

## Our pilgrim God

- Acts 7:1-53
- The accusations that the Sanhedrin makes against Stephen have to do with two things, the temple and the law, specifically that Stephen speaks against both. The high priest says to Stephen, "Are these things so?" Then Stephen begins his defense that runs 53 verses, and is the longest recorded sermon in the entire Bible. He answers both charges at the same time, and we will see it as we look at four different time periods in the OT. Then Stephen closes his defense, his apologia, with his own accusation against the Sanhedrin. And underneath all of this, there are two powerful principles at work. First, our God is a loving and merciful God. You see that in the way He showed patience to stiff-necked people all through the Old Testament. Second, His patience is perfect but not unlimited. This sermon is a warning that God's patience will not last forever. Look at verse 42, "But God gave them over to worship the host of heaven (meaning, the creation rather than the Creator)." That sounds a lot like the progression we see in Romans 1: 24, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." Then in verse 26, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions." Then in verse 28, "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." God is loving and good. But He is also just. And there will come a time for each person when He will "give him up."
- The temple
- The accusation is that Stephen preached against the temple. The root of the accusation was that the Jews believed that the temple was the center of their faith and in fact it was in the temple where God's presence dwelt. It was there that you were to meet with God. And we know that God did indeed meet with His people, and before that in the tabernacle. And we sing about this idea, don't we? "One day..." "Better is one day." David wrote, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple." (Ps. 27:4)
- Stephen goes through four epochs of the Old Testament and examines the hypothesis that the Sanhedrin is promoting as truth: that the temple is the center of worship and to be there is to be protected by God and if it did not exist, that would be proof that God had abandoned His people.
- Abraham. Where was he from? Ur of the Chaldeans. Was there a Jewish temple there? No. In fact, there weren't even any Jews there. Not yet, anyway. When God called Abram out of Ur, Abram was a worshipper of other gods. Little g. But God spoke to him anyway. Stephen says, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham." God took the initiative and moved Abraham from Ur to Haran to Canaan. And God called to Himself a people. Before God had a temple or even a land, He had a people. And remember in Genesis 15, God told Abraham that his descendants would be sojourners in a land that was not theirs and they would be servants there, afflicted for 400 years? That takes us to...
- Joseph. Where was he from? Well, he was born in Canaan, the promised land, but as you know, he spent most of his life in Egypt. His brothers, the patriarchs of Israel!, were jealous of him, so they sold him into slavery. He ended up in Potiphar's house, where we know from the account in Genesis, Joseph found favor. Then when he was falsely accused and thrown into prison, he again found favor. Then when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream for him, he again found favor and became the number two man in all of Egypt. What's the main point, here? Stephen says it in verse 9: **God was with him.** Wait a minute. Was there a Jewish temple in Egypt? No. But the Jewish people were about to show up. En masse. They moved there and

found favor until that Pharaoh died. And another king arose who did not know Joseph. And the Jews were enslaved for more than 400 years. That takes us to...

- Moses. Where was he from? Well, he was born in Egypt and lived 40 years there as the son of the Pharaoh. But he was Jewish. And He knew the God of Israel. And though he was raised as an Egyptian, Moses was God's man. And when was 40, he tried to rescue his people in his own strength and failed. He first killed an Egyptian who was mistreating a Jew, and hid his body in the sand, thinking he had gotten away with delivering the Jews, one dead Egyptian at a time. Then he tried to stop two Jewish men from fighting the next day. They were stiff-necked in their response, and even asked if Moses was going to kill them like he killed the Egyptian. Moses was frightened by that and he fled to Midian, where he lived on the backside of the desert for 40 years, tending his father-in-law's sheep. Someone said Moses spent 40 years thinking he was a somebody, then spent forty years finding out he was a nobody. Finally he spent forty years finding out what God could do with somebody who was nobody! But the pivotal point in Moses' life happened in the desert when God spoke to him through a burning bush. **(joke: Pres. Bush, asking God if he could speak to Moses about problems in the middle east?)** But the point of the story that Stephen re-tells in verses 30-34 is that there was no temple in the desert where Moses was. But God met with him anyway. And he told him, "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."
- Stephen spends more time on Moses than the other OT leaders, maybe because he was accused of wanting to overturn the laws of Moses. But Stephen leaves no doubt about his respect for Moses' leadership. In fact, he underlines clearly the way Moses was an Old Testament type of Christ. He spelled it out for his listeners, the Sanhedrin, and I am sure it was part of the reason they stoned him. Moses and Jesus were both sent by God. Moses and Jesus were both sent to deliver God's people. Moses and Jesus both performed signs and wonders. And Moses and Jesus were both rejected. Verse 35, "This Moses, whom they rejected." And verse 39, "Our father refused to obey him..." Then later he indicts them, the Sanhedrin, of doing the very same thing with Jesus, whom by the way is the one referred to in verse 37: "This is the Moses who said...'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'
- David and Solomon are mentioned because it was they who built the temple: David desired it, and Solomon built it. But look at verse 48: "Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands..." That's the key to this whole section. Listen, Sanhedrin! Our God is not confined to a place. He is a pilgrim God. He appeared to Abraham in Ur and in Haran. He appeared to Joseph in a pit and a prison and a palace in Egypt. He appeared to Moses in a bush in the desert. And yes, He appeared to Solomon in the temple. The Most High God cannot be kept in a house, especially made by men. Neither can salvation be manufactured by men's hearts and minds. We cannot decide what it means to be saved apart from what God has clearly SAID. God is not locked into a building or a religion made by men. He appears now in the hearts of men and women who have been delivered from death to life by Jesus.
- That leads to Stephen's final point, which is an accusation that those who accuse him do not know the very God they are accusing him of resisting and blaspheming! He calls them "stiff-necked," and he has just told the story again of the Old Testament, where God gave mercy to His people, His stiff-necked people, and some continued to resist Him, and harden their hearts, until He gave them over to worship their own little false gods. The work of their hands. Isaiah talks about the folly of idolatry in chapter 44, where a man would cut down a tree, takes half of it and builds a fire, warms himself, and bakes some bread over it. Then he takes the other half of it and shapes an idol out of it and falls down and worships it. You get that? One half of his tree is his god, and the other half of the same tree is his firewood!

- Stephen looks the Sanhedrin in the face and with the boldness that can only come from God, says that these men are just like their fathers before them who resisted the Holy Spirit. Even worse. Their fathers persecuted the prophets. These men killed the Messiah. The Righteous One. You received the law from angels, Stephen said, but you did not keep it.
- Stephen is about to be stoned to death. And we will talk about that next week, and how he died. But the important thing about Stephen is not that he was martyred for his faith in Jesus. But that he was a bridge that thousands of other first century believers walked across into missions. He taught in this sermon that wherever the people of God were in the Old Testament, God was there with them. He was connected to people. Not to programs. Nor to buildings. And in the Jerusalem, on this day when Stephen preached for the last time, the believers were about to find out that Jesus would be there with them wherever they went. Because Stephen's martyrdom will spark a great persecution and all but the apostles will be scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Then later people like Paul and Barnabus will get on ships and sail to other regions, as far as they could go almost, and they would come back to Antioch with the report: Jesus went with us. This is what He did! And it is the same with us. When we leave what is comfortable to take the Gospel to another place that is not as comfortable, we go with the assurance that Jesus is with us. That's what Stephen taught the first church. That's what he teaches us as well.