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*TEACHING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD*

# Acts of the Apostles - Lesson 7

## Chapter 7

P.O. Box 702107  
San Antonio, Texas, 78270  
210.319.5055

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- Part II of Stephen’s story
  - Tonight is his defense of the charges brought against him
    - In this day, there were no defense lawyers or lengthy trials
    - Stephen was called to speak for himself and give a defense against the charges
      - Gamaliel’s warning that the Sanhedrin risked fighting against God had all but been forgotten
  - Stephen’s discourse is the longest and most famous in Acts
    - And it forms a very unconventional defense, though it’s very powerful
      - It essentially takes the form of a retelling of the high points of Israel’s history
    - And at first glance it seems to be a long speech without relevance to the charges or even the Gospel
      - In reality, it’s a remarkable delivery of both a defense to the charges and a presentation of the Gospel
  - In fact, the discourse accomplishes three things simultaneously
    - First, it defends the the specific charges leveled by the false witnesses
      - Blaspheming God & Moses
      - Speaking against the temple, the Law and the customs of Israel
    - Secondly, Stephen demonstrates that God’s plan has followed a regular pattern of picturing Christ throughout the history of the nation of Israel
      - And that the story of Jesus is merely the continuation of the record established in the Old Testament
    - Third, Stephen takes opportunity to show where the religious leaders of his day had distorted and misused God’s word or Israel’s customs
    - Finally, Stephen brings an indictment against the leaders for failing to recognize this truth and for persecuting the saints

**Acts 7:1** The high priest said, “Are these things so?”

**Acts 7:2** And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,

**Acts 7:3** and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’

**Acts 7:4** “Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.

**Acts 7:5** “But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM.

**Acts 7:6** “But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND

**MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.**

**Acts 7:7** “‘AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,’ said God, ‘AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.’

**Acts 7:8** “And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

- Stephen begins with a recap of the patriarchal period
  - This testimony is Stephen’s response to the charge that he blasphemed God
    - Though the technical definition of that charge is to speak the name of God, Stephen consents to the broader meaning of the charge
    - He defends himself against the suggestion that he has diminished God’s nature or character, not just His name
  - The retelling of Abraham’s story reflects a high view of God as a promise-keeping God
    - And it pays proper respect to the way God’s glory was established through the patriarchs of Israel
- Secondly, look at the subtle jabs Stephen takes at the Sanhedrin
  - He pointedly mentioned that Abraham had been called and given a promise while still outside the land
    - The Pharisees and other Hebrew Jews placed excessive importance on living in the land
    - One of the reasons they probably chose Stephen to persecute was that he was a Jew from outside the land
    - Here Stephen counters that notion by pointing out that God was working with Abraham, a man who came from outside the land
      - God’s favor, in other words, is the result of a call and obedient faith, not a result of birthplace or family line
  - Another jab comes in the form of the promised inheritance
    - The promise to Abraham was for an inheritance that Abraham never personally received in his lifetime
    - Stephen demonstrates that the fulfillment of that promise wasn’t to be found in the land of Palestine, at least not in its present form
- Now look for a pattern in these events that form a repeating framework for the entire discourse
  - A man of God’s choosing is shown in two stages
    - In the first stage, the man God chooses is seen falling short of the supposed goal or fullness of glory God intended
      - Only to be shown later reaching that very goal in a better way
    - The pattern repeats over the discourse to suggest that Jesus’ life is the model for this pattern

- For example, Abraham is chosen by God and sent to a foreign land
  - But in that land, he doesn't receive the full inheritance he was promised
    - Instead, he produces offspring that become a family and nation
  - But through a covenant, Abraham is promised to receive this inheritance in a future day
- Not only does this pattern begin to suggest Christ's own life
  - But Abraham's story itself serves as an important prerequisite for Christ's coming, since it is the Abrahamic Covenant that promises the Messiah

**Gal. 3:16** Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.

**Gal. 3:29** And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

- A quick note on apparent discrepancies in the text between Stephen's statements and other texts of Scripture
  - All the differences are explainable, and the differences offer additional insight into these events
    - For example, Abraham's father died in Haran before Abraham left for the land
    - The problem comes because the age of Haran at death would seem to be too old given Haran's age when he is said to have become a father to Abraham and his brothers back in Ur
  - The confusion comes because we assume Abraham was first born in Haran's family

**Acts 7:9** "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,

**Acts 7:10** and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

**Acts 7:11** "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.

**Acts 7:12** "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time.

**Acts 7:13** "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.

**Acts 7:14** "Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.

**Acts 7:15** "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died.

**Acts 7:16** "From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in

## Shechem.

- Now the story turns to Joseph
  - In this section Stephen continues to develop the story of Jesus as reflected in the lives and circumstances of the Old Testament
    - Now the focus is Joseph
  - The first time Joseph was called to lead his family, his brothers rejected him and became jealous
    - Yet God was with him
      - Stephen's subtle point is that rejection by men (men of Israel) doesn't mean God is also rejecting His chosen
    - Eventually, God raised Joseph up and restored him
      - And now Stephen adds a new detail to the comparison
      - The family of Israel is struck by famine and stress and trial back in the land
  - And when Israel responded to their stress by seeking relief in Egypt, they appear before the one they previously rejected
    - And then they give Joseph respect
    - And Joseph sends for all Israel to join them
- This account offers such a wonderful parallel to Christ's experience with the nation of Israel
  - He appears once and comes to rule over them and his brothers (Israel) rejected him
    - While he is away, the Father exalts the Son to great power and authority
    - And Israel is suffering under dispersion and persecution
  - Then under stress the nation will appeal to Jesus for protection (Zechariah 12-14)
    - And Jesus will return for them and invite all Israel to become part of His kingdom
  - And here again Stephen emphasizes that God's blessing occurred outside the land and then they returned
    - A further jab at the Sanhedrin that valued the land over the Messiah Himself

**Acts 7:17** “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,  
**Acts 7:18** until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH.

**Acts 7:19** “It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.

**Acts 7:20** “It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.

**Acts 7:21** “And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.

**Acts 7:22** “Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.

**Acts 7:23** “But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.

**Acts 7:24** “And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.

**Acts 7:25** “And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.

**Acts 7:26** “On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?’

**Acts 7:27** “But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US?’

**Acts 7:28** ‘YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?’

**Acts 7:29** “At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

- Now Stephen turns to Moses and in the process he’ll defend himself to the charge that he blasphemed him
  - The entire account of Moses is respectful and gives Moses the proper dignity
  - And now Moses takes the role of forerunner of Jesus
    - Like with Joseph, Moses is a man sent by God to deliver the Jews
      - This is an obvious parallel to Jesus
    - Several of the things Stephen says about Moses are similar to things said in the Gospel concerning Jesus
- Stephen begins by reminding the leaders of Israel that God promised the nation would be oppressed
  - So when the time for the promise arrived, they entered slavery
  - During this time the nation of Jews was under oppression at the hands of evil leaders
    - And in the midst of that experience, God raised up a deliverer for them
      - And that deliverer first came as a child with a unique background
      - He was raised by a surrogate family
        - These details remind us of Christ of course
  - At the age of forty, Moses takes note of the plight of his people in slavery and begins to defend them
    - And Stephen tells us that Moses anticipated that his action would be met with gladness by his fellow Jews
    - But Stephen says they didn’t understand
      - In fact, the next day Moses tried to act as a peacemaker among his people, but they mocked him

- They rejected him as a ruler and judge over them
  - Having been rejected, Moses fled into the desert and produced sons
- All of this prefigures Christ's first coming to deliver Israel
  - It also demonstrates that Israel has commonly rejected what God has offered

**Acts 7:30** “After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH.

**Acts 7:31** “When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:

**Acts 7:32** ‘I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.

**Acts 7:33** “BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, ‘TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.

**Acts 7:34** ‘I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.’

**Acts 7:35** “This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.

**Acts 7:36** “This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

**Acts 7:37** “This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.’

- When it came time for Moses to return, God appeared to him
  - Notice again the reverence with which Stephen describes Moses
    - The charge of blaspheme against Moses is effectively denied here as Stephen gives a proper and respectful testimony concerning Moses
  - Secondly, Stephen continues to show that physical land was not the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel
    - The call to Moses took place outside the land
      - In fact, the land is counted holy simply because God was present
      - Further indictment of the Jewish leaders who had made the land of Israel their god
  - And now the man previously rejected by the nation of Israel becomes their appointed deliverer
    - And Stephen reminds the leadership that God Himself stated through Moses that their Messiah would be modeled on the life of Moses
    - Specifically, the pattern of a man “once rejected and later received” is the model that Moses provides and Jesus fulfills
  - Rather than Stephen speaking against Moses, it was the Sanhedrin who was
- But even after their deliverance, the nation continues in their disobedient ways

- Stephen emphasizes that the giving of the Law didn't change their hearts
  - The people of Israel have always violated their own law

**Acts 7:38** “This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

**Acts 7:39** “Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt,

**Acts 7:40** SAYING TO AARON, ‘MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT — WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.’

**Acts 7:41** “At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

**Acts 7:42** “But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL?

**Acts 7:43** ‘YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.’

- Stephen is now addressing the charge of speaking against the Law
  - Rather than speak against the Law, Stephen upholds the Law calling Scripture living oracles
    - They are living because they are the manifestation of God in Christ
    - They are living because they call men to a new relationship with God
  - In contrast to his adoration for a living word, Stephen speaks against the people's disobedience to the Law
    - They were unwilling to be obedient to God and turned their backs on Him
      - Here's another obvious jab at the leaders of Israel, who were unwilling to be obedient to the living word in their day
      - They were unwilling to be obedient to the Gospel
    - Their disobedience was instigated by the Jewish leaders, Aaron their high priest, who led them into idol worship
      - In fact, Stephen reveals that while the nation wandered in the desert, they continued to engage in idol worship and made sacrifices to Molech
  - By comparison, Stephen implies that it wasn't he who spoke against the Law
    - It was the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin who were guilty of this offense in the way they rejected the word of God through Christ and chose idol worship instead
    - And the Lord promises to judge those who engage in idol worship contrary to His revealed word

**Acts 7:44** “Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.

**Acts 7:45** “And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David.

**Acts 7:46** “David found favor in God’s sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

**Acts 7:47** “But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.

**Acts 7:48** “However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

**Acts 7:49** ‘HEAVEN IS MY THRONE,  
AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET;  
WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?’ says the Lord,  
‘OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?’

**Acts 7:50** ‘WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?’

- The final charge was that Stephen had spoken against the holy place, or the Temple
  - Stephen had probably been charged with dishonoring the Temple because he had preached on the insignificance of a building
    - And he likely emphasized the important of the living temple of God in the heart of the believer
  - Here he defends himself through a proper retelling of how the tabernacle originated and its true purpose
    - First, notice that the original tabernacle was not a temple
      - It was a tent built in the wilderness, Stephen emphasizes
        - Again, the blessing and grace of God arrived outside the land and in a different form than the one presently revered
    - Secondly, in keeping with the author of Hebrews, Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that even the first tabernacle was not special in itself
      - Rather, it was important because it was built on a pattern as a copy of something truly important – that being God’s true dwelling place
    - God isn’t contained in a place built by human hands
- David asked God for the privilege of building a permanent structure to honor the Lord
  - The idea of a temple originated with David, and though God eventually permitted it, we see that it was a manmade request in the beginning
  - David requested it, but God denied him the opportunity
    - It was granted to Solomon, a lesser king compared to David
    - It became a part of Solomon’s undoing
  - The temple was not a priority for God because He doesn’t dwell in a building made by human hands

**Acts 7:51** “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

**Acts 7:52** “Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;

**Acts 7:53** you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

- Finally, Stephen brings his discourse to conclusion by applying all these lessons to his audience
  - They are repeating the sins of their fathers
    - They are uncircumcised in the heart, which is to say unbelievers
  - Interesting that Stephen uses this phrase
    - The use of circumcision to picture the saving work of the Spirit in the heart eventually becomes one of Paul’s favorite ways of communicating the difference between faith and works
      - Circumcision of the heart is contrasted with circumcision of the flesh
    - But here, Stephen introduces that concept
      - And in the audience was a young man named Saul of Tarsus
  - Stephen says they have rejected and persecuted the prophets as did their fathers
    - And in particular, they have persecuted the Righteous One
      - Who was foretold beforehand
      - All of Stephen’s discourse was intended to reflect how the Righteous One and his death were foretold in Scripture
    - They received the Law ordained by angels but did not keep it
      - To keep the Law in this context is similar to another of Paul’s later teachings
      - That true obedience to the Law means becoming obedient to the Gospel, because the Law points us to Christ

**Acts 7:54** Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

**Acts 7:55** But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;

**Acts 7:56** and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

**Acts 7:57** But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.

**Acts 7:58** When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

**Acts 7:59** They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

**Acts 7:60** Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

- In response to this damning conclusion, the Sanhedrin erupts in anger
  - They are cut to the quick we’re told
    - Luke’s language literally says sawn in two
  - They gnash their teeth, which means to bite with loud noises
    - This is an expression to indicate aggressive and angry speech
  - Interestingly, Stephen virtually makes no mention of Jesus
    - And yet he has been preaching Jesus throughout the testimony
    - It’s also interesting to see how Stephen becomes the link between Peter and Paul
      - Peter is known as the Apostle who was reluctant to put aside the Law and the customs of Israel in order to follow Jesus fully
      - Paul is the Apostle anointed to clearly demonstrate that the New replaced the Old
      - Stephen is the first among the brethren to preach this new dispensation and does so within hearing of both men
- While this eruption is taking place, Stephen is calmed and encouraged by a heavenly vision granted to him alone
  - He sees Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven
  - The Scripture tells us to expect this, especially Psalm 110
    - Later New Testament Scripture confirms this, but Stephen’s vision is the only known manifestation of that truth
      - Stephen alone sees what the Scriptures tell us is true
- When the Messiah is seen next to the Father, He may be described at times as seated or at other times as standing
  - The significance of Jesus sitting is that only when a servant’s work is finished may he sit
    - Jesus has finished the work of redemption
  - But if He is seen to be standing, it reflects His ongoing work to build and guide and protect His Church
    - Here, Jesus is seen standing because of His work in that moment to guide Stephen’s speech and reassure Stephen that Jesus is directing the outcome
      - Stephen was confessing Christ before men, and the vision reminds him that Jesus keeps His promise to confess Stephen’s name before the Father
- As Stephen gazes at this incredible sight, he is completely distracted away from the moment and even tries to share it with everyone
  - It’s as if Stephen expects that this vision is available to everyone, and if they would

only see it with him, it would stop the fight

- But no one else sees the vision
- And when Stephen declares that he sees the Son of Man next to the Father, he is declaring that Jesus is in that place
  - This statement is the last straw to the Sanhedrin who view it as blasphemy
  - They cover their ears, rush him, drag him outside the city and stone him
- According to Deuteronomy, the witnesses at the trial must be the first ones to cast stones in killing Stephen
  - In order to be more comfortable throwing stones, they first remove their outer cloaks and lay them at the feet of Saul
    - This is an incidental statement except that Luke knows how important Saul will become in his narrative later
    - Described as a young man meant Saul was under the age of 40
- While the stoning takes place, Stephen apparently continues to have a vision of Jesus
  - And he asks Jesus to take his spirit immediately, probably so that he wouldn't experience a prolonged death
    - And it appears Jesus answers his prayer, since he dies while still on his knees