

Sermon 27, How We Got Here, Acts 6:9-7:60

Proposition: Stephen's trial and defense link Christ's reign in the present to His reign in the past, and above all, defend Christ's right to destroy the temple and change the Mosaic customs.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Stephen's speech undoubtedly holds a key place in the text of Acts. It is the longest speech in the book, and thus Luke thought it was important. But what's important about it? How do we understand this speech? Well, it is a record of how we got here. It tells the pre-history of Christ's reign, and especially seeks to defend the change from Levitical Judaism to Apostolic Christianity. Stephen seeks to vindicate Christ's right to destroy the temple and to change the Mosaic customs. In so doing, of course, he is vindicating the reign of Christ in its present, Christian form by linking it to Christ's reign in the past.

I. A Dispute, 6:9-10

Like so many worthwhile things in our world, this speech had its beginning in an argument. I was listening to a bestselling novelist the other week as he was interviewed on a podcast. The interviewer asked about this novelist's first major hit, *100 Cupboards*, and the novelist admitted

that it began in an argument with his wife. In order to prove that he was right, he went ahead and wrote a bestseller.

Well, Stephen got involved in an argument with some men from the Freedmen's Synagogue in Jerusalem. According to the commentators, Jerusalem at this time had hundreds of synagogues within its walls. But one in particular contained some people who were spoiling for a fight and ended up getting involved in an argument with Stephen. They lost, because they did not have the same fear of God and the same presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. By his fear of God and the overwhelming power of the Spirit who sustained him, Stephen won the argument.

II. False Charges Filed, 6:11-14

But the argument didn't stop there. Stephen's opponents realized that they had lost the debate. So instead of changing their position, or looking for stronger arguments for their side, they committed the fallacy of an appeal to force, getting the civil courts involved and stirring up the mob against Stephen. They wanted to cancel this debater, because they couldn't bear his wisdom and the Holy Spirit that filled him. So they found false witnesses who accused him of tampering with the temple and with Mosaic customs — or at least, of wanting to do such a thing.

III. Vindication, Pt. 1: The Face of Stephen, 6:15

Well, Stephen's best evidence for his innocence, as the trial opens, is his face. He is vindicated by how he looks! Such a glorious look belongs properly to an angel, not a man — and the whole Sanhedrin saw it. Now, appearances can be deceiving. But what you see is what you get.

Of course, the existence of these two contradictory proverbs in English shows that the evidence of a face is not always reliable. But it is reliable often enough to be of value. For instance, my father and one of my college friends are both convinced that the best way to evaluate a man's character is simply to look at his wife and children. Do they look happy, or do they look exhausted, stressed, drawn, and strained? Well, Stephen's face spoke eloquently for him. So did his tongue: the core of Stephen's story in Acts is his speech.

IV. Historical Narrative as Theological Argument, Pt. 1, 7:2-53

That speech, of course, is a historical narrative. Why does Stephen tell it? Not to rehearse a bunch of information that his audience knew as well as he did; no. The reason someone narrates the history of a group to that group, particularly in a moment of argument or crisis, is to get across a particular vision of who the group is by telling them where they have come from. That, of course, is what Stephen is doing. He is telling the history of Israel in order to say "This is what Israel is; this is what Israel ought to be." There's a place for looking at all the details he mentions. But I think that the details will make a lot more sense if we understand the big picture first. When you know what you're looking at, you will be much better able to understand the tiny details.

A. The Point

Stephen is making five big points. We know that particularly because the application section of his speech, the part where he summarizes his message, contains all these points. So yes, there are many literary features here (like framing it with the glory of God, quoting the very words of

Scripture, conflating the details of multiple episodes into one main point) that we could talk about. But let's skip to what Stephen is trying to say. What's your drift, Mr. Deacon Man?

1. Historically, the Glory of God Was Not Confined to the Temple

Well, his first point is that the glory of God has not been confined to the temple, speaking in historical terms. The Sanhedrin would definitely have considered this to be an irrelevant point, rather like speaking to Parliament today and pointing out that historically, the British Constitution gave a much larger role to the monarch. Parliament would say "So? That was centuries ago." And in the same way, Stephen's points are from the distant past, centuries or even millennia ago. But they are valid nonetheless, unlike the historical argument for making Elizabeth II an actual Queen who sets policy and governs the realm. Things have changed in Great Britain since the Personal Rule of Charles I. But God Almighty has not changed. Who He was millennia ago is who He is today. And thus, historical arguments regarding the character of God are valid at any time.

Historically speaking, He wasn't confined to the temple. He appeared to Abraham, in the wilderness, in Egypt, at Sinai, and in Mesopotamia. God is hardly limited to a downtown Jerusalem address where the high priests can control Him. That is Stephen's first point. And it's an important one. To us, this point is obvious. That's because we're Christians. It's baked into our religious DNA to recognize that God can be found under a tree in Africa, in a shipboard chapel in the Bering Strait, and in a monastery on Mount Sinai or a church building in Chile. He is everywhere, and we know that we can call on Him from anywhere. But Stephen was dealing with people who had been used to God living in the temple for centuries past. For them, the idea of God living elsewhere was far stranger than the idea of making New York our national capital is to us (though New York was the capital for a brief time). So Stephen patiently recounts all the time that God manifested His glory outside the temple and outside the Levitical system.

2. Theologically, God Doesn't Live in Handmade Temples, vv. 48-50

A corollary to this first point, then, is that God does not dwell in houses made by hands. If it's human-built, then it is not and cannot be God's ultimate home. This is the theological side of the historical truth that the Most High appeared in many places to various Israelites. Solomon and Isaiah both acknowledged this.

What this means for Stephen's audience is clear: God can't be fit into their little box. He is too immense to be contained by a small temple, or a large temple, or a whole universe. Thus, the accusation that Stephen wants to destroy the temple is rather irrelevant. God is free to move out of the temple at any time.

3. Israel Has a History of Idolatry, vv. 42-43

But Stephen makes more points. God is not confined to the temple, and has appeared in many different places. But Israel has not been particularly faithful about worshipping God in the places where He appears; indeed, God's people have a history of idolatry. Stephen brings up the Golden Calf incident, immediately connecting it to Amos' statement that Israel in the wilderness was an idolatrous society and that the punishment for idolatry is exile. It's self-evident, Stephen seems to

imply, that Israel has spent a long time in exile. That means that they were idolaters, because it's idolaters who get taken to Babylon!

So here's the speech so far: God is not confined to the temple, and historically, you didn't worship Him there all that correctly anyway!

4. Israel Has a History of Rejecting God-Appointed Leaders

But Stephen's not out of ammunition yet. He has a couple of additional bombshells that he wants to drop on the Sanhedrin. He names a series of God-appointed leaders, a sort of who's who in Israelite history.

a) Joseph

The first of these is Joseph, rejected by his brothers (whom Stephen keeps calling "our fathers" to highlight the connection between them and his audience) but made by God the ruler over all Egypt. Clearly, God's plan was not something that the Jewish people of that day understood or submitted to — not without famine and two trips to Egypt!

b) Moses

Moses stands as a second rejected leader. The first time he went out to visit his brethren, they rejected him. But the second time, when he rejected them, he became ruler and judge, a man mighty in word and deed. Israel was not very good at submitting to him, and Stephen ends his account of Moses' career with the words we've already looked at about going into exile beyond Babylon. It's as though Moses, mighty prophet that he was, did not have the wherewithal to get Israel to cooperate.

c) The prophets, v. 52a

The prophets, too, have been uniformly rejected by Israel. One commentator said that this claim is simply false, but tellingly, did not mention a prophet whom Israel loved, enjoyed, and embraced. You can't find any record of such a prophet! Maybe Jonah, who prophesied success for Israel? But he rejected himself and his own mission; how much more, then, would Israel as a whole reject him? All of the major prophets were outcasts and rejected; Elijah and Elisha were at odds with the kings of Israel and even Judah for much of their careers; and even a court prophet like Gad had to take his life in his hands to confront an erring David. So if you can show me a prophet who was always accepted by the establishment, I will admit that Stephen is going beyond the evidence here. But I don't think that you can do it. The prophets were simply too hated!

d) The Righteous One, v. 52b

Well, of course, the worst crime on Israel's record is this crime of rejecting Jesus Christ, the great prophet like Moses to whom they were supposed to listen. They betrayed Him; they murdered Him. This only confirms Israel's mistreatment of the prophets. They had failed to keep the law, and now they failed to honor the prophets who spoke for the law on God's behalf.

5. Historically, Israel Is More a Law-breaker than a Law-keeper, v. 53

The final point, then, is that Israel defines itself as the group of law-keepers, but Stephen insists that their history is defined more by law-breaking than it ever was by law-keeping. That is a tough thing to insist on. As Paul makes so clear in Romans 2, the idea of keeping the law is the

very essence of Judaism. Yet, just like Jesus and the apostles, Stephen insists on the reality of sin and the truth that Israel, like the rest of mankind, is more a law-breaker than a law-keeper.

B. The Purpose

Why does Stephen use the history of Israel to make these points?

1. Stephen Vindicating his Teaching

Well, in the first instance, he's obviously vindicating his teaching over against those synagogue members who were arguing with him and weren't content to lose. How do his points vindicate his teaching? They show that the temple is not the only "holy place" in which God is at work, and they show that there is nothing sacrosanct about the Levitical system. It can be replaced when and as God wants to replace it. Stephen's broader point is that you can't assume synagogue worshippers are always correct about God's character and purposes. The Jewish people are historically idolaters and law-breakers, and their desire to confine God to the Jerusalem temple is not something to be respected but something to be fought tooth and nail.

2. Luke Vindicating the Reign of Christ

But beyond Stephen vindicating his position over against his cheating opponents, we must also reckon with Luke's purpose to vindicate the reign of Christ. By quoting Stephen's speech so fully, Luke is showing the certainty of the kingdom. Jesus reigns *even though* the Levitical system is being relegated to the trash heap, because the Levitical system is not the only way in which He can reign or has reigned in the past. The Christian message trumps the Jewish way; what we have been taught is actually more certain than God's dwelling in the temple and being accessible through the Levitical rites.

So in other words, believe Jesus — not Judaism. That is Luke's point. The change from Judaism to Christianity is theologically acceptable and has plenty of historical precedent to back it up in God's ancient dealings.

This whole idea of a "new thing" is also deep in our Christian DNA, to the point where it is frequently abused in the contemporary church. "Oh, this new worship style/clothing style/food fad/theological view is OK, because New Wineskins, man!"

But brothers and sisters, though Christianity was indeed new and different from Judaism, that does not automatically justify any and every innovation that someone wants to introduce into the worship of the church. Far from it. Yes, Luke is vindicating Christ's reign — but showing that God appeared in Mesopotamia is way different than showing that He appeared in a rap concert. In other words, the change from Judaism to Christianity was historically precedented. The change from hymns and psalms to choruses and praise bands, not so much. Getting rid of the reading and preaching of the word? Not so much.

V. Historical Narrative as Theological Argument, Pt. 2, 7:54-60

Well, as Stephen's historical narrative concludes, Luke continues his. And as he details how Israel in the person of its representative responded to Stephen, he shows conclusively that all Stephen's charges were true.

A. Israel's response to its history demonstrates its guilt

If Israel was not a bunch of hardened idolaters, they would have heard Stephen's charges and repented. But since they were indeed law-breakers and idolaters, they hear his charges and freak out. Just as, ten or fifteen years ago, suggestions that Muslims were terrorists would sometimes provoke terror attacks in Paris or Amsterdam, so this suggestion that the Jewish people break the law of God and kill the prophets leads them to — you guessed it: they kill the prophets and break the law. In particular, they kill this particular prophet and break the law of loving their neighbor.

B. Stephen's response to their rage demonstrates his Christlikeness

Yet though Israel shows conclusively how far gone they are, Stephen's response demonstrates his Christlikeness. He commends his soul to Jesus (just as Jesus commended His to God), and asks God to forgive his murderers.

In other words, Christian truth is historically more accurate, theologically more accurate, and morally more accurate than the ideology of first century Judaism. Luke is very clear about this.

How do we live? What does our history say about us? Do we live as though our faith is the truth? Does believing what we say we believe make us more morally upright?

VI. Vindication, Pt. 2: The Face of God, 7:55-56

Well, at the beginning of Stephen's trial it was clear that he deserved acquittal, because like Moses', his face shone with angelic glory. And now, at the end, Luke returns to this theme of vindication. But rather than talking again about Stephen's face, he highlights instead the face of God, or at least the glory of God shining from heaven upon Stephen, who saw the Son of Man standing at the Father's right hand. Did the murderers see God smiling upon their deeds? Of course not. But Stephen saw God smiling upon his.

Jesus has the right to abolish the temple and change the Mosaic customs. Stephen has announced it, and died for it. Will you live for the new temple and the new customs that Jesus has given us? Will you believe the theological points that the history of God's people make only too clear? And will you keep the law God sent to you? Jesus reigns; the administration is different, but it's still Him, reigning. Trust and obey Him. Amen.