



Stephen's Sermon

Acts 7

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**Though A.I. was utilized, this original sermon or its concept was not written by A.I.*

We've been going through the book of Acts, and we've come to chapter 7. This chapter wasn't originally in my series, but I felt the Lord prompting me to add it in.

This is Stephen's sermon or speech to the Sanhedrin, for which he was stoned to death. At the end of chapter 6, he was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin. This is the same council that crucified Jesus.

The accusation against Stephen was that he spoke against the holy place and the law of Moses. The holy place was the temple and the land. They accused him of teaching that Jesus was going to destroy the temple and change the customs of the law.

Stephen's sermon moves through four eras in Israel's history: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the final era, Kings David and Solomon. I've identified three threads running through the sermon:

1. God's presence cannot be confined to a single place or land.
2. The Israelites always reject God, though God never breaks his covenant.
3. God is the Redeemer his people, sending messiah-types until the true Messiah to rescue his people.

Let's follow those three threads through the four parts of Stephen's sermon. At first, you might be a little confused but with each section it will start to clear up for you, so stay with me!

I invite you to turn to Acts chapter 7. We will start with verses 1-8.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Scripture: Acts 7:1-8

Abraham

7 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

2 To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 3 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6 God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' 8 Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father

of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.
Amen.

Thread One: God's Presence Cannot be Confined to a Single Place

The first thread starts with God approaching Abraham in a land full of idol worshipers and making a covenant promise to him. Abraham did not receive this land of promise at all. Neither did his ancestors at first. They were stuck in a foreign land of pagan idol worshipers for 400 years, yet God was with them. He was not merely with them, but he was executing judgment on the foreign people for their idol worship, showing God's sovereignty and ability to move and rule wherever he leads his people.

The first thread speaks of God not being confined to a specific place or people. God is the sovereign Lord. He rules over all the earth and over all people. His covenants stretch through all lands and people— it's pretty radical for Stephen to start this way as it lays the foundation for why Christ is sent to the whole world; why the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all people, not just the Jews.

One important note about God's covenants: his covenants are meant to separate his faithful people out from all unfaithful people.

Thread Two: The Israelites (Patriarchs) Reject God; He Never Breaks His Covenant Promise

For the second thread, Stephen mentions the 400 years in a strange land, Egypt to be exact, that the Israelites initially endured. The reason for their suffering in a foreign land was brought about by the patriarchs selling their brother Joseph to slavery in Egypt. We'll see that in the next block of Scripture. At the same time we see God making a covenant of circumcision with Abraham and all his descendants. This was a covenant meant to separate God's people from the pagans in their midst. Even in the people's rejection, God is still faithful to his promises.

Thread Three: God is the Redeemer Through Sent Messiah-Types

The third thread: God is the Redeemer and he sends messiah-types, or types of Christ, to prefigure the Messiah and rescue his chosen people from slavery. Abraham is a messiah-type chosen by God to be a model of faith, obedience, and the blessings of God on all nations. The Apostle Paul in Gal. 3:8 said the gospel was announced in advance to Abraham, so that all who have faith would become the children of Abraham and be justified by faith through Christ Jesus.

Let's read Acts 7:9-16

Joseph

9 "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

11 "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their

first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. 16 Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money. Amen.

We find the same three threads running through this section, moving the narrative forward from Abraham to Joseph.

Thread One: God's Presence is Not Confined to One Place

In vs. 9, Stephen says something telling: Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt by his brothers, "But God was with him." He was taken far from the land of promise, but God remained with him, even blessing him greatly in the midst of an evil culture. Stephen's accusers believed God's presence was tied exclusively to the temple and especially to the land of Israel, but Joseph's story destroys that belief. God was just as present in Egypt as he was anywhere else. Joseph did not encounter God in the temple or the holy land. He encountered God in a pit, in slavery, in prison, and finally in Pharaoh's court.

This thread continues the narrative that God's covenant presence goes with his people wherever they are, whether in exile, suffering, even the darkest places that seem devoid of God's Spirit. We should be encouraged by this truth.

Thread Two: God's People Repeatedly Reject God and His Sent Ones; God's Covenant Promise Continues

Stephen pulls out a terrible story in their history in vs. 9, "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt." These were the patriarchs of Israel, the men who would give birth to the twelve tribes of Israel. They rejected Joseph, their eventual savior.

Joseph had a prophetic dream about the sheaves of wheat, and the sun, moon, and eleven stars—his whole family—bowing down to him (Gen. 37:1-11). This was a prophecy of how God would use Joseph to rescue his people. Joseph's brothers hated him for it, so they threw him in a pit, and sold him for pieces of silver. You can see the pattern in Stephen's sermon: God's people always reject God and his sent ones, and yet his covenant promise never fails.

Thread Three: God Raises a Rejected Savior to Redeem His People

The stunning part of Joseph's story is how God turned rejection into redemption. The one sold by his people to slavery was the one redeeming his people from slavery. Though Joseph was humiliated and suffered unjustly, God graciously made him a ruler over all of Egypt. When famine came, the same brothers who meant harm had to come to him for salvation. God's grace was not only upon Joseph, but his grace was upon his stiff-necked people through Joseph.

Joseph is a messiah-type. Rejected by his own people. Exalted by God. Raised to save those who betrayed him. God's wonderful mercies!

Let's look at the next section, Acts 7:17-45. For the sake of time, I'll paraphrase or skip parts.

Moses

17 “As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. 18 Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ 19 He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

20 “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family.

Verses 21-22 talk about Moses’ upbringing in Pharaoh’s house.

23 “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. 24 He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. 25 Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. 26 The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

27 “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? 28 Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’

Verses 29 Moses fled.

30 “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: 32 ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’

33 “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Verse 34- 35 God sends Moses back to Egypt to set his people free.

35 “This is the same Moses they had rejected, [saying] ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’

39 “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

Verse 40- 41, the Israelites made idols of their own to worship.

42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“ ‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?’

43 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.
Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

Verses 44 to 45 mention the tabernacle of the covenant law— this was a portable tent they set up from place to place in the wilderness, and Joshua brought that tent into the promised land.
Amen.

The same three threads continue in Stephen's Moses narrative. The threads are weaving both an indictment and a beautiful hope for all people.

Thread One: God's Presence is Not Confined to the Temple.

God appears to Moses, but not in Jerusalem, not in a temple, not even in the promised land. It was a burning bush out in the middle of nowhere— a desert! In verse 33, God commanded, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." That holy ground wasn't a part of Israel. What made it holy ground was God's manifest presence and nothing else!

Stephen's teaching is pretty radical for the time, and it's a theme you see throughout the New Testament. Holiness has nothing to do with a place. Holiness has only to do with the presence of God. Later in the wilderness we see the same thing in the tabernacle tent. God's presence in this temporary tabernacle tent was the only reason it was a holy place. Further, His presence moved with them wherever he led them.

This thread tells us again, God is not confined to any place. He dwells with his people in covenant faithfulness wherever he leads them.

Thread Two: Israel Rejects the God-Sent Deliverer; God's Faithfulness Continues On

Moses was rejected by his own people. Verse 25 says: "Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not." This rejection came up again after Moses led them out of Egypt. The people turned their hearts away and made their own idols to worship.

The convicting pattern is coming clearer with every word. God's people reject the redeemers he has sent to rescue them, and yet his covenant faithfulness continues on in spite of rebellious hearts.

Thread Three: God Sends a Rejected Deliverer who Foreshadows Christ

Moses is the clearest messiah-type in the Old Testament. He rescued Israel from slavery with signs and wonders. He was the mediator of the covenant law from God. He rescued his people from slavery. Yet, as great a messiah-figure that Moses was, he predicted that a greater Messiah was yet to come. In verse 37, the key verse of this chapter, Stephen quotes Moses' prophecy about the coming Messiah, "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people" (Deut. 18:15). That greater prophet was Jesus Christ.

Stephen brings up another messiah-type in Joshua. Joshua means “Yahweh is salvation.” He prefigures the Messiah by leading his people into the promised land.

Finally, let’s finish with Acts 7:45b-53.

David and Solomon

[The tabernacle] remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

48 “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human 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 where will my resting place be?
50 Has not my hand made all these things?’

51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ac 7:1–53.

Stephen finishes with king David and Solomon, two strong messiah-figures. He abruptly ends his history lesson with a sharp rebuke of the Sanhedrin, which is exactly what he was building up to.

So, one last time, let’s look at the three threads.

Thread One: God Cannot Be Contained by a Building

Stephen brings up David and Solomon because they were responsible for the first temple—David had the vision, Solomon made it happen. Yet, even in such a magnificent place for worship, Solomon makes one of the most important admissions in the Old Testament: “The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands.” The Sanhedrin were idolizing their temple.

Then Stephen quotes the prophet Isaiah: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.” (Isa. 66:1-2). This is the climax of Stephens sermon. A physical temple cannot confine God, it cannot even summon God’s presence unless God chooses to dwell in it. The religious leaders and all Israel, for that matter, believed the temple was the only place authorized for worship. It was idolatry and a way to use God to control the people.

As the Scripture says, God made the heavens and the earth. He will not be contained by anything made by human hands. Further, Jesus has become the true eternal temple, and by the Holy Spirit, the body of faith-filled believers has become the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Thread Two: Israel Continually Resists God; Yet God’s Mercy and Grace Prevails

Stephen calls the religious council stiff-necked with uncircumcised hearts and ears. They resist the Holy Spirit and don't even follow the law of Moses to begin with. They follow the same pattern as their ancestors, persecuting the prophets, killing those who foretold the coming Messiah, and murdering the Righteous One. Stephen is not the rebellious one, it's the Sanhedrin!

This second thread warns throughout against stiff-necked rebellion. Yet, by God's love and compassion, there is always a third thread of mercy and grace.

Thread Three: God Finally Sends His True Messiah— and He Was Rejected

This is where it all comes together. Every deliverer in Israel's history pointed forward to the one true Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Abraham pointed toward salvation by faith in God's promise.
 Joseph pointed toward the rejected one who would save his people from suffering.
 Moses pointed toward the deliverer of God's people from slavery.
 Joshua pointed toward the One leading God's people into the promised land.
 David pointed toward the humble Shepherd, and the coming King of kings and Lord of lords
 Solomon pointed toward the Christ as the true temple, and the Holy Spirit dwelling within all believers.

Though they were messiah-types, none of them were the Messiah, only shadows.

Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets. The Anointed One that all of Israel and the whole world was waiting for had come, and the Israelites in true form rejected him, and killed him.

Conclusion

Stephen's sermon at first looks like a history lesson, but it's an indictment on the rebellious heart and a testimony to God's covenant faithfulness amid stubborn rebelliousness.

The three threads throughout Stephen's sermon tell us:

1. God's presence cannot be confined to a place, whether a temple or land.
2. The people always reject God and his sent ones, but God's covenant faithfulness never fails.
3. God always sends a redeemer who rescues his people.

The three-strand cord ends with Jesus Christ. The true temple where God dwells with humanity is Jesus. The Redeemer of all humankind is Jesus. Just like every deliverer before him, he was rejected and killed by his own people. Yet, God, in his covenant faithfulness, raised him up and set him at the right hand of God in his heavenly throne room. As Stephen was getting pelted to death with stones he looked up and said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." and his final words were in the words of Christ, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Amen.

Let's pray.

Study Questions
Read Acts 7

Observation Questions:

1. What were the accusations against Stephen before the Sanhedrin?
2. Identify the key historical figures Stephen mentions in his sermon. What was significant about them?
3. How did Stephen describe the reaction of the Israelites to Moses' leadership?
4. What does Stephen quote to emphasize that God is not confined to temples?

Interpretation Questions:

1. Why does Stephen begin his sermon with Abraham's calling?
2. What is the significance of Joseph's story in relation to God's presence?
3. How does Stephen use Moses' story to illustrate the rejection of God's deliverers?
4. In what way does Stephen conclude his argument with the religious leaders? Why does it seem abrupt-- in other words, what is it about the preceding statement (vs. 49-50) that makes Stephen end his history lesson right there and turn sharply toward the Sanhedrin?

Application Questions:

1. How can you apply the understanding of God's omnipresence in your daily life?
2. What steps can you take to ensure your heart remains open to the Holy Spirit?
3. In what ways can you embody the values of God's covenant faithfulness in your relationships?
4. How can recognizing Jesus as the fulfillment of all promises impact your faith practice?