

Stephen's Story

Acts 6:1-8:3

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Do you love a good story? Are there certain stories you like to hear again and again? Maybe it's a favorite book you like to re-read or a movie or TV show you like to watch again. Each time, you pick up on something you may have missed before. Maybe there's something comforting about hearing a familiar story.

Families have stories that get re-told. We recall something that happened and enjoy telling about it. We might even tell about difficult times and how we came through them.

A nation has stories, a history, that helps define who we are as a people.

The Church has a story. Actually, we have lots of stories that help define who God is and who we are, stories that help us remember what God has done and give us hope for what God will do. The many stories of individuals in various times and places are part of the big story that starts with God. It catches us up and involves us.

What if someone tells your story but emphasizes different details than you normally do? What if they tell the same story but draw different conclusions than you do?

In this section of Acts, a follower of Jesus tells the story of God and Israel. The people he tells it to are familiar with it, but they react violently to how he tells it and applies it.

We're listening to Stephen's story. Actually, it's *stories*. We hear the story about Stephen and the story Stephen tells. They cover two full chapters of Acts.

Stephen's story is part of the church's larger story. We last saw the early church providing for each other's material as well as spiritual needs. We saw the good example of Barnabas and the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira. Following that episode, the apostles continued ministering and preaching in the temple courts. The high priest and his cronies were jealous of the apostles and arrested them. But the Lord sent

and angel to release them from jail and instruct them to “go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people all about this new life” (5:20). They did and they were again brought before the ruling Council. After much debate, the Council had the apostles flogged then released them. They continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Now we see the church still growing. Growth is good, but it can bring problems. The twelve apostles are preaching and teaching, doing signs and wonders, and trying to run the Jerusalem food bank on their own. It gets to be too much. Some of the Greek-speaking Jews who are believers claim that their widows are being overlooked in the daily food distribution and that the Aramaic-speaking Jews are being favored. Widows were especially vulnerable in that culture. Most women spent their lives first in households that belonged to their fathers and then their husbands. They controlled little property and had little economic opportunity. Many women were widowed at a relatively young age and became even more vulnerable economically and socially. God had always expected Israel to care for vulnerable people, including, maybe especially, widows and orphans. The prophets chastised the people for neglecting widows (for example, Isaiah 10:1-2; Zechariah 7:10-12). Luke shows particular concern for widows. He mentions them more than any of the other Gospel writers (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*).

So providing for the widows in the church is important, but it's becoming overwhelming. The apostles realize that they don't have time or even the skills to deal with this. So they call the believers together—or at least a representative group of them. They ask the group to choose seven men who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom so they can turn the responsibility over to them. The seven all have Greek names, so it's possible they come from the group that had raised the issue. Stephen and Philip are the two that get the most attention.

Stephen is said to be full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He is also full of God's grace and power. Not only does he help with the food distribution, but he performs great wonders and signs. And he debates with Jews from various places. The Jews were scattered all over the known world. This was called the “Diaspora.” Some of these dispersed Jews were in Jerusalem and

were part of a synagogue there. They argued with Stephen, but they couldn't stand up against the wisdom that the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Since they couldn't beat him in honest debate, they got some people to make false accusations against him. They said Stephen was speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. That's a serious charge among Jewish people. Then Stephen's adversaries stirred up the people, the elders, and the teachers of the law and they took Stephen before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. They false witnesses brought their fake testimony against him.

It sounds a lot like the trial of Jesus before this same council. Part of Stephen's story is that he is a model disciple, a true follower of Jesus. Even as the council stares at him, they see that his face is like that of an angel. There's some kind of radiance, divine presence, confidence there.

The high priest asks Stephen if the charges against him are true. Has he really spoken against Moses and God and the temple? Is he really saying that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and change the customs that came from Moses?

Stephen doesn't directly answer the charges against him. Instead, he tells them a story. It's one they're very familiar with. It's their story, the story of the Jewish people. Really, it's the story of God. Stephen shows that they've misread their story. They've emphasized the wrong things. They've drawn the wrong conclusions. Where they are now shows that they've taken a turn away from the direction God intended.

N. T. Wright illustrates this by talking about cricket. Now, I played baseball when I was very young. I wouldn't say I understand it very well. But I know nothing about the English game of cricket. Wright says one of the differences between baseball and cricket is how the ball is delivered to the person trying to hit it. In baseball, the pitcher stands in one spot and throws the ball toward the batter. In cricket, the "bowler" runs up to the spot where they release the ball. Within the rhythm of the whole run, the bowling action follows, getting its energy and direction from the run-up. The bowler will step off the run and mark it. If the run-up is wrong, the whole thing is messed up. It's similar to someone doing the long jump. They have a mark to hit and so they pace off exactly how far they need to go back to run up

to the jump and get it correct. Wright says that Stephen is telling the people that they need to rework their run-up. "Tell the story again from the very beginning and get it right this time. Pace out the whole journey, from Abraham onwards, so that you arrive at the present moment at exactly the right speed and from exactly the right angle. Then, and only then, will you understand who Jesus is" and what those who believe in Jesus have and haven't been saying (*Acts for Everyone*, Part 1, 107-08).

So Stephen starts with God. He says, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham." God takes the initiative. God calls Abraham and that's the beginning of God's program of redemption, delivering people from sin and death and all the damage sin does. God first appeared to Abraham a long way from the land Abraham would eventually come to, the land where his descendants would live. So God's not located in Jerusalem or the temple or even in the land of Israel. God is present anywhere.

Abraham's family, his descendants, are the carriers of God's covenant. A couple of generations after Abraham come the twelve patriarchs, the sons of Jacob. One of those sons was Joseph. His brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. "But God was with him and rescued him" (7:9). God gives Joseph wisdom and enables him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph becomes ruler over Egypt.

The high priest and his associates are jealous of the apostles (5:17). Stephen and the others chosen to serve are full of wisdom. The church has the favor or goodwill of many of the people.

When a famine struck Egypt and Canaan, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. They didn't recognize their brother Joseph the first time they went there. When they returned, Joseph revealed himself to them. He provided for them and all then of Jacob's family moved to Egypt.

The brothers had tried to get rid of Joseph. The Sanhedrin had tried to get rid of Jesus. They didn't recognize Jesus for who he is, but he keeps trying to reveal himself to them.

The people of Israel stayed in Egypt for generations. The a king of Egypt came along who didn't care anything about Joseph. He began oppressing the people of Israel, forcing them to abandon their newborn babies so they would die. But God remembered and was keeping his

promise to Abraham. And Moses was born at this time. His family kept him and cared for him as long as they could. Then, when he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own. Moses got an Egyptian education, which was famous for its great wisdom.

As an adult, Moses went to visit his own people, the Israelites. An Egyptian was mistreating one of them, so Moses defended the Israelite and killed the Egyptian. "Moses thought his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not" (7:25). That's another foreshadowing of Jesus.

The next day Moses tried to stop two Israelites who were fighting. The one who was in the wrong pushed Moses aside and said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you going to kill me too?" At this, Moses ran away to Midian, where he was a resident alien. He married and had two sons.

After forty years, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush near Mount Sinai. Going to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Then the Lord told Moses that he was standing on holy ground. God can make any place holy, not just the "holy land" or the temple. God also said, "I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt" (7:34).

The people had earlier rejected Moses, but now God was sending him to be their ruler and deliverer. God led the people out of Egypt and did wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness. God was still doing wonders and signs in Jesus and in the church through the Holy Spirit.

Moses declared that God would raise up for Israel a prophet like himself. Moses was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel of God's presence, with the Jewish ancestors; "and he received living words to pass on to us" (7:38). It doesn't sound like Stephen is blaspheming Moses or speaking ill of him in any way.

It was the people of Israel, "our ancestors," who refused to obey Moses. They pushed him aside and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.

They asked for gods they could see and handle, something made by their own hands. They made an idol in the form of a calf. And God turned away from them and gave them over to worship the sun, moon, and stars. Often, the punishment for sin is sin itself. God judges us by allowing us to continue in sin, to let sin run its course.

The history of Israel includes worship of gods that weren't God, of idols they made themselves. The prophets ridiculed and condemned this idolatry. How foolish to make something with your own hands and then to worship it!

Then Stephen reminds the council about the tabernacle, the tent, of the covenant law that "our ancestors" had in the wilderness. God had given directions for making it. It was to be the place to meet God and to worship. Later, after the nation had entered the land and become established, David wanted to build a permanent house for God. Instead, David's son Solomon built it. But even Solomon recognized that the Most High doesn't live in houses made by human hands. Stephen quotes Isaiah delivering God's word: "'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? Has not my hand made all these things?'" (7:49-50; Isaiah 66:1-2).

Now Stephen goes on the offensive. He stops saying "we" and "us." Now he says, "You. You stiff-necked people!" He accuses them the way the prophets used to accuse their ancestors. "You always resist the Holy Spirit!" Your ancestors persecuted the prophets and executed those those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One (that is, Jesus). "And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it" (7:51-53).

The council members were furious at Stephen and snarled at him. But Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and got a vision of the glory of God (remember he began his speech by referring to "the God of glory"). It's as if the heavenly throne room appeared in place of the earthly ruling council. Stephen says, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Well, that was too much for them. They covered their ears; they refused to listen; they started yelling, and they rushed Stephen. They dragged him out of the city and started stoning him.

The witnesses, those throwing the stones to kill Stephen, laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul, who approved their killing of him. Later Saul sets out to destroy the church, dragging men and women off to prison. We'll see more of this Saul.

But as Stephen dies, he continues to follow Jesus. He prays in a way similar to Jesus on the cross. Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And, and Jesus prayed for those who killed him to be forgiven, Stephen prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60).

So Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. The word martyr means "witness." There were many Jewish martyrs in the centuries prior to the time of Jesus. Some of their stories are told in various writings. During one season of persecution, these Jewish martyrs went to their deaths bearing witness to their own faith, including their belief in resurrection that they will enjoy on the last day. They also threatened their torturers with dire punishments to come, saying things like, "Do not think that God has forsaken our people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!" (see 2 Maccabees 7; Wright 123).

And the extraordinary thing is that, even though the earliest Christians were all first-century Jews to whom that kind of response would have been normal and expected, none of them, going to their death, say anything like that at all. Stephen has just laid a pretty ferocious charge against the Jewish leaders in his speech. But when it come to his own death, he shouts out a prayer at the top of his voice, as rocks are flying at him and his body is being smashed and crushed, asking God not to hold this sin against them. That is every bit as remarkable as the vision of the open heaven and the son of man standing as counsel for the defence. It is the up-ending of a great and noble tradition. If we knew nothing about Christianity except the fact that its martyrs called down blessing and forgiveness, rather than cursing and judgment, on their torturers and executioners, we would

have a central, though no doubt puzzling, insight into the whole business. (Wright 123-24)

The explanation is that the Christians had really learned from Jesus and were empowered by Jesus. The story of God's redemption of the world reaches its highest point in Jesus. We're still living in that story. Like Stephen and so many others, we are called to follow Jesus in life and in death. We can help each other in this. And, as with Stephen, God can fill us with the Holy Spirit, with faith, with wisdom, with grace, with power. And we will truly represent Jesus and be his witnesses wherever we are.