

Stephen's Testimony part 2 Acts 7:20-53 www.bible-sermons.org May 14, 2017

The church had a problem with food distribution. The apostles knew they needed to stay devoted to the Word and prayer, so they asked the disciples to choose seven deacons to oversee the matter. Stephen was one of the men chosen as he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He had been witnessing to a synagogue of fellow Hellenists and been very persuasive. The synagogue rulers fought back by finding false witnesses to bring accusations before the ruling council claiming that Stephen was always speaking against the law and predicting the temple would be destroyed by Jesus.

The first part of Stephen's response was to go over the history of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reminded them that God had appeared in a manifest form in the past (Acts 7:2). He reminded them that the heads of their tribes had rejected and tried to kill their brother Joseph, who would end up being their savior and forgive them of their sins against him (Acts 7:9-10). He also reminded them that though the promises of God linger, they never fail to come to pass. He continues in our passage for today reminding them of the specific types and shadows of the Messiah as well as the direct prophecy from Moses. Remember that Stephen is accused of speaking against the law, but his recounting of history is indicting his accusers as being the ones who have ignored the law and turned against it.

Stephen continued, ²⁰ *At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house,* Acts 7:20 Stephen is telling of the story of Moses. The baby boys were to be thrown into the Nile as Pharaoh feared that Israel was becoming too powerful and might side with Egypt's enemies (Exodus 1:10). Moses parents hid him as long as they could and then put him in a basket in the reeds along the Nile.

²¹ *and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son.* ²² *And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.* Acts 7:21-22 Providence had Pharaoh's daughter find him and adopt him, raising him as her own son. That was a miracle! She must have held the heartstrings of her father, the Pharaoh, to take a Hebrew baby as her own. She had Moses' actual birth mother become his nursemaid (Exodus 2:7-8), another miracle. No doubt his real mother told him of his ancestry and taught him about the God of their fathers. It sounds impossible under the circumstances, but nothing is impossible with God (Matthew 19:26). Moses received the best training that Egypt could offer. He was one of Egypt's best and brightest.

²³ *"When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.* ²⁴ *And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian.* ²⁵ *He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.* Acts 7:23-25 The Hebrews lived in Goshen and only mingled with the Egyptians for work projects as the Egyptians despised shepherds and considered them to be unclean (Genesis 46:34). At the age of forty, Moses decided to visit the race of

Commented [PW1]: Acts 7:2 (ESV)

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,

Commented [PW2]: Acts 7:9-10 (ESV)

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.

Commented [PW3]: Exodus 1:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Commented [PW4]: Exodus 2:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

⁸ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

Commented [PW5]: Matthew 19:26 (ESV)

²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Commented [PW6]: Genesis 46:34 (ESV)

³⁴ you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."

people from which he was born. He saw an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew and avenged the oppressed man by killing the Egyptian. He made the mistake that is so common to man, that of assuming others will understand his motives. Our cultures predispose us to a certain mindset about those of another culture. The Hebrews were forced labor for the Egyptians, so they no doubt despised them. They may have known of Moses heritage, but they probably saw him as a traitor and wondered why he hadn't done anything before. Moses assumed they would credit God for raising him up to help them.

I remember when my wife moved to the USA. She thought it was a Christian nation and everyone would act like a Christian and have a Christian mindset. She soon learned that is not the case. Assumptions usually lead us down the wrong road. We know that man is fallen and will generally act in a selfish manner. However, we can't even assume that. There are people who love God and will act in the love of God to unselfishly help others. Jesus tells us the only way we can know the nature of a person is by the fruit of his or her life and it takes time to observe that (Matthew 7:20).

*²⁶ And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?'*²⁷ *But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?'*²⁸ *Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' Acts 7:26-28* Moses came upon two Hebrews who were quarreling. The one in the wrong asked who chose Moses to be their ruler and judge. He asked if Moses wanted to kill him like he killed the Egyptian. Word of the murder had spread among the Hebrews and they didn't interpret Moses' actions as he expected. Instead of welcoming his as a deliverer, they questioned his motives.

The men's Bible study has been on this issue of man trying to be righteous or resting in God and what He has accomplished on our behalf (Romans 6:11; 1 Corinthians 15:10). We are led of the flesh or of the Spirit. Moses was trying to accomplish God's desire man's way. That never bears lasting fruit and can get us in real trouble.

²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. Acts 7:29 He thought he was doing the right thing, but it was not God's way or God's time. For the next forty years Moses attended Desert University and majored in humility. It is a very necessary course for those whom God would use, for it teaches us to be totally dependent on God (John 15:5). That is when lasting things can be accomplished (John 15:16).

³⁰ "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. Acts 7:30-33 Moses is now eighty years old. It looked like any hope of saving his relatives was long gone. With all his potential and training, he was merely a shepherd of sheep. But that is the perfect

Commented [PW7]: Matthew 7:20 (ESV)

²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Commented [PW8]: Romans 6:11 (ESV)

¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Commented [PW9]: 1 Corinthians 15:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Commented [PW10]: John 15:5 (ESV)

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Commented [PW11]: John 15:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

training for what God was about to call him to do, to lead the Hebrews through this very desert depending on God alone.

Notice that the "angel" in the bush says He is the God of Moses' fathers, the I Am (Exodus 3:14)! This fire was a visible manifestation of God (a theophany). The Apostle Paul tells us that visible manifestations of God are actually Jesus (Colossians 1:15). Moses is meeting with Jesus. **When you meet Jesus, everything changes.** And remember that Stephen is trying to explain to the rulers who are trying him that Jesus earthly life was the manifestation of God (John 1:14), and that God does not limit Himself to a temple to meet with us. Stephen is demonstrating from Scripture that he is actually honoring the law that they are ignoring.

³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt. ³⁵ *"This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.* Acts 7:34-35 We should take great comfort from this passage, for it declares that God is a God who sees our difficulties and hears our groaning (Isaiah 63:9). Stephen was quoting these many quotations right out of the Greek version of the Old Testament. He memorized the Scriptures. No wonder he was full of wisdom. His heart and mind were devoted to the Word.

The Jews of Stephen's day to some degree felt like their forefathers in Egypt. Rome could call them to serve on whim, to carry a burden or to labor in some other way. Israel was occupied. While they still had some freedoms, they were taxed heavily and forced to do as Rome pleased. They wanted another Moses, a physical deliverer.

The very person who the Hebrew slave asked, "Who made you a ruler and a judge," was being called by God to be a ruler and redeemer. The connection the Spirit was making with Jesus was obvious. The rulers rejected Jesus as ruler and redeemer, but He was sent by God to do that very thing (John 3:17) and had now ascended to the right hand of God to hold that position for all eternity. The council put Stephen on trial, but God had the ruling council on trial! Only God's judgment matters in the end.

Stephen continued, ³⁶ *This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.* ³⁷ *This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'* Acts 7:36-37 This was the great prophecy they longed to see fulfilled. But now that it had come to pass, they didn't like the way it was fulfilled. Jesus did more signs and wonders than Moses (John 20:30), but those signs weren't against Rome. His signs and wonders demonstrated a greater deliverance, one from the ultimate enemy who enslaves the soul to sin. As blessed an instrument of God as Moses was, he couldn't change the heart of the Hebrew people (Malachi 3:7). The older generation had to die in the wilderness (Numbers 14:35).

Jesus' signs and wonders are unsurpassed in all of history. Those who say others did miracles in those days are blowing a couple of reports of one-time events way out of

Commented [PW12]: Exodus 3:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Commented [PW13]: Colossians 1:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Commented [PW14]: 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.

Commented [PW15]: Isaiah 63:9 (ESV)

⁹ In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Commented [PW16]: John 3:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Commented [PW17]: John 20:30 (ESV)

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

Commented [PW18]: Malachi 3:7 (ESV)

⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?"

Commented [PW19]: Numbers 14:35 (ESV)

³⁵ I, the LORD, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die."

proportion. None come close to the sheer number and variety of miracles in the three years of Jesus' ministry (John 10:38; John 21:25).

³⁸ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, Acts 7:38-39 Stephen is driving home the point that the account of how the Hebrews treated Moses foreshadowed what these rulers had done to Jesus (John 7:19). Moses was a physical deliverer chosen by God to take the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Yet, despite the miracles and delivering to them the Word of God, they refused to obey him or the laws of God, thrust him aside, and their hearts turned back to Egypt over and over again (Numbers 14:22).

The One like him that God would raise up from the Jewish people did amazing miracles that showed He was the One the prophets foretold (John 7:31). He offered to deliver them from the bondage of sin and lead them to the Kingdom of God. They did to Him what they did to Moses, refused to obey Him and thrust Him aside, even taking it a step further by killing Him (Exodus 17:4). Egypt in their hearts was power and wealth. Just as the Hebrews lusted after the fish, leeks, and garlics, these rulers desired to cling to their positions of power and influence. Egypt is many different things for different people. All that we lust after has one thing in common. Those lusts are more important to us than our Creator who offers us redemption from enslavement to those temporal desires (John 8:34). Only Jesus can open our eyes to see what is valuable.

⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. Acts 7:40-41 The Jews of Stephen's day deplored idolatry and recognized it as the reason they went into captivity. Stephen is reminding them of the influence it had on their ancestors and suggesting it was still in their hearts in a different form. The Holy Spirit through Stephen was bringing conviction, just as He does today when we read the Word.

⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: "'Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?' ⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.' Acts 7:42-43 The history of their unfaithfulness to God who led them out of Egypt was a stark reminder of how sinful they could be. This was a warning of how God would turn away from them if they continued to reject the Messiah. He would give them over to their idols and send them out of the land again. It was prophetic, for the Jews were exiled from Jerusalem after the second Jewish revolt. Jews in the second century and since can look back on the preserved words of the first Christian martyr and realize that he was the one who was speaking the truth. The loving patience of God was giving them a chance to see where their hearts were by a review of their history and warning them of their future.

Commented [PW20]: John 10:38 (ESV)

³⁸ but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

Commented [PW21]: John 21:25 (ESV)

²⁵ Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Commented [PW22]: John 7:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?"

Commented [PW23]: Numbers 14:22 (ESV)

²² none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice,

Commented [PW24]: John 7:31 (ESV)

³¹ Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

Commented [PW25]: Exodus 17:4 (ESV)

⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

Commented [PW26]: John 8:34 (ESV)

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

⁴⁴ "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Acts 7:44-47 The place of worship changed in the past from a tent to a temple. Could it not change again to a temple of living stones (1 Peter 2:5)? The wording reminds them the tent and temple were only a copy of the heavenly reality (Revelation 21:22).

⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?" ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things? Acts 7:48-50 Stephen was quoting Isaiah 66:1-2. God is too big for any building. The entire earth is merely a footstool for Him. He made the universe. How can man build something adequate for God? God must build it, and He is (Matthew 16:18)!

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Acts 7:51-53 Now Stephen is done with implications and just makes the connection clear. Just like their forefathers they have always resisted the Holy Spirit. The problem is that their hearts are uncircumcised (Deuteronomy 10:16)! The covenant of circumcision was a physical sign of an inward act that was to be true for them. They were to have sensitive hearts to God and His Word, but they would not. They were stiff-necked. They would not turn at the sound of God's voice. They insisted on going their own way and refused to listen. This is the very thing they were afraid would be repeated when they came out of exile (Nehemiah 9:16-17). They had become like their ancestors who persecuted and killed the prophets, God's messengers, sent to guide them back to God. The unforgivable sin, persistently resisting the Holy Spirit, was as true of them as it was their ancestors.

This was the perfect message for Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah and redeemer. It is today as well. But what of us who do not have Jewish heritage? We can be just as stiff-necked, just as idolatrous, and just as insensitive to all God has done to redeem us. We may not respond as violently as they did in the following verses, but the result is the same. To harden our heart towards God's great redemption offered to us in Jesus, is to love this temporal world more than its Creator and to ignore the eternal consequences. God loves you! He gave Himself for you. There is nothing more precious or to be prized. Don't be as blind and hardhearted as these rulers were. I'm not asking you to join a church or give a thing or asking anything of you. I'm asking you, in Jesus' stead, to talk to Him and let Him speak to your heart, to confess your stubborn independence from Him, and ask Him for forgiveness and eternal life. He will graciously give it to you if you will humbly ask (Matthew 7:7-8; John 3:17).

Commented [PW27]: 1 Peter 2:5 (ESV)

⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Commented [PW28]: Revelation 21:22 (ESV)

²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

Commented [PW29]: Isaiah 66:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?"
² All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Commented [PW30]: Matthew 16:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Commented [PW31]: Deuteronomy 10:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Commented [PW32]: Nehemiah 9:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶ "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.
¹⁷ They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

Commented [PW33]: Matthew 7:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.
⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

Commented [PW34]: John 3:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

For those of us who have invited Jesus to make His home in our hearts, Stephen has set an example for us. God honored His humble service of food distribution and his faithfulness to hide the Word in His heart by making Him a hero of the faith, the first Christian martyr. You might think that is not an example you are excited to follow, but remember that martyr simply means a witness. There is no higher calling than to be a witness of the love and grace of Jesus. Eternity is before us. Are you investing for it, or are all your treasures here? Look at all Jesus has done for you! How can we respond half-heartedly? Stephen's life challenges us to surrender our lives to the life of Christ in us. Is your heart's desire meaningful in the light of eternity?

Questions

- 1 Go over the background leading up to this confrontation.
- 2 What was Moses' mistake?
- 3 Who met with Moses?
- 4 What did Moses learn?
- 5 Why did Stephen bring up Moses?
- 6 What kept people from following God?
- 7 Why bring up the tent and temple?
- 8 What did the quote from Isaiah declare?
- 9 What was Stephen's indictment of the rulers?
- 10 How does it apply to people today?