

ACTS

Please turn in your Bibles this evening to Acts chapter 7 as we continue our study through the Word of God.

As we move into Acts chapter 7 we are going to look at the trial of Stephen before the Sanhedrin or the Jewish religious council.

And as we saw last time, the charges against Stephen are given to us in Acts chapter 6, where we are told, **“Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ . . . They also set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.’”** Acts 6:11, 13-14.

Now this was a set-up to get rid of Stephen as they had false witnesses and they told these men what to say, the charges to bring against Stephen. Keep in mind that these were the religious leaders!

They said that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses, against the Law, against the Jewish customs. Not only that but He spoke blasphemous words against God and God’s dwelling place, the Temple and that Jerusalem would be destroyed.

And we are going to see Stephen defend the Christian faith and the way he does that is with the Word of God. He does not talk about how good the sword of the Spirit is, he uses it to cut down their words and to show them that he is not a blasphemer as well as Christianity not being heresy but the fulfillment of what the Old Testament prophets said!

Also, keep in mind what Jesus said in Acts 1:8, **“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

Up through Acts chapter 7 we see the Gospel spreading through Jerusalem, but not much farther than that.

Now we will see persecution arise upon believers in Jerusalem by the Jewish religious leaders and the Gospel is going to move to Judea and Samaria in Acts 8 through 12.

And the way that God does this is through persecution. The light of God was burning bright in Jerusalem and now the Jewish religious leaders were trying to stomp it out. But, like a burning ember, as their foot came down upon it, we see embers spreading out farther and farther and that is what is going to happen as the Gospel message is moving forward, eventually, **“to the end of the earth.”**

And as we will see this evening, Stephen defend his faith before the Sanhedrin in a very powerful way. Richard Longenecker comments on this by saying,

The defense of Stephen before the Sanhedrin is hardly a defense in the sense of an explanation or apology calculated to win an acquittal. Rather, it is a proclamation of the Christian message in terms of the popular Judaism of the day and an indictment of the Jewish leaders for their failure to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah or to appreciate the salvation provided in him.

- The Acts of the Apostles, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 9, p 337

And Bruce said: “Such a speech as this was by no means calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin. It is rather a defense of pure Christianity as God’s appointed way of worship.”

Let me say this. Stephen’s defense, is based upon the Word of God, not feelings, emotions, or whatever. And please take this to heart, the best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself!

Stephen is going to give to us some amazing insight on the Old Testament, something we would not have known because the Old Testament is silent on this, but Stephen isn’t!

And we will talk about that more as we come to those passages here in Acts chapter 7.

So, Stephen is before the council and in Acts 6:15 we are told, “**And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.**”

And that is where we will pick up our study this evening, in Acts chapter 7 beginning in verse 1 and let’s see what the Lord has for us as we study through His Word.

ACTS 7

VERSE 1

So as Stephen is before the Sanhedrin or the Jewish religious council, we see the High Priest, probably Caiaphas who was in office until A. D. 36, the one who presided over the trial of Jesus, question Stephen.

And as the trial starts he wants to know if these charges are true because if they are, he is worthy of death.

Thus, Stephen is going to answer this by going over their history and he makes some powerful points that we don't see in the Old Testament, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen speaks to them and to us.

Of this Boice makes these remarks, "Stephen seems to have perceived . . . that the old order of things was passing away and a new order was coming. This becomes particularly clear when he talks about the temple. It was cherished by the Jews. But it was destined to pass away, and Stephen seemed to have sensed that. His speech is a transition speech that paves the way for presenting the gospel to the Gentiles, which begins in the very next chapter of Acts."

The Old Covenant had passed off the scene and our salvation is based upon the New Covenant, the shedding of the blood of the perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ. He is the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world and that is what Stephen is going to show them from this Jewish history lesson from the Old Testament.

VERSES 2-8

Stephen begins with the father of the Jewish faith, Abraham. And Stephen starts out by speaking of how God appeared to an idol worshiping Gentile, father Abraham, and called him to come out of the area of the Chaldeans and cross over into a new land, Canaan, thus, Abraham was the father of the Hebrews, a term that means "*one who has crossed over.*"

But instead of completely following the Lord, Stephen tells us that Abraham stayed in Haran until his father, Terah died, and then he obeyed the Lord.

In Haran God re-called Abraham to go from this land into the land of Canaan. An interesting point that Stephen makes is God gave this land to him and his descendants and yet, Abraham didn't own any of it, except for a burial plot, nor did he have any children yet!

Now this is important. Abraham's partial obedience did not take God's promise away. Instead, it meant the promise was on hold until Abraham was ready to do what the Lord said. The fulfillment of the promise didn't progress until Abraham left Haran and his father behind and went to the place God wanted him to go.

But don't negate the faith of Abraham. You see, as we come to the New Testament we see Paul make these remarks regarding the faith of Abraham, **“Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, ‘I have made you a father of many nations’) in the presence of Him whom he believed - God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore ‘it was accounted to him for righteousness.’”** Romans 4:16-22.

Abraham was not saved by works, or the Law for the Law was still over 400 years down the road. He was saved by faith and specifically, faith in the coming Messiah, the One who would come and take away the sins of the world!

Stephen goes on to say that his descendants will be in bondage for 400 years in a foreign land, which was Egypt. Why do we read of 400 years here and in Genesis 15:13; and then 430 years in Exodus 12:40 and in Galatians 3:17?

Some say that 400 was the rounded number, but I don't think so. I think they were afflicted down in Egypt for 400 years, but they were down in Egypt for 430 years. You see, while Joseph was alive and the Pharaoh on the throne knew of Joseph, they were treated well! You can read of that in Exodus 1:8-22. After that they were slaves in Egypt!

Then, after that God will judge that nation, Egypt. And bring His people out of bondage so they could worship the true and living God.

Stephen then goes into their patriarchal period from Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob and his 12 sons that made up the 12 tribes of Israel!

Now Stephen is going to deal with a very interesting subject. I love what the Holy Spirit is doing here, and we will see that in a minute. So, let's read on.

VERSES 9-16

Now Stephen speaks of Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, and how his brothers refused to recognize him as a deliverer and sold him to slave traders, ending up in Egypt and God eventually raised him to be second in command over all of Egypt, just under Pharaoh, to save his people.

We read of this in Genesis 50:19-20, **“Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.’”**

What is the point that Stephen is trying to make here?

Stephen is saying that Joseph is a type of Christ and that his brothers are a type of the nation of Israel. You see, they first rejected Joseph, and it wasn't until they were re-united with him the second time, down in Egypt, that they saw him as a deliverer.

Thus, your descendants did this before, and now you are doing it again. Jesus came the first time and you rejected Him. In fact, they put Him to death! But, when He comes again, like Joseph, you will receive Him as a Deliverer, as a Savior, as the Messiah! How masterful is this!

In fact, in Zechariah 12:10 we are told, **“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.”**

And Jesus said in Matthew 23:37-39, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’”**

And finally, Paul said in Romans 11:25-27, **“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.’”**

So, the nation as a whole will one day receive Him the second time, in His Second Coming, it will happen!

Another point we need to deal with here because some will try to show you that there is a mistake, but there is not.

In Genesis 46:26-27, Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22 we are told that 70 people came down to Egypt and Stephen says 75 people. Why the difference?

Because the Septuagint text, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, says that Genesis 46:27 is 75 people and thus, Stephen, being a Hellenist Jew would read the Septuagint text.

And the difference between the Hebrew and the Greek text is that the 75 included Joseph's descendants born in Egypt.

Gleason Archer put it this way regarding this issue,

We therefore conclude that both totals [from the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Septuagint] are correct, though they were calculated differently. Jacob's own sons numbered twelve; his grandsons by them numbered fifty-two; there were already four great-grandsons born in Canaan by the time of the migration, for a total of sixty-six. Manasseh and Ephraim, born in Egypt, increased the total to sixty-eight; Jacob and his wife (whichever she was) brought it up to seventy. But the Septuagint added the seven grandsons of the prime minister [Joseph] and omitted Jacob and his wife from the tally.

This brings us to the result that Stephen correctly reported the number seventy-five, according to the Septuagint in Gen 46:27 and Ex 1:5. Likewise, Gen 46:27; Ex 1:5, and Deut 10:22 in the Masoretic text are correct with their total of seventy. Either figure is correct, depending on whether Joseph's grandchildren are included. (Four great-grandchildren of Jacob were included even in the Masoretic text tally of seventy.)

Now, as we read on, we will see once again how they missed another deliverer the first time and will not recognize him until he comes again. Let's read on and see who this person is.

VERSES 17-19

As time went on and the memory of Joseph had faded in Egypt, the new king, the new Pharaoh was worried about these Hebrews who were growing stronger and there was the possibility that they might eventually overthrow the Egyptians.

So, he afflicted them, made them into slaves and the Hebrew midwives were told to kill the Hebrew baby boys as they were born.

But they refused to obey and told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women gave birth before they could get there!

And so, the command by Pharaoh went out, “**. . . ‘Every son who is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive.’**” Exodus 1:22.

Something I always find interesting and I should not be surprised, is that when things look dark, when they look hopeless, God has a plan and He will see us through. We see that here with the birth of Moses

And even with the evil plan to kill the baby Jewish boys, we see God's plan come forth. Let's read on and see what happens.

VERSES 20-22

This did not happen by chance or luck but at God's appointed time, Moses was born.

But there was this decree by Pharaoh, and his fate, like the other Hebrew boys, was to be drowned in the Nile River.

But, instead his mother prepared an ark made from bulrushes and covered it with asphalt and pitch, and placed her son, Moses in the river.

Downstream pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe with her maidens. And as she went down she heard the baby crying and saw this ark floating in the water.

Thus, she had one of her maids retrieve it. And as she looked into this ark she saw this beautiful baby boy and she fell in love with him, even though he was a Hebrew boy.

You see, this boy was to be put to death, but, instead of killing him, she raised him as her own son.

That meant Moses was educated in the finest schools in Egypt! And Moses grew into a strong and mighty man. In fact, he was next in line to the throne in Egypt.

But, as we will see, God had other plans for him!

VERSES 23-25

Now think about this for a minute. Moses was taken in by pharaoh's daughter when he was three months old. And if that is true, then how in the world did Moses learn of his roots if he was raised in Egypt?

Because the mother of Moses was called by the daughter of Pharaoh to nurse him and she even paid her to do this task.

Thus, at a young age, his mother instilled in him the things of God and his heritage.

Now, as he sees the affliction of his people, he goes down to help them, and when he saw an Egyptian hurting one of his people, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

At this point Moses saw himself as a deliverer and he believed his people would also recognize that calling in his life, to deliver his people from this bondage.

One writer put it like this in regard of all that Moses had and what he did. He wrote,

Moses was brought up in the wisdom of the Egyptians. The wisdom of the Egyptians is not despised even in our advanced day when we feel that we know about everything. Too often we do not give the Egyptians full credit for what they did know. They had developed mathematics, chemistry, engineering, architecture, and astronomy to a very fine point. They had developed these fields of study in a way that was really remarkable. Look at the pyramids. Look at the colors we find in the tombs, colors which have stood the test of the centuries. They understood about embalming. They had calculated the distance to the sun. My friend, they had a highly developed culture and were not an ignorant people.

Moses had all the advantages of that day, being raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He was outstanding. Yet he was not prepared to lead God's people. All the learning of the world of that day did not equip him to lead God's people.

All the wisdom that men have today is not enough for them to understand the Word of God. It is too difficult. Why? Because the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God. These things are foolishness to him and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned (see 1 Cor. 2:14).

Although Moses was learned in the wisdom of his day, he was not ready to deliver God's people. So, after forty years of learning in Egypt, God put him out into the desert. There God gave him his B. D. degree, his Backside of the Desert degree, and prepared him to become the deliverer.

- Phil Ballmaier, Acts 7

Look what happened to Moses after he delivered one of his brethren from the hands of an Egyptian.

VERSES 26-29

Moses was ready to deliver his people. He thought that his time had come. But it only took one day for all his hopes and ambitions to be dashed on the rocks below.

What happened was that the next day after he killed the Egyptian, two Hebrew men were fighting, and Moses tried to break it up and one of them said to him, “**Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?**”

Moses knew he was in trouble, he saw the handwriting on the wall and once Pharaoh found out what he did, he would be put to death!

So, Moses fled to Midian where he will spend 40 years in the desert tending sheep.

We look at that and may think, “What a waste of time!” Not at all. It was what Moses needed to learn, things God needed to develop in Moses before he was going to lead the children out of their bondage in Egypt!

VERSES 30-34

I wonder if Moses felt like Peter did when he denied the Lord three times. I am sure that Moses felt like he was a complete failure at this point in his life.

And now he was content to be a shepherd, to live alone; he was too old to deliver anyone. He was broken; he knew he could do nothing.

And I guess you can say that Moses had come to the end of himself and then we see that God steps in and tells Moses, “. . . ‘Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’” Acts 7:33-34.

In other words, “Moses, you are the one who will deliver my people from their bondage in Egypt!”

And Moses said, “Are you kidding me?” No, he did not say that!

But why now? What had changed in those forty years? Moses changed.

You see, for forty years Moses thought he was somebody, highly educated, powerful, and strong and he found out he was nothing.

Now that he sees himself as nothing, God says that he is now ready for service!

What an important lesson for us to learn, to learn to be humble and God will lift us up.

On the other hand, as pride fills our life, God will bring us down and the reason He does this is so we will have a right perspective of things. You see, you can never be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big!

Let me also say this. Have you ever felt that God does not hear your hearts cry? Maybe you felt that God doesn’t see all that is happening to you. You have cried out to the Lord and it seems like nothing is happening!

But notice what we have seen in these verses. ***GOD HAS SEEN! GOD HAS HEARD. GOD HAS COME TO DELIVER!***

Never forget that. Remember what David said in Psalm 61:1-2, **“Hear my cry, O God; Attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”**

Comforting words here in Acts chapter 7 and comforting words here in Psalm 61. ***GOD HAS SEEN! GOD HAS HEARD. GOD HAS COME TO DELIVER!***

VERSES 35-36

Look at this picture that Stephen is painting for them. First, he spoke of Joseph as the deliverer the first time he came, and they rejected him. It wasn't until they saw him the second time that they saw him as the deliverer.

Now he speaks of Moses and how the Jewish people rejected Moses the first time he came, they did not see him as their deliverer! It wasn't until they saw him the second time, some forty years later, that they saw him as their deliverer!

And the point that Stephen is leading up to is that just as they missed Joseph and Moses as their deliverer's the first time, so too have they missed Jesus the first time that He came as the Deliverer. And it won't be until He comes again that they will recognize Him as their Deliverer!

And we will see the climax of what Stephen is saying when we get to verse 51 and he tells these Jewish religious leaders, **“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”** Acts 7:51.

Make no mistake about it, the Jews looked to their fathers as shining examples of godly men, and they were not godly. They persecuted and put to death the prophets that God had sent to them. They rebelled against God over and over again.

And the point of Stephen is that they are no different than their fathers, but worse! You see, they have made an even greater mistake than their fathers by rejecting Jesus Christ!

Jesus made this exact point to the religious leaders in the Parable of the Landowner in Matthew chapter 21, beginning in verse 33, where we read, **“Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. ‘Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?’ They said to Him, He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes”?** **Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.’** Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. **But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.**” Matthew 21:33-46.

And then, in verse 36 of Acts chapter 7 we see Stephen speak of their deliverance from Egypt and how Moses was the one who lead them out. And they spent forty years in the wilderness on their journey to the Promise Land!

Why did they spend forty years in the wilderness? Because of their unbelief, their failure to trust God, even though they saw His mighty hand upon them through signs and wonders! Here is the lesson. Look at all God has promised us and don't go wandering, but believe, trust in Him and walk in His power. Don't wander in unbelief!

VERSE 37

Now Stephen is moving from their history to their present actions. Moses spoke of this coming Prophet, who is Jesus. And now, this prophet has come!

In fact, in John 6:14 we are told, "**Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.'**"

Some of the people recognized who Jesus was but these religious leaders, who represented the nation, rejected Him in His First Coming.

Yes, their fathers rejected their God-sent deliverers, but they have done even worse, they rejected the Messiah! They refused to hear or receive Him!

VERSES 38-43

I like what Stephen is doing here. These Jewish religious leaders accused Stephen of speaking against the sacred Law of Moses. But Stephen shows them that if you look back at the history of Israel, they repeatedly broke the Law!

Keep in mind that as soon as God gave them the Law, they were already breaking it, rejecting it and in doing so, were rebelling against God.

What is interesting to me is that what the Jews could never do, we have movements today that are encouraging us to go back to the Law and for some, you can't be saved unless you obey the Law of God!

Keep in mind that the Law was given to the Jews to protect them from the pagan influences around them and to enjoy the blessings of the land. Yes, they were to be different than the nations that surrounded them. But the keeping of the Law never saved them.

The Law could never save anyone because all the Law can tell you is how good or bad you are doing. It is a mirror showing you where you are at and if we honestly examined our lives, we are in trouble. In other words, "**All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**" Romans 3:23.

That is why Jesus came, not so we can go back to the Law, but to grace. He has extended this gift of eternal life that is only found in Him, and it is a free gift! Not by any works that we do, but by the finished work that He has done!

And if we really think about it, like back then, we too cannot keep the Law to be saved. James puts it this way, "**For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.**" James 2:10.

You see, our salvation comes from our Deliverer, our Savior, Jesus Christ who paid in full the penalty for our sins if we would only receive Him!

Now, the incredible thing here is they rejected God and longed to go back to Egypt – a place of bondage.

It breaks my heart when I see people today travel down that road, for there is nothing good on it! The only solution is to remember where you were at before you fell, repent of your sins and do those things you did before that kept you close to Jesus, don't leave your first love. And if you do, you must return to Him! Don't place yourself back into the bondage of this world!

For the Jews, they worshiped idols in Egypt, (Joshua 24:14; Ezekiel 20:7-8). And then, once they were in the Promise Land they once again adopted the gods of the pagan nations around them!

And if that is what you want to do, then God will give you over to those things, but that is never good!

You see, for the Jews, they worshiped the works of their hands instead of the creator of heaven and earth.

When a person loses the consciousness of God in their life, who He is, then they resort to all kinds of idols to help them regain that relationship, and that doesn't work.

Others see themselves as god and once again, what they have done instead of what He has done!

Idol worship is not only a statue or object, but it can be anything that gets in your way of your relationship with God – so be careful!

We also see here in Acts 7:42 that Stephen quotes out of Amos 5:25-27 but Amos speaks of the place beyond Damascus as the place of captivity while Stephen speaks of Babylon, why?

Because Amos was speaking to the Northern Kingdom of Israel that was taken into captivity by the Assyrians beyond Damascus, while Stephen is speaking of the Southern Kingdom of Judah which had a portion of all the 12 tribes of Israel living there and thus the entire nation went into captivity in Babylon for their idolatry! (Northern Kingdom of Israel and their idolatry – II Kings 17:13-18) (Southern Kingdom of Judah and their idolatry – Jeremiah 19:1-15)

And for the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and this is interesting to me, they loved their idols so much that God brought them into the capitol of idolatry – **BABYLON!**

Men today hate God so much, they refuse to come to Jesus, they love the darkness rather than the light and thus, God will allow them to go into darkness apart from Him – but again, it is their choice!

VERSES 44-46

Again, Stephen was accused of speaking against the Temple and thus, he answers that charge by going back to the days when Israel had the Tabernacle or tent of witness in the wilderness. And even with that they were worshiping the host of heaven!

Then, Joshua lead the children of Israel into the Promise Land and the Tabernacle was brought into the land and it continued through the days of David.

David loved the Lord and he wanted to build a house for God to dwell in, not a tent any longer. But God would not allow David to build Him a house because he was a man of war.

We are told of this in I Chronicles 28:2-3, **“Then King David rose to his feet and said, ‘Hear me, my brethren and my people: I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and for the footstool of our God, and had made preparations to build it. But God said to me, “You shall not build a house for My name, because you have been a man of war and have shed blood.”””**

David was not allowed to do it, but as we will see in the next few verses, one of his descendants, Solomon his son was allowed.

Now let’s look back on the point that Stephen was making here. The Tabernacle, with the Ark, was a symbol of God’s presence to the children of Israel. It was constantly with them, except when it was captured by the enemy, from the time of Moses to Joshua who brought the tabernacle and the children of Israel into the Promise Land, and then on to David, and yet they fell into idolatry even with this constant reminder of God before them.

How does that even apply to us today? It truly does, and I have seen it in the lives of some Christians. We see them worship a church building, or the area where the pastor preaches from. For some, the only place they meet God is at church. That means the rest of the time He is not with them?

I even had a few who wanted to pray with their faces to the ground in the front of the church. To me, that reminded me so much of my Catholic days when you bowed in front of the altar.

Isn’t God with us wherever we go? Of course He is. So why don’t we live accordingly instead of placing God in some kind of manmade box!

Stephen is going to build on this point as he speaks of Solomon and the Temple!

VERSES 47-50

This is powerful. Stephen speaks of the house that Solomon built for God, the Temple. And then he quotes out of the Prophet Isaiah saying, basically, “God never asked for a Temple. And do you really think that Almighty God lives in a box, lives in a Temple? His presence fills the universe!”

In fact, that is what Solomon tells us as he was dedicating this Temple, “**But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!**” I Kings 8:27.

Stephen’s point is that God is bigger than any Temple. Yes, the Temple was a symbol of God’s presence, but like back then, we make it a prison for Him to dwell in.

We need to keep that perspective of God in our lives, that He is always with us, for without that perspective, we resort to idols to try and obtain it and that is always destructive. Idols don’t draw us to the true and living God, they drive us away!

I don’t know about you, but I am surprised they let Stephen go this far. I am sure that the hair on the back of these religious leader’s neck was sticking up, that their blood was boiling.

But why? Because as much as they cherished their history, it was not good for them. They did not like to be reminded of the truth.

Keep in mind that Stephen was the one on trial here and yet, the defendant is becoming the prosecuting attorney and listen to what he tells them next. He does not pull any punches but nails these Jewish religious leaders. He exposes them for what they are. Listen to what he says starting in verse 51 of Acts chapter 7.

VERSES 51-53

It is a shame that the book, *“How to Win Friends and Influence People”* had not come out yet! Maybe Stephen would have been a little nicer!

No, not at all! That is the church today, not willing to call sin “sin” and not willing to deal with issues that may offend some people, but they are wrong, not even dealing with false doctrine!

Stephen does not do that, not at all. He says that they are stubborn in their ways. He says that their hearts are hard and cold to the things of God. He says that their ears are insensitive to hearing the Words of God. He says that they are no different than their fathers, resisting the Holy Spirit and living a life of pious religiosity and not one surrendered to God.

In Deuteronomy 10:16 we are told, **“Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”**

What Moses was saying to the children of Israel, Stephen is saying to these religious leaders, their descendants.

Stephen wants these men to turn to the Lord, but he is not done showing them their error! In Acts 7:52-53 he nails them again.

He tells them that they were without excuse for their behavior, their actions.

The Law that they were so proud in keeping, they did not keep! Ouch, that had to hurt!

First of all, the Law pointed to Jesus, for Jesus said **“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.”** John 5:39-40.

Thus, by rejecting Jesus they are rejecting what Moses said, the giver of the Law, as once again Jesus said **“For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”** John 5:46-47.

And Jesus nailed these guys also when He said in Luke 11:47-51, **“Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,’ that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.”**

Thus, as your fathers killed the prophets who spoke of the coming Messiah, the coming Prophet, you have done far worse by killing the Prophet Himself, the Messiah!

I like how Spurgeon sums this up for us. He wrote, “He takes the sharp knife of the Word and rips up the sins of the people, laying open the inward parts of their hearts, and the secrets of their soul . . . He could not have delivered that searching address with greater fearlessness had he been assured that they would thank him for the operation; the fact that his death was certain had no other effect upon him than to make him yet more zealous.”

Stephen lays this all out to these Jewish religious leaders. Now, how did these religious leaders respond to the truth that was before them? Let’s read on and see.

VERSE 54

The phrase “**cut to the heart**” or “**cut to the quick**” comes from a Greek word, DIAPRIO. It literally means “to saw in half.”

Here is the thing. As they heard the truth it ripped them apart and exposed their error, their false spirituality. Stephen was not being blasphemous, but they were in their words and actions and they didn’t like this exposure and thus they come growling at Stephen!

What is interesting here is that where do we see this idea of “*gnashing of teeth*” in the Scriptures? Jesus described Hell as a place where there is “*weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”

They were convicted by what was said but they were resisting what the Holy Spirit was showing them, what they needed to do and thus, they showed themselves as citizens of Hell!

Remember when Peter gave his sermon on the Day of Pentecost and we see that the people were convicted as well. And instead of gnashing their teeth at Peter, they said, “**... ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’**” Acts 2:37.

They were open to what the Holy Spirit was showing them and this conviction upon their lives lead to their salvation.

On the other hand, these Jewish religious people, who should have known better, were not open to what the Holy Spirit was showing them, and it lead to their destruction, they were citizens of Hell, as I have said!

VERSES 55-56

Here is the contrast with Stephen and these supposedly religious leaders.

Stephen was standing before them full of the Holy Spirit. He didn’t have to change; it was his way of life.

It is what we read of him in Acts 6:15, “**And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.**” Stephen had the face of an angel while these religious leaders came at him with the grotesque faces of the Devil!

And we see here that Stephen gets a glimpse of heaven and sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

I thought Jesus was seated at the right hand of God, so why is He standing here?

Maybe He is standing to receive into heaven one of His faithful martyrs, Stephen! It is as Psalm 116:15 says, “**Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His saints.**”

Bruce puts it like this, “Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God.”

So, I believe Jesus stood to receive His faithful servant into heaven. Yes, Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father in terms of His redemptive work. That is completed. But it seems that Jesus welcomes us into heaven as He is doing with Stephen here.

One more point here. When people look at us, what do they see? Men and women filled with the Holy Spirit and their whole countenance shines? Or men and women resisting the Holy Spirit and they are mad, angry, bitter, lash out at others?

It is a choice on our part. Who are you surrendering to, the flesh or the Spirit? And I will guarantee you this, if you are living by the Law then your actions will reflect the work you are trying to do and what people will see is all the ugliness of the flesh. That is what we see here with these Jewish religious leaders. The Law made them self-righteous and their whole countenance showed who they belonged to and it was not God!

But if you walk in the Spirit, then the fruit of the Spirit will flow from your life!

VERSES 57-60

Make no mistake about it, this was an out of control mob that was running after Stephen.

Let me give you a perspective of what Luke is trying to portray here regarding these Jewish religious leaders.

The word “**ran**” or “**rushed**” is the Greek word HORMAO and it is the word that is used to describe the mad rush of a herd of demon-possessed swine into the Sea of Galilee.

This religious group of men lost all control, they didn’t want to hear the truth and became a wild mob – they were not Spirit led but fleshly driven!

It also reminds me of young children who don’t want to hear what their parents are saying anymore, and they cover their ears and scream!

And they are so mad that they take Stephen out of the city and they stoned him to death.

Now, the second-century Jewish writing Mishnah, describes the practice of stoning. And, as you can imagine, it is not pretty. We are told, “When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned . . . When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, ‘Confess, for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and everyone who confesses has a share in the age to come’ . . . Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped . . . The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.” (Cited in Bruce).

We are also introduced to another man named Saul here in Acts 7:58. Now Saul's presence here is important, for I believe it is his consenting and his witnessing of Stephen's death that ate at his heart.

You see, he saw the action of his religious friends and himself, and then the love, the peace, the assurance that filled Stephen's life and he couldn't understand it because he was a keeper of the Law, or so he thought.

He wanted to have that kind of relationship with God, but he tried to do it through the Law and that could never happen. But Stephen spoke with God and I believe the seeds that were sown by Stephen will lead to the conversion of Saul, to Paul. Those seeds have been planted!

And as they were stoning him we are told the words of Stephen before he went to sleep or before he went to heaven. He said, "**Lord, do not charge them with this sin.**" Are you kidding me? "Lord, strike them dead, ***NOW!***" But that is not what Stephen said!

Now as you look at Stephen, the words he said as they were stoning him, and you think you could never do that. You can't!

I will explain in a minute. Now, you may wonder how Stephen did it, he wasn't a superman!

Remember what we read, "**. . . Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit . . .**" Acts 6:5.

That is how he did it and that is how we can do it, a life surrendered unto Him and controlled by Him. We can't do it in the flesh, it is not natural, it is supernatural and thus, we must continually surrender our lives to the guiding and directing of the Holy Spirit!

It is as Paul said in Colossians 4:5-6, **“Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”**

You have no idea how mightily God can use you as you walk in His Spirit! What a testimony he left for us and what a hunger to live that kind of life he has given to us.

The first martyr of the church is not dead, he lives with Christ and in this death, which they speak of as **“sleep”**, for these bodies will go back to the dust of the earth and his spirit and soul will go to be with the Lord, and so will ours!

It is as Jesus said in John 11:25-26, **“... ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’”**

Won't you believe and walk in Him and see what He will do in you and through you for His glory!

And let me close with this. We will all go through some tough times in this life, some really tough times. And we may wonder why this is happening? What is the point of all of this?

I think we can look at the life of Stephen and come to that same conclusion if we did not know the rest of the story!

You see, the death of Stephen caused a man named Saul to persecute the church, and in a very hard way. Now how does that help anything? Because it caused the Gospel to spread to Judea and Samaria, outside of Jerusalem!

Not only that, but as I have said, this man named Saul would come to saving faith and we know him as Paul the Apostle. All because of the witness of this man named Stephen. I wonder who our lives are affecting for Christ? Thus, walk in the Spirit and let the fruit of the Spirit flow instead of the works of the flesh destroy!