look like for me to remain soft-hearted and responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit?

FINAL THOUGHT

Stephen's speech is not ultimately about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, or even the Temple.

It is about Jesus.

Everything in Israel's history was moving toward Him.

The tragedy of Stephen's accusers was not that they loved the Law, the Temple, and the traditions of their fathers.

The tragedy was that when the One to whom all of those things pointed finally arrived, they rejected and killed Him.