

## Acts 6:8-7:37 Teacher's Lesson Lessons In Evangelism from Stephen

**Introduction:** Today we'll study about remarkable deacon named Stephen. He was such an effective evangelist that false charges were brought against him to silence his witness. Acts 7 is Stephen's defense, the longest oration recorded by Luke. In it, Stephen gave a long review of Old Testament history. He recited what appear to be insignificant historical details and then concluded with a scathing criticism of the Sanhedrin. *What was Stephen trying do to? How was his speech a defense of the charges brought against him? What is the logic behind it?*<sup>1</sup>

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**\*\*\*\*In addition to serving as a deacon (6:4), what very public ministry did Stephen have (6:8-15)?**<sup>2</sup> Stephen was active among the "people" (unbelievers), performing miracles and evangelizing. Just as Stephen was chosen to serve Hellenistic widows, he also evidently evangelized Hellenistic Jews. All the place names of 6:9 are outside Judea: Cyrene was a city in modern Libya, Alexandria was a city in Egypt, and Cilicia and Asia were Roman provinces in modern Turkey. Paul was originally from Cilicia, and may have been among those who could not refute Stephen.<sup>3</sup>

**When the unbelievers realized they could not win disputes with Stephen, what sinful tactic did they resort to (6:11-14)?** They instigated men to spread lies about Stephen's teachings. These lies misled the "people" and caused them to rise up against him (they incited a mob), which led to his arrest and trial before the council (Sanhedrin). Opposition to Christianity often is a matter of the heart, not the intellect.

**Evangelism Application:** Unbelievers who actively oppose the Gospel sometimes do not fight fair. They are not gentlemen. They are not interested in the Truth. If you expect the possibility of underhanded tactics from those full of guile, then you won't be as discouraged when it inevitably happens. (This type of thing happens all the time in secular politics.)

**ESV Matthew 10:16** . . . I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

**Life Application:** Do not believe everything you hear about a person (especially from the media!). There are two sides to everything.

**ESV Proverbs 18:17** The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Working signs and wonders was not exclusive to the apostles (6:8). Stephen was doing apostolic work in addition to serving as deacon. The apostles were too busy to do both, but somehow Stephen was able to do both. He was Super Servant!

<sup>3</sup> Those Stephen evangelized were associated with the synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9). These were Jewish men (or their descendants) who had been formerly been Roman prisoners of war but who had been set free.

**1. What had Jesus really said about rebuilding the temple in three days (6:14)?** See *John 2:18-21*. He predicted His resurrection from the dead after the temple of His body was destroyed.

ESV **John 2:18-21** So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

**2. What had Jesus said about tradition that might have fueled the lie that Stephen wanted to change the customs of Moses (6:14)?** See *Matthew 15:1ff*. Jesus contrasted the inspired teachings of Moses with the man-made traditions of the elders. Jesus frequently violated Jewish custom; He did not violate Mosaic Law. If Stephen also taught this, the false witnesses could have easily twisted his words.

**3. What is the essence of the two false charges brought against Stephen (6:11-14)?** In essence, the two charges were that Stephen had spoken against both the Law of Moses and against the temple.

**What supernatural affirmation of Stephen's testimony did the council see in 6:15?** See *Exodus 34:29*. His face somehow changed to reflect the countenance of an angel. Perhaps it was some visible manifestation of God's glory, such as Moses had after he came down from Mount Sinai. As such, it was a divine vindication of Stephen's message.<sup>4</sup> "Stephen" means "crowned one". God certainly put His crown of approval on Stephen.

**Hardened In Sin:** One would think that Stephen's angelic countenance would give the council pause, but not so. These men were hardened in sin. Their hearts were calloused. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

**4. What similarities are there between Stephen (6:11-14) and Jesus?** See *Mark 14:63-64*, *Matthew 26:59-60*. Both used signs and wonders to validate their message. Both taught in the synagogues. Both faced false witnesses.

**5. What can we learn from Stephen about evangelistic methods (6:8-15)?**

- a) One thing we see is the benefit signs and wonders are to evangelism. Evangelists in pioneer areas report that signs and wonders continue today. It would not hurt to ask God to give works evangelistic signs through you.
- b) We also see the indispensable place wisdom from the Holy Spirit has in evangelism. Ask God for witnessing wisdom.
- c) Also, notice that the unbelievers disputed with Stephen. This suggests that Stephen did not simply present the Gospel. He was able to defend the faith. He tried to persuade people. Evidence was presented. He also gave arguments and reasons to believe it.

ESV **1 Peter 3:15** . . . [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you . . .

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<sup>4</sup> Marshall, 139.

- d) We are to be as wise as serpents in how we deal with unbelievers. Don't be naive. Expect to occasionally face underhanded opposition.
  - e) There are none so blind as those who will not see. Opposition to Christianity often is a matter of the heart, not the intellect.
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**Perspective:** Stephen did not directly answer the charges brought against him. Instead, he attacked the idolatry of his accusers. This gives us insight into the type of Gospel apologetic Stephen used in the debates.

\*\*\*\***How did Stephen begin his defense (7:1-8)?** Stephen's defense was a selective recital of Hebrew history. He began with God's promises to Abraham.<sup>5</sup>

**6. What promise did Stephen zero in on in 7:1-3?** Stephen started with God's promise to give Abraham land. Moving to this land required Abraham to leave his homeland and family.<sup>6</sup>

**7. What two paradoxes did Stephen bring out in 7:5?** The **first** was that though Abraham moved to the Promised Land, he did not take possession of it. This was evidently a reference to the fact that Abraham lived in tents, moving from place to place within the land. Abraham never built a permanent residence there. The **second** paradox is that God promised the land would belong to Abraham's offspring, even though he had no children (his wife was barren).

**8. What sobering words did Abraham hear from God in 7:6-7?** God revealed to Abraham that his offspring, though promised the land as an inheritance, would live outside the land for four hundred years, eventually even becoming enslaved there (Egypt). However, God promised to judge their oppressors and bring them into the Promised Land to worship Him.

**9. What is the covenant of circumcision (7:8)?** See *Genesis 12, 15, 17*. God made a covenant with Abraham wherein He promised Abraham a multitude of descendants through his wife Sarah. The sign of this covenant was, appropriately, circumcision.<sup>7</sup>

**10. Why did Stephen trace the genealogy in 7:8?** It shows how God was faithful to His promise to give Abraham offspring.

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<sup>5</sup> It should also be observed that although Scripture is inerrant, Stephen's speech may not have been. (For example, the Bible accurately records even the words of Satan, the father of lies). Stephen spoke with broad brush strokes and was unconcerned with precise historical detail. The theology of his main points, however, is accurate.

<sup>6</sup> Mesopotamia was a huge area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It covered modern Syria and Iraq. Abraham moved from the Mesopotamian city of Ur (now in Iraq) to the city of Haran. Haran is in Turkey, just above the border with Syria.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen may have brought up the covenant of circumcision to illustrate an ancient promise from God that had continued unbroken over the generations. This was in contrast to the temple, which was much more recent and transitory (the first temple dated from the time of Solomon and had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The temple of Stephen's day was actually the third temple to be built (Kistemaker, 243).

**11. Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple (6:13). Why might Stephen have reviewed out these particular historical facts about Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt (7:1-7)?** Stephen made the point that God is omnipresent. God had no trouble appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia, Abraham never possessed even a foot of the Promised Land, and God was in Egypt watching over Abraham's offspring until the four hundred years were up.

**Root Sin:** The real problem was that Jews of his day had falsely elevated veneration of the Promised Land and the Jerusalem temple to the point they equated possessing them with being in a right relationship with God. God is not confined to the Promised Land or to the temple.

**Strategy:** Stephen answered the charges against him by counter attacking. He assaulted a deeper problem his opponents had, which was that they had made an idol out of the Promised Land, the Law and the Temple. They did not truly worship Jehovah; they worshipped a golden calf in the form of apostate Judaism.

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**\*\*\*\*How did God use the treachery of the patriarchs to provide them food during the coming famine (7:9-16)?** The patriarchs sold their brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt. However, Joseph eventually became a trusted leader in Egypt and was able to provide food to Jacob's household during the famine. God made a promise to Abraham that out of him would grow a great nation of people. God was faithful to his promise, despite the unfaithfulness of Abraham's descendants.

**What shrewd political strategy catapulted Joseph into rule over Egypt (7:9-10)?** The strategy was simple: God was with Joseph. Tough act to follow!

**Where's Waldo?** Stephen pointed out that "God was with" Joseph in Egypt, again bringing home the point that God's presence was not limited to the Jerusalem temple.

**When did his brothers finally recognize Joseph (7:12-13)?** In their ignorance, they did not recognize their own brother on their first visit. It was not until their second visit that Joseph revealed to them who he really was.

**12. What parallel is there between Joseph and Jesus (7:9-13)?** The parallel between Joseph and Jesus is obvious. Both were betrayed by their own people, both were given over to foreigners (Joseph to the Ishmaelites and Jesus to the Romans), neither was recognized by their own brothers, and both were used by God to bring salvation.<sup>8</sup> It could be argued that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost Jesus gave the Jews a second chance to recognize who He really was.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 246.

**A temporary famine forced them down into Egypt. Why did they move there permanently (7:13-16)?** Joseph and Pharaoh insisted they move to Egypt. Considering the vast amounts of food in Egypt plus the favorable treatment they received, it is no wonder they stayed on long after the famine ended. Doubtless they knew of God's prediction that Abraham's would eventually become enslaved in a foreign county, but perhaps they did not realize that country would be Egypt.

**13. Why is it significant that seventy-five Hebrews moved from Canaan to Egypt (7:14)?**

The clan had grown from two (Abraham and Sarah) to seventy five. This again shows God's faithfulness to His covenant promise. God is faithful to His covenant promises, despite the faithlessness of the Israelites. This statement also shows that Stephen believed in God's covenants.

**14. Why is it significant that, after they died, their bodies were taken back to Canaan for burial (7:16)?<sup>9</sup>** Even though they lived and died in Egypt, it shows they were well aware of God's promise to eventually give Canaan to the Hebrews.<sup>10</sup> The Promised Land was special to the Jews because God had given it to them, but walking by faith with God is the end game, not living on a certain piece of real estate.

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**\*\*\*\*God took Joseph from slavery to sovereignty. How did God do the same for Moses (7:17-22)?** Moses was born into slavery, exposed as an infant for death, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, and instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, becoming a mighty leader.

**Based on 7:17-18, why did the king want to reduce the Hebrew population (7:19)?** He feared trouble from the Hebrews since they were growing in numbers, and he was ignorant of the relationship that had existed between Joseph and a previous Pharaoh.

**Political Insight:** Mass immigration has consequences. The American Indians were decimated due to unrestricted immigration. The Byzantine Empire ultimately fell due to Muslim immigration.

**15. Thousands of babies were born the year Moses was born. What made baby Moses, in particular, beautiful in God's sight (7:20)?** Metaphysically, it would have to do with God's plan to use Moses to bring the Hebrews out of Egyptian slavery. Perhaps it was an idiom for the fact that Moses truly was a beautiful baby (even God thought so!), causing Pharaoh's daughter to adopt him.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis records that it was Jacob who bought a tomb in Shechem. However, Abraham did build an altar there, so perhaps Abraham originally bought the land and Jacob had to repurchase it after years of absence (*ESV Study Bible*, 2094). It is also possible Stephen merely telescoped the two events for brevity (Marshall, 147).

<sup>10</sup> To whom "they" refers is unclear. Genesis 50 records that the bodies of Joseph and Jacob were moved.

**16. What parallel is there at this point between Moses and Jesus (7:17-22)?** Both Jesus and Moses survived the purposeful execution of male babies by a tyrannical ruler. Both lived in Egypt as children.<sup>11</sup>

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**\*\*\*\*How did the Israelites respond to Moses as their leader (7:23-29)?** Moses wanted to rescue the Israelites from oppression (7:25), but was asked, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?”

**17. What parallel can you see here between Moses and Jesus (7:23-29)?** *See John 1:11.* Both were rejected by those they came to save.

ESV **John 1:11** He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

**18. Why did a mere question (7:28) cause Moses to flee to Midian<sup>12</sup> (7:29)?** The question showed Moses that knowledge of his killing of the Egyptian was already wide spread and that he had no support among the Israelites. The man who spoke embodied the sentiment of the people. Realizing arrest was imminent, Moses did the only reasonable thing he could do, and fled. He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day!

**What blessing did God give Moses in Midian (7:29)?** God gave him two sons (and a wife!). God’s blessings are not limited to those living in the Promised Land.

**Omnipresence:** God’s active presence was not limited to Canaan. He was active in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Midian.

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**\*\*\*\*After forty years in Midian, what commission did God give Moses (7:30-34)?** God pulled Moses out of moth balls and commissioned him to bring the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery.

**Parallel:** Israel rejected Moses the first time, but God sent him back a second time with great power.<sup>13</sup> Israel rejected Jesus the first time too, but He came back in great power at Pentecost.

**19. Why did Stephen point out that God told Moses to take off his sandals (7:30-33)?** The burning bush incident happened on Mount Sinai, not in the Promised Land. God’s presence is not limited to any particular geographical area. He can even make the wilderness of Sinai into holy ground. This furthers his agreement that the Jews were making too much of the temple.

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<sup>11</sup> Kistemaker, 251.

<sup>12</sup> Midian was beyond the Sinai Peninsula, in modern NW Saudi Arabia. The Egyptians would have had a hard time finding him there.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, 129.

\*\*\*\* **God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, enabled Moses to perform signs and wonders, and through Moses parted the Red Sea. How did they respond to Moses the second time (7:35-43)?** The ancient Israelites ultimately refused to obey Moses and in their hearts returned to Egypt, 7:39. They rejected both Moses and Jehovah God, 7:41. So too the Jews of Stephen's day rejected Jesus when he came and rejected the witness of the Holy Spirit sent at Pentecost.

**20. In 7:35, why did Stephen point out that Moses was rejected by the people, but accepted by God?** See *1 Peter 2:4*. Reading between the lines, what happened to Moses is exactly what happened to Jesus. Peter described Jesus thus:

ESV **1 Peter 2:4** . . . rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious . . .

**Who was the prophet predicted by Moses in 7:37?** See *back to 3:22-23*. Jesus is the prophet that Moses predicted. Peter made this same point in his sermon to the people after the man born lame was healed and the council was doubtless well aware of what Peter said:

ESV **Acts 3:22-23** Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.'

**Parallels:** Both Moses and Jesus were rejected by the people but accepted by God. Moses as prophet, Moses was a type of Jesus, the ultimate prophet.

**Strike Two:** This is now the second time the Israelites rejected Moses. In a similar way, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost represented a second chance for Israel to accept Jesus as Messiah. The council, however, followed the example of their ancestors and rejected Jesus a second time.

### So What?

**21. What can we learn about evangelism from Stephen?**

**22. How did Stephen answer the false charges made against him (6:11-14)?** See *7:1-53*. Stephen did not answer the charges directly, but rather went to the root of the accusations.<sup>14</sup>

a) Stephen dealt with their wrong attitude toward the temple. They had raised the temple up to the status of an idol and forgotten that God does not dwell in buildings made by man.<sup>15</sup> God had no trouble manifesting Himself in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, or Sinai. Once in the Promised Land God manifested Himself in a tent that moved around. God didn't need the temple at all.

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson, 119.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, 140.

**b)** Stephen illustrated from Old Testament history that it was the Jews themselves who were effectively opposed to the Law of Moses and God Himself. Their fathers rejected both Joseph and Moses, they worshipped idols, and they killed the prophets. The ruling council that put Stephen on trial was merely carrying on with the rebellious spirit of their fathers.

\*\*\*\* = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
- You can hear this lesson being taught at [SermonAudio.Com/NTRF](http://SermonAudio.Com/NTRF).

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Revised 09/03/2017