

Stephen's Testimony part 1 Acts 6:8-7:19 www.bible-sermons.org May 7, 2017

Last week we read of the apostle's commitment to the Word of God and prayer. That commitment meant following the examples they found in Scripture to solve the problem of what seemed to be unfairness in the distribution of support to a certain group of widows. The apostles had the disciples choose seven men full of faith and the Holy Spirit to deal with the problem. We were surprised to see that they choose men from the offended group to handle the entire distribution of support for all widows. I asked for your prayers to guide the church to become a house of prayer. We desperately need to be guided by the Holy Spirit if we are to allow Him to accomplish anything through us that truly glorifies God and advances His kingdom.

One of the seven deacons who were chosen was Stephen. Stephen means "crown" in Greek. In the next weeks we'll see it became a fitting name. *⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.* Acts 6:8-9 In case we might think the men that were chosen to help with the food distribution were just handling the practical matters and nothing more, Luke follows with the testimony of Stephen. He was full of grace and power. What a wonderful, heaven sent combination! How we need more of that today (2 Corinthians 8:7). Grace is a powerful witness all on its own, but combined with the Spirit's power to do great wonders, it is not surprising that opposition soon came. It wasn't only apostles doing the miraculous, but a deacon as well. Stephen was the instrument of great wonders and signs. Remember that we read that he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

The remains of this particular synagogue are believed to have been discovered in 1913 by a French archeologist. The people who attended this synagogue were Hellenists like Stephen most likely was. He was probably reaching out to those with whom he once worshiped. They were probably offended that he would break ranks with them and join this new Jesus movement. They tried to argue with his teaching.

¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Acts 6:10. When the Holy Spirit is giving us the words to speak, the result is wisdom and demonstration of the power of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:4). When they couldn't make headway against him, they decided on another plan attack. It is not unusual that those who won't receive the Gospel become enemies of it, instead of just moving on.

¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." Acts 6:11-14 This was the same tactic the Sanhedrin used against Jesus. Since two

Commented [PW1]: 2 Corinthians 8:7 (ESV)

⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

Commented [PW2]: 1 Corinthians 2:4 (ESV)

⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

witnesses had to agree to condemn a man, they arranged false witnesses (Psalm 27:12). The council was hearing the same charges that they used against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61). While they feared the crowds before, it looks like the effectiveness of the disciples' witness and the conversion of many priests was emboldening those who would not hear to resist them. When an evil person can't win an argument, they often resort to slander and question motives. The accusations are that Stephen spoke against Moses, the temple, and the law. While Stephen may have said Jesus was a greater redeemer than Moses, that is hardly blaspheming Moses. It is exalting him as a foreshadow of Messiah. Stephen wouldn't speak against the temple, for they were still worshiping in the temple. He knew Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17), so he would never speak against it. Jesus did prophesy that the temple would be destroyed. Stephen may have implied that the church was the new temple. Perhaps that is the claim they were twisting (Matthew 24:2). (Also see John 2:19-21). Another accusation that was partly true was that Jesus would change the customs delivered by Moses, but that was for the Gentiles, not the Jews. One lie had followed another in their effort to stop Stephen's witness. Jesus said that the father of lies is Satan (John 8:44).

15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Acts 6:15 We have seen that Stephen was full of wisdom. Solomon wrote that the wisdom of man causes his face to shine (Ecclesiastes 8:1). Moses face shone so brightly after he met with God on Sinai that he had to wear a veil (Exodus 34:29). In the book of Judges, Samson's mother said the face of the angel she met shined (Judges 13:6). I would guess that Stephen knew he was about to give his life in service to Jesus. This was his opportunity to tell the council and any onlookers the full message of the Gospel. The servant had one last opportunity to serve his Master before he went to meet Him face to face (1 John 3:2).

In the Proverbs, wisdom is another name for Jesus. He calls to us to turn us from our foolishness and promises to pour our His Spirit on us if we do turn (Proverbs 1:23). Wisdom will come into our heart and be pleasant to our soul (Proverbs 2:10). We are to be attentive to wisdom (Proverbs 5:1). It was Stephen's relationship with Jesus that gave Him the wisdom and caused His face to shine.

The missionary Adonirum Judson returned for a brief season to New York to report on His attempts to reach Burma for Christ. He had seen the death of his wife and child because of hardships on that field, but continued his efforts to translate the Bible and reach the people for Christ. The children on the streets of New York called him "Old Glory Face" because his face shone like Stephen's. May God raise up more men and women of God who have such an intimacy with Jesus that we can testify of their shining faces!

We are all called to serve. We are all called to be learners, disciples. We did not come into the family of God to sit back and do as we please (John 5:30). We came to discover the joy of serving our Lord and Savior out of our love for Him and find we are blessed in the process. That is who God made us to be, saturated with the Word of God and filled with the Spirit. We will never know true fulfillment until we enter into that

Commented [PW3]: Psalm 27:12 (ESV)

¹² Give me not up to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence.

Commented [PW4]: Matthew 26:59-61 (ESV)

⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death,

⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward

⁶¹ and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'"

Commented [PW5]: Matthew 5:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Commented [PW6]: Matthew 24:2 (ESV)

² But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."

Commented [PW7]: John 2:19-21 (ESV)

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?"

²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

Commented [PW8]: John 8:44 (ESV)

⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because ... [1]

Commented [PW9]: Ecclesiastes 8:1 (ESV)

¹ Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

Commented [PW10]: Exodus 34:29 (ESV)

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down fr ... [2]

Commented [PW11]: Judges 13:6 (ESV)

⁶ Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like t ... [3]

Commented [PW12]: 1 John 3:2 (ESV)

² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when ... [4]

Commented [PW13]: Proverbs 1:23 (ESV)

²³ If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.

Commented [PW14]: Proverbs 2:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

Commented [PW15]: Proverbs 5:1 (ESV)

¹ My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding,

Commented [PW16]: John 5:30 (ESV)

³⁰ "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

relationship. How has God called you to serve? Are you listening for and responding to our Master's call on your life, devoted to the Word and prayer?

¹ *And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"* Acts 7:1 The high priest is Caiaphas, the same man who had brought Jesus to Pilate. He held the position until 36 A.D. Was Stephen preaching that Jesus said He would destroy the temple and change the commandments given to Moses? As we'll see at the end of his message, it was partially true. Jesus did prophesy the destruction of the temple within a generation. The church would soon be telling Gentile converts that they did not have to keep the dietary and worship laws given to the Jews. Jesus had preached against some of the oral traditions that Jews believed to be as sacred as the Law.¹ **The real question for the Jews was whether the prophecies predicted the Messiah would do this.** The Scriptures teach that after the Messiah comes the Temple will be destroyed (Daniel 9:26). Rabbinic interpretation of the name of Perez was that the Messiah would break out of hedge of the Law.² Some surmised He would then give one supreme Law.³ That is what Jesus did when He said the greatest command was to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind and all our strength (Luke 10:27). Stephen could have answered in this way, but the Holy Spirit knew they would not listen and instead illustrated for them the hardness of their hearts.

² *And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.* Acts 7:2-4 Stephen addressed his fellow Jews as "brothers," just as Peter had done. He began recounting the Jews' history from Abraham. He said the glory of God appeared to Abraham. Throughout his defense, Stephen is showing that he is not a blasphemer, but that he believes the Scriptures that show the glory of God appears at other places and times and is not limited to the temple. This is one of several examples he gives to show that they should have expected God to meet with us in a manifest way. John told us that Jesus was the glory as of the only one from the Father (John 1:14).

⁵ *Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.* Acts 7:5-6 God had promised Abram that He would make him a great nation and give him and his descendants all the land in which Abram camped. There were two issues that were troublesome. He did not have a child to inherit the promise, and God warned that his descendants would live for 400 years as slaves before they came into the land.

⁷ *'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.'* Acts 7:7 Here is the promise. The time will come when God will judge the nation that oppresses them, and they will then come to the land and worship God in this land given to Abram. There may be a subtle implication

Commented [PW17]: "The customs are no doubt the oral traditions giving the scribal interpretation of the law; these were regarded as stemming from Moses, just as the written law was. An attack on the oral law was thus tantamount to an attack on the whole law." (Marshall, Howard *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, p 130)

Commented [PW18]: Daniel 9:26 (ESV)
²⁶ And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.

Commented [PW19]: Risto Santala writes: RaMBaN (R. Moses Ben Nahman), who lived towards the end of the 13th century, describes the birth of Perez as follows:
"He was encircled by a hedge, and he was enclosed within it. That is why it is said 'So this is how you have broken through the hedge and come out from within it'." Perez was the first-born, "The first-born through the power of the Most High, as it is written, 'I will give to him a first-born son'. This was written about the holy person who is to come, David, the King of Israel -- long may he live. Those who are wise will understand." (*Mikraot Gedoloth*, corresponding section.)
What would 'those who are wise' understand, and what is meant by 'breaking through the hedge'? Historically this well depicts what happened when Christianity broke out of the Judaic mould...

Commented [PW20]: Ecclesiastes Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 11:8 states, "The *Torah* which one learns in this world 'is vanity' in comparison with the *Torah* of the Messiah."

Commented [PW21]: Luke 10:27 (ESV)
²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

Commented [PW22]: John 1:14 (ESV)
¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

that while in Egypt they weren't worshipping YHWH, but had been adopting the gods of Egypt. We know the first thing they did when they thought Moses was dead was to demand Aaron craft a golden calf to worship similar to Egyptian worship.

We should note that Stephen is weaving the Old Testament accounts together with fluidity and inserting quotations from the Greek version. This confirms that he is one of the Hellenists and that he has thoroughly studied the Bible and memorized portions of it in Greek. How would we do if we had to give a defense like this?

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. ⁹ "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Acts 7:8-10 Circumcision was a sign of the covenant and that they were different from other nations. Abrahams great-grandchildren were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Their ungodly jealousy of Joseph led them to sell him into slavery. "But God..." These two words always speak of the grace of God and His steadfast love and faithfulness (Psalm 118:1). God was with Joseph and gave him favor and wisdom. That is the great difference between the Jews who rebelled against God and those who followed His commands. God would be with the prophets and kings who came after Joseph and did great things through them as well. Obedience invites God's presence, and His presence is accompanied by favor and wisdom.

Why is God with some and not with others? It is not because God is fickle and has His favorites, but rather that He reaches out to all, and gives grace to all, however only some will appropriate the grace that is given and act on it. Joseph acted on the grace given him and lived a godly life in communion with God. He refused to be bitter. He honored those in authority. He forgave his brothers of their horrible crime against them. We can't find a negative thing in Scripture about him. The sovereignty of God in the circumstances of life exalted Joseph to the highest position of the land so that he could save his father and brothers, and so that the promise of God might be fulfilled in the future.

¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. Acts 7:11-14 The entire family survived the famine through His presence in Joseph's life and because of God's faithfulness to His promises.

¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. Acts 7:15-16 Jacob died in Egypt, but believed the promise given to Abraham, to his father Isaac, and to him personally

Commented [PW23]: Psalm 118:1 (ESV)

¹ Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

(Genesis 48:4). He had Joseph promise to bury his bones in Shechem, alongside Abraham. Herod the Great built a structure over this cave which is still intact. It was later taken over by the Muslims and made into a mosque, as they also claim Abraham as their forefather. (Genesis 23:19).

17 "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt¹⁸ until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. 19 He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. Acts 7:17-19 When the promised 400 years was nearly accomplished, the nation had grown so large that the Pharaoh feared they would become strong enough to overthrow the Egyptians. He ordered that all Hebrew newborn boys be drowned. That was when Moses was born. A deliverer was being raised up to fulfill the promises of God.

Why go over history as an answer to the accusations? Stephen will show that he is not a blasphemer of the law, but rather is interpreting it correctly. His examples will insinuate that the rulers missed the glory of God in the Messiah just as their forefathers callously rejected Joseph and Moses and rebelled against the manifestations of God in the past. We'll discuss more about why the Holy Spirit is taking them through their history to this turning point in our study next week.

The Jews were in a situation similar to the one they faced in Egypt. Rome was occupying the land. Legalism had drained the life out of their religion. The Deliverer had come, but just like their forefathers, they rejected Him because they couldn't see the end results. The rulers lacked faith in the same way their forefathers did. They rejected Joseph out of jealousy (Genesis 37:11). They rejected Moses when they didn't get immediate results. They rejected him on the wilderness journey because it wasn't easy. Some rejected him to try to gain power and influence. Nothing had changed. But this isn't just about Jews. It is about mankind and our fallen nature. Even today there are many who will deny all the evidence, prophecies, the life of Jesus, and the prompting of God's Spirit, and make excuses for not accepting the love of Jesus that delivers us from the bondage of our sinful nature. This history is not only about Jews. It is the story of man. Look at our own past. Look at your personal history and realize how desperately we need God's Deliver and do not harden your heart like these rulers did.

Questions

- 1 Why might the testimony of Stephen be inserted here?
- 2 Why did the synagogue get so angry with Stephen?
- 3 What was the accusation?
- 4 What makes one's face shine?
- 5 In what way were the accusations partially true?
- 6 Why tell the story of Abraham?
- 7 Why tell the story of the twelve sons of Jacob?
- 8 Why tell the story of Joseph?
- 9 What is the Holy Spirit conveying?
- 10 Does it apply to us today?

Commented [PW24]: Genesis 48:3-4 (ESV)

³ And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴ and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.'

Commented [PW25]: Genesis 23:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan.

Commented [PW26]: Genesis 37:11 (ESV)

¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

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John 8:44 (ESV)

⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Page 2: [2] Commented [PW10] Paul 4/29/2017 8:45:00 AM

Exodus 34:29 (ESV)

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

Page 2: [3] Commented [PW11] Paul 4/14/2017 10:18:00 AM

Judges 13:6 (ESV)

⁶ Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name,

Page 2: [4] Commented [PW12] Paul 4/28/2017 12:44:00 PM

1 John 3:2 (ESV)

² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.