

Joseph and Jesus

Acts 7:9-16

As Stephen defends himself under the threat of death, this sermon with reference to Joseph is directly related to the past two sermons with reference to Abraham. Let me read again the context, beginning with,

Acts 6:8 “And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous 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 change the customs which Moses delivered to us.” 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. 7:1 Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

So, Stephen, give an answer against the charge of blasphemy. Defend yourself against the accusation that you have taught against the law of God and against the Jewish temple, saying that Jesus will bring an end to them both. And Stephen knew that his life was in danger, and as we already noted a few weeks ago, he did become the first Christian martyr, put to death because of his faith in Jesus.

Acts 7:54 “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being

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 said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Stephen’s defense was to recount the history of Israel as the people of God, but as I have emphasized the past two weeks, it was not merely an historical lecture. Stephen is not merely reminding his opponents of this historical heritage. Rather, as he describes that historical heritage, he is proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, because it is that Old Testament history of God’s people Israel that itself tells the story of redemption. Of salvation. The work of God in salvation is explained in the Bible not only in the doctrinal teaching of the Apostle Paul or Jesus himself, but also in the very outworking of history. So the history of Israel is the history of salvation. The work of God in the life of the nation of Israel is the work of God in the salvation of his people. Thus, as Paul would later write to the Galatians,

Gal. 3:8 “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”

So the historical account of Abraham is a description of the outworking of the gospel, preached beforehand to Abraham. And then, today, also, to Joseph. So today we will study the gospel preached beforehand to Joseph.

Stephen will cover many chapters of the book of the book of

Genesis in these few verses this morning, chapters 37-50. Joseph was beloved of his father Jacob. He was the first son of the wife whom he loved, Rachel, and you should remember that he was tricked by her father, Laban. Joseph worked for Laban seven years in order to marry Rachel, but was deceived into marrying Leah first. He then work for Laban another seven years for Rachel. Yet for many years Rachel was unable to bear a child, until at last, Joseph was born. So Joseph holds a special place of honor and love, he was the beloved son of Jacob's beloved wife.

Thus his brothers became jealous of him and sold him into slavery, they hated Joseph we are told in Genesis. Plotting to kill him, they were convinced by Reuben to let him live but to sell him into slavery to Midianite traders, who took Joseph to Egypt and sold him as a slave to Potiphar, "an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guard," we are told. All of that summarized by,

v.9 "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt."

So why is all of that so important, of such importance that Stephen would make reference to it here in Acts 7? One commentator notes, "It is recorded factually, and it is not clear what the theological point of the details is." But I believe that there is a far more satisfactory answer, that Stephen is not merely giving a defense in order to save his life, he is, rather, proclaiming the gospel...a gospel revealed by the historical circumstances which God brought about through the very familiar story of Joseph and his brothers. Thus we learn from Stephen about Jesus. Joseph himself actually represents Jesus the Messiah in several meaningful ways. And so, with the historical account of Joseph, here is the gospel, the gospel unfolded and proclaimed as the history of God's people in the Old Testament progresses through the time of Joseph. Let me explain.

First, not to skip over the obvious, we see,

I. THE SINFULNESS OF MAN.

v.9

Envious. Or jealous. It is a word that means hot, which in a good sense means "zealous." But there is nothing good here. It is hot-angry. Jealous-angry. I could, of course, spend the time to recount all that Joseph's brothers did to him in their anger. They wanted to kill him. They were going to cast him into a pit and let the wild animals devour him. And when they were convinced not to kill him, they sold him into slavery. And they put some animal blood upon coat of many colors in order to cause their father think all along that he was dead. Wicked, heinous sin. Period.

But I want to evaluate that sin with a bit more understanding than merely their murderous jealousy, jealous that their father loved him. It really was a rejection of authority, ultimately God's authority. Let me remind you what was at the root of their jealousy.

Gen. 37:5 "Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. 6 So he said to them, "Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 And his brothers said to him, "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words."

They didn't inquire as to whether or not this dream was of the Lord. They didn't consider the possibility of God's purpose for the dream, that God might well be exalting Joseph to reign over them. They wouldn't have it. They wouldn't allow such a thought. They

couldn't stand the idea that this little brother of theirs would gain prominence. They wished to preserve their own authority, to preserve their own independence and autonomy. And that, beloved, is the nature of sin. Sin is...

A. A rejection of God's authority.

"Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" No, they proclaimed. They would not submit to such authority, nor ever consider that it might well be the purpose of God. Autonomy is such a horrible sin, self-law, the unwillingness to submit. And it is the original sin, isn't it?

Gen. 2:15 "Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

God gave his human creatures a prohibition, a moral prohibition. A test, of obedience. And that test became the occasion of their first sin. They listened to the Devil himself.

Gen. 3:4 "Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings."

God said, "Do not eat of that one tree," the tree of the knowledge not only of God but also of evil. And "the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes,

and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate." We will decide for ourselves! We will judge for ourselves, what looks good for food. We will decide for ourselves what seems pleasant to us and will make us wise. We will be a god unto ourselves. We will do whatever is right in our own eyes.

That's the very definition of sin, a rejection of God's authority. And in this case, with Joseph, it is also...

B. A rejection of God's servant.

I believe this theme is repeated often enough in Scripture, and I believe Joseph is prominent enough for me to make this connection, that God had chosen Joseph to be his servant for the deliverance of his people, and his people rejected that servant. To use those words, it allows you to see in Joseph a picture and a pattern of Jesus himself, a type. And I am quite confident that such a connection would have been intended by Stephen, pointing out to his accusers this pattern of the rejection of God's anointed servant. We see this theme of such a rejection repeatedly in these words of Stephen.

v.27 "But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?"

v.35 "This Moses whom they rejected, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush."

v.39 "[This is he] whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt."

And then, in conclusion, Stephen's main point,

v.51 "You stiff-necked and 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 foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...”

That is, of course, what got him killed. But that is the gospel, a declaration first of all, of the sinful rejection of God’s love and mercy, a rejection which ultimately came to be focused upon Jesus.

Isaiah 53:3 “He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

That’s Jesus! And the rejection of Joseph shows to us the sinfulness of man. But then, all the more, this account of Joseph, those last 14 chapters of the book of Genesis summarized by Stephen in these 8 verses, is a plan and clear proclamation of,

II. THE PREDETERMINED PURPOSE OF GOD.

And so Stephen’s words,

v.9b “But God was with him 10 and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.”

In other words, God meant it for good. And so when Jacob died and Joseph’s brother’s feared that Joseph might repay them

for all the evil they had done, we read this,

Gen. 50:15 “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him.” 16 So they sent messengers to Joseph, saying, “Before your father died he commanded, saying, 17 ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph: “I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.” ’ Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, “Behold, we are your servants.” 19 Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? 20 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. 21 Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.”

As we go through this summary of Joseph’s life recorded in Acts 7, I wanted to begin here, with the conclusion. Because I want that conclusion to be obvious and deeply rooted in your mind. God had a purpose. A good purpose. He was accomplishing good. Specifically, he was accomplishing redemption, salvation. He was using the circumstances of Joseph’s life to bring about his great work of redemption, delivering his people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And in order to deliver his people out of slavery, they had to be, first, enslaved. In history, in their own experience. So this was the way in which God brought to pass his eternal purpose of deliverance, salvation. The people of Israel would be enslaved in Egypt. And that begins with Joseph being sold by his brothers as a slave in Egypt. They clearly meant it as evil. They rejected God’s own servant. “But God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

So we see that “God was with Joseph,” verse 9. God “delivered him out of all his troubles.” You can read the specific examples of that in Genesis 37-50. The point is that,

A. God rescued Joseph.

And he did it repeatedly. Over and over again. As an example,

Gen. 39:1 “Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. 2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. 3 And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority.”

Later in that same chapter,

Gen. 39:20 “Then Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison. 21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph’s hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. 23 The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph’s authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.”

God not only rescued Joseph.

B. God exalted Joseph.

I just read, “because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.” And so Joseph became the

trusted assistant to King Pharaoh himself. And we read,

Gen. 41:39 “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” 41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” 42 Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. 43 And he had him ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried out before him, “Bow the knee!” So he set him over all the land of Egypt. 44 Pharaoh also said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.”

In our text, Stephen’s summary,

v.9 “But God was with him 10 and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.”

So God exalts his servant, and he “meant it for good.” And here is the climax of this whole account, here is the greatest good which God was working to accomplish.

C. God delivered his people through Joseph.

The great deliverance that would come under Moses’ leadership, the Exodus, would be possible only because God preserved his people in Egypt, under Joseph’s leadership.

v.11 “Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. 13 And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to the

Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people.”

Again, those words summarize several chapters of Genesis, and the point is that God is establishing and preserving his people, in Egypt, anticipating the day when they would literally and physically be delivered out of Egypt. And we read in Genesis 45 that Joseph understood that. Sometimes it is hard to tell what the Old Testament saints understood at the time, but other times we are told.

Gen. 45:4 “And Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come near to me.” So they came near. Then he said: “I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8 So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.”

Joseph understood the purpose of God. Joseph was sent to preserve life, and historically, with the years of famine, that became obvious and evident. But there was more to all of this than mere history. This is redemptive history, and we can understand and interpret what Stephen is saying about the life of Joseph in a redemptive historical way, which is to say, we can see the work of God in redemption being exhibited in the life of Joseph and his brothers.

Gen. 45: 7 “And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

I’ll read again from,

Gen. 50:20 “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.”

That’s Stephen’s purpose in this historical account, just as it was with the previous references to Abraham. He is proclaiming the gospel, the gospel preached beforehand to Joseph. And with that, we also see,

III. THE FAITH OF JOSEPH.

Remember the emphasis the last two sermons, with the covenant promise of a great land and a great number of descendants. With Abraham, Joseph too had...

A. Faith to live as an heir of the covenant promise.

He died, we are told. But, like Abraham, he made arrangements to be buried in the promised land, knowing that he would inherit that promise of God, even if he never inhabited the land while living in this age on this earth.

v.15 “So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. 16 And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.”

There is a lot of history in those verses, including a conflation or combining of two purchases of burial plots into one, with a consistent meaning, expressed in,

Heb. 11:22 “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.”

To read the fuller exposition of that, we go back to,

Gen. 50:24 “And Joseph said to his brethren, “I am dying; but

God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” 25 Then Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.” 26 So Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.”

So it is, as with Abraham, we see,

B. Faith to believe the promise of life.

He would die, on earth. But his life would continue, according to the promise of God, in the promised land! He, with Abraham, did not live to experience the fulfillment of that promise in their flesh, but their bodies were laid to rest there in the hope and expectation of receiving that promise of life in the resurrection.

Again,

Heb. 11:13 “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

That promise is now for us, for we live today as Joseph lived. As Abraham lived. As an alien and a stranger, a foreigner, a pilgrim, a temporary visitor, waiting for the promised inheritance, the eternal city that promises eternal life. And that life is for all those whom God delivers out of the bondage of sin, through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the promise of the gospel that I proclaim to you today.