



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ◇ DEO ◇ GLORIA

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Defense of Stephen, Part I

Acts 7:1-16

May 20, 2007

- I. **Stephen Declares God's Sovereign Initiation**
- II. **Stephen Demonstrates God's Hand in their Common Past**
 - a. **A Common Ancestry**
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- III. **God's Sovereign Hand in the Past Points to a Common Hope**

- ❖ This chapter opens with the high priest [presumably Caiaphas, who was high priest until 36 A.D.] asking, 'Are these things true?'
 - As far as 'these things', the high priest is certainly referring to the charges brought before the Sanhedrin by the men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen.
 - These charges were: (1) blasphemy against Moses and God [Verse 11]; and (2) speaking blasphemies against this holy place [the Temple] and the Law.
- The charges against Stephen were the most serious that could be brought before the Sanhedrin.
- Yet, Stephen, in his defense, never becomes *defensive*.
- Rather, he will **affirm** the truth of the entire Old Testament, demonstrating that it finds its fulfillment in the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- ❑ What Stephen does is fully consistent with the words of Paul, who exhorts Titus to hold ‘fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that [you] will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict’ (**Titus 1:9**).
- ❑ Also, Paul, himself, states, ‘...I am appointed for the defense of the gospel...’ (**Philippians 1:6**).
- ❑ The Apostle Peter writes, in **1 Peter 3:15**, ‘...sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...’
- ❑ Finally, as **Jude 3** states, all believers are to ‘contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.’

- ❑ Stephen’s defense speech, here in Acts 7, is the longest speech in the Book of Acts.
- ❑ Although, at first glance, it may appear to be simply an Old Testament Survey, it is much more.
- ❑ The purpose of Stephen’s speech is to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament. Therefore, far from being blasphemous, Stephen stands firmly in the tradition of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and all of the Old Testament saints. The reason for this is that all of the Old Testament saints, as well as the Old Testament signs, such as the Temple, pointed to Christ Himself.
- ❑ Richard Longnecker writes:

‘The defense of Stephen before the Sanhedrin is hardly a defense in the sense of an explanation or apology calculated to win an acquittal. Rather, it is a proclamation of the Christian message in terms of the popular Judaism of the day and an indictment of the Jewish leaders for their failure to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah or to appreciate the salvation provided in him.’

- ❑ Rather than being blasphemous against Moses, the Temple, and the Law, Stephen affirmed their rightful place as signs that pointed to Christ.
- ❑ Stephen’s speech is divided into five major parts:
 1. the promises to Abraham (vv. 2-8)
 2. the deliverance through Joseph (vv. 9-16)
 3. the deliverance through Moses (vv. 17-34)
 4. the apostasy of Israel (vv. 35-50)
 5. the rejection of the Messiah (vv. 51-53).
- ❑ Stephen traces the story of God’s sovereign hand and Israel’s sinfulness from Abraham, the father of faith, through the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon, all the way to the current day when he was speaking.

I. Stephen Affirms God's Sovereign Initiation in Israel's Beginning

- Stephen begins his analysis of the Old Testament by saying, 'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran...'
 - Stephen's point is quite clear. He is affirming the God of the Scriptures [certainly not blaspheming Him!] and declaring His sovereign hand in the establishment of the nation of Israel.
 - Abraham was considered the 'father of faith'; the father of the nation of Israel, and the opening of Stephen's defense acknowledges this truth.
 - Furthermore, Stephen refers to God as the 'God of glory'

- In Psalm 29:3, the Psalmist writes:

'The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
The God of glory thunders,
The LORD is over many waters.' Psalm 29:3

- Stephen's use of the term 'God of glory' demonstrates not only a familiarity with the Old Testament and the Psalms, but also reflects a high, lofty, and exalted view of God [Exodus 33:18-19].
- It is as though when God revealed Himself to Abraham in His 'Glory' that it was so overwhelming, so compelling, that it was, indeed, irresistible.

- Yet, Stephen's main objective appears to be this: that God appeared to Abraham **in Mesopotamia**. In other words, God revealed Himself to Abraham where Abraham was: in Mesopotamia, particularly in Ur of the Chaldeans'.
- Furthermore, God did not appear to Abraham because he was righteous. He did not appear to Abraham because of He saw something 'special' in Abraham. He did not appear to him because Abraham had 'potential.' He appeared to Him for His glory!
- **Joshua 24:2** even states, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.'
 - **Abraham did not seek God out...God sought him out, calling Abraham while he was still a pagan, worshipping other gods.**
 - This is exactly how God works today. Ephesians 2:4-6 states, 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with Him...'

- In other words, God does not wait for us to seek Him, for **we never will!** Therefore, every time God calls us, and saves us, He does so, while we are in ‘Mesopotamia’ worshipping false Gods.
- Thus, Stephen, in his ‘defense’, has already begun to discredit the claims of the false witnesses, who claimed that he had spoken blasphemous words against God. Far from blasphemy, Stephen exalted God, acknowledging His sovereign hand in everything in the Old Testament, pointing to Christ.

II. Stephen Demonstrates God’s Hand in their Common Past

- Although Stephen opens his speech before the Sanhedrin by exalting the Sovereign work of the God of glory, he also appeals to the Sanhedrin on the basis of the common ground he shares with them.
- He begins by saying, ‘Hear me, brethren and fathers!’
 - In other words, he acknowledges their common Jewish heritage by referring them as ‘brethren’.
 - Further, by calling the elders on the Sanhedrin ‘fathers’, he displays respect for their authority.
 - Throughout the remainder of his speech, Stephen will demonstrate his familiarity with their common background; however, he will use the Old Testament narrative [and, specifically, the sins of the Old Testament patriarchs and ‘saints’] to reveal to his listeners their sin of rejecting the Messiah.

a. A Common Ancestry

- Stephen begins his Old Testament ‘survey’ with Abraham, the ‘father of faith.’
- The Jews were quite proud of their ethnic heritage and ancestry, which could be traced back to Abraham.
- The Apostle Paul, in **Romans 9:4-5**, speaks of the Israelites as those ‘to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the father, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh.’
- Therefore, by beginning with Abraham, Stephen establishes common ground upon which to build his arguments and base the remainder of his speech.

b. A Common Pilgrimage

- ❑ Stephen states, in **Verse 3**, that the Lord spoke to Abraham and told him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you...’
- ❑ Stephen continued, in **Verse 4**, ‘Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran...’
 - Haran was located about 500 miles northwest of Ur and was known for its moon worship.
- ❑ ‘...From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.’
 - Stephen’s words, therefore, explain how God uprooted Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to establish the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine.
- ❑ Stephen, then says, in **Verse 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.’
 - In other words, Abraham never had a **physical inheritance in the land of Israel**. The only plot of land Abraham ever possessed was his place of burial (Genesis 23). All he had was the promise of God.
 - **Abraham was, indeed, a pilgrim in a foreign land.**

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- ❑ Then, in **Verses 6-7**, Stephen said, ‘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. 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.’
 - In other words, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be pilgrims as well, in the land of Egypt.
 - Yet, God said that Abraham’s descendants would ‘come out and serve me in **this place**.’
 - No doubt, ‘this place’ is a reference to the **temple**, for this had been central to the charges brought against Stephen.
 - However, even when the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, they were pilgrims in the wilderness. Further, even the land of Canaan was not the final home of the Israelites. They were still pilgrims there, in the Promised Land.

‘They had forgotten that, wonderful as possession of the land of promise was, they were nevertheless only to be pilgrims in it as Abraham had been. Without this orientation, they lacked the spiritual depth that characterized their ancestor. Abraham, we are told in Hebrews, was not looking for an earthly city, but ‘to the city with foundations [the heavenly city], whose architect and builder are God’ (Hebrews 11:10). These rulers had ceased to look forward. They were looking back, and they had taken the things of the world and the blessings of the world to be permanent. They had allowed God’s temporal blessings to eclipse their sense of God’s presence.’

James Montgomery Boice

F.F. Bruce writes, ‘...the people of God must be on the march, must pull up their tent stakes as Abraham did, leaving national particularism and ancestral ritual, and go out where God may lead.’

John Polhill agrees, ‘...God can never be tied down to one land or place and correspondingly his people are closest to him when they are a ‘pilgrim people,’ a people on the move.’

- ❑ This is exactly what the Apostle Paul means when he declares, ‘For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ’ **Philippians 3:20**.
- ❑ Many of the difficulties that we as Christians face today are due to the truth that we do not view ourselves as pilgrims, sojourners. We see this physical, temporary world as our permanent home; and, as a result, we become enamored, controlled, and consequently trapped and imprisoned by the things that will pass away. Yet, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are to set our sights on that which cannot be seen by the physical eye. We are to be led, not by the physical things of this world, but by the Spirit.
- ❑ Only then, we will worship God in Spirit [which cannot be seen] and truth.
- ❑ When we focus our eyes on the things ‘above’, we are uprooted from this world, and truly **free in Christ**.
- ❑ Tragically, the Jews of Jesus’ and Stephen’s day saw physical Canaan as their permanent home. As a result, they focused on the physical Law, the physical temple, the physical rituals, and failed to see the One to whom they pointed.
- ❑ Throughout the Old Testament the land, beginning in the Garden of Eden, always points to our permanent home: the New Jerusalem, which will come down out of heaven (Revelation 21:10-11).

c. A Common Struggle

- ❑ Not only did the words of Stephen reflect the common ancestry and pilgrimage that he shared with his accusers, but they reflected the common struggle their ancestors shared.
 - In **Verse 6**, Stephen recalled that Abraham’s descendants would ‘be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.’

- Technically, Israel was in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40); however, Stephen simply gives a general figure.
 - This account by Stephen further underscores the irony in this situation. His primary accusers were freed slaves; yet, they remained, like the Israelites in Egypt, in bondage to sin and death.
 - Yet, the bondage in Egypt was not the first time the nation had struggled. Stephen also explains the even that lead to Israel’s sojourn in the foreign land.
 - In **Verse 11**, Stephen recalls the famine that came ‘over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.’
- ❖ Indeed, Israel was a nation familiar with grief, affliction and bondage. However, even this pointed to their desperate need for a Deliverer, a Redeemer, a Savior – the Messiah.

d. A Common Covenant

- Stephen also refers to the common covenant that he shared with his fellow Israelites: the Abrahamic covenant.
 - In **Verse 8**, Stephen says, ‘And He [God] gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day...’
 - No doubt, Stephen, and all of his male accusers shared the covenantal sign of circumcision, as they share the Abrahamic covenant. Yet, it was the Abrahamic Covenant that pointed to the greatest of covenants, the eternal covenant, the New Covenant. It was this covenant whereby each individual would be circumcised, not by human hands, in the flesh; but, rather, we be circumcised in the heart.

‘But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.’ Romans 2:29

e. A Common Sinful Past

- Yet, despite the many ‘uniting’, ‘positive’ commonalities that Stephen shared with his accusers, one truth of their common past remained inescapable: **sin**.
 - The great patriarchs of Israel were among the most revered men among the Jews. However, Stephen states, in **Verse 9**, that ‘The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt.’
 - It is at this point in his speech that Stephen begins indicting his accusers. By recalling the treatment of Joseph at the hands of the patriarchs, Stephen,

quite subtly, yet directly, indicts his accusers of rejecting Christ – the One to whom Joseph pointed.

John MacArthur correctly states, ‘The Hellenists were doing the very same thing that the founding fathers of the nation were guilty of doing and what they were falsely accusing Stephen of doing.’

- Just as the patriarchs of the nation of Israel were guilty of heinous sins, so were the contemporary believers of Stephen’s day.
- This is most certainly the one thing that every human being, regardless of race or culture, has in common: all of us have sinned, and have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). This is, in fact, the very case that the Apostle Paul builds in the first three chapters of Romans.

III. God’s Sovereign Hand in the Past Points to a Common Hope
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- Peter’s ultimate purpose, however, in illustrating the common ancestral past of he and his accusers was not to simply build a bridge to the past, but to point to a greater, future, eternal hope.
- The sovereign, effectual call of Abraham points to our call by God.
- The land to which Abraham was called pointed to the dwelling place of God: the New Jerusalem.
- The pilgrimage of Abraham points to our pilgrimage here on earth.
- The circumcision of flesh points to the circumcision of the heart.
- Even the twelve patriarchs of the Old Testament point to the twelve apostles: the foundation of the New Covenant community.
- The bondage of the Israelites in Egypt points to our bondage in sin prior to our deliverance by Christ.

- Yet, the central, climatic character in this first part of Stephen’s speech is Joseph.
- The reason for this is not only because Joseph points to Christ as a deliverer, but because of the cruel treatment Joseph suffered at the hands of his brethren.
- Notice the series of events that led to the selling of Joseph into Egypt:
 1. God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans (modern-day Iraq).
 2. Abraham went from Ur to Haran.
 3. After Abraham’s father died, God moved Abraham to Palestine.

4. God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision.
5. Abraham became the father of Isaac; Isaac became the father of Jacob.
6. Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.
7. The brothers of Joseph [the patriarchs] became jealous of him.
8. The patriarchs sold their brother into Egypt.
9. While in Egypt, God granted Joseph favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh.
10. Pharaoh made Joseph governor over Egypt and all his household.
11. A famine came over Egypt and Canaan.
12. Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, and he sent his sons to investigate.
13. On the second visit, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers.
14. Joseph sent word and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives, 75 in all, to Egypt.
15. Jacob and all his living descendants went down to Egypt.
16. They all died in Egypt and were buried back in Canaan.

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- It is quite powerful to understand the intentional, direct parallels between Joseph and Jesus, as Joseph was a Christ-type.
 - Jesus and Joseph were both ethnically Jewish.
 - Both men were hated by their brethren – Joseph by his brothers; Jesus by his fellow countrymen.
 - God exalted Joseph to a place of royalty in Egypt; the Father exalted Christ to ‘the highest place, giving Him the name that is above every name.’
 - Joseph delivered his brothers, the same ones who betrayed him, from famine and death; Christ delivers His people, all who were once sinners, from sin and death.
 - Joseph took his brothers to live with him in the greatest place of all of Egypt: Goshen; Jesus will take us, His people to live with Him forever in heaven.
- ❖ Yet, unlike Jesus Christ, the patriarchs, Joseph, and all Old Testament saints died, were buried, and their graves remain to this day. Their lives were fleeting, yet they pointed to One who is eternal: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- ❖ May we not focus our minds on the things that are fleeting, but rather look to the One to whom all Creation points, finding our ultimate hope and joy in Him.
- ❖ There is no longer any need for any ‘sign’ -- for all signs point to Christ!
- ❖ Stephen begins his speech referring to God as the ‘God of Glory’, and he ends his speech demonstrating how all the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ to the Glory of God!