

Lessons Learned from Stephen and Israel

Acts 7:1-60 And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 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, ... 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?' 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."

❖ Intro

➤ Today we look at a man who lived for the glory of Jesus

- Today we look at a man who died for the glory of Jesus
- **We are going to cover all 60 verses...**
 - This is not just a history lesson
 - This is the pinnacle of God's Story with Israel
 - ◆ His choosing them, their rejection, His grace, their rejection, His mercy and their murder
 - ◆ We can learn a lot from these people

➤ Recap

- Remember we have just come out of ch 6.
- The apostles had the church choose 7 men to oversee the distribution of money for widows
- **Stephen was one of the chosen 7.**
 - We see that Stephen is a Hellenist Jew. He has a greek name.
 - And He had been teaching Jesus to many in the synagogue
 - Many priest were becoming obedient to the faith.
- **This upset a lot of people.**
 - So, they tried to gather up some false witness to say Stephen had blasphemed God
 - And that He had blasphemed God
- **Their big accusation**
 - Was that Stephen had said Jesus would destroy the temple.
 - We noticed it was likely Stephen was saying things similar
 - But the false witnesses were taking things out of context
 - They were saying He blasphemed the Holy Place, the Holy Law and their Holy God

➤ The Main Issue: (So important to understanding Stephen's sermon)

- Is their thought that Stephen was trying to stir up heretical teachings
- And the idea of destroying the temple was inconceivable to them.
- You may have read this chapter and wondered?
 - Why does Stephen just give a history lesson...
 - And I will try to show you how his sermon fits perfectly with what was going on around him
- **Another Reason for Expository Preaching:**
 - We would never get the whole story had we not been going through the book of Acts
 - The context brings understanding to this text

➤ One Main Point:

- They saw their belief system being attacked.
- So, they got defensive... And anything that got into the way of their religion

- Was their enemy.
- **Stephen was teaching Jesus to all the people in the synagogue, which was Jewish**
 - And many priest were believing...
 - Because of what Stephen was teaching them about Jesus
 - Along with other apostles, and disciples...
- **Stephen's Sermon is a direct response to the people...**
- **The high priests ask him if these accusations are true**
 - and it opens the door for Stephen to preach
 - And He begins to preach the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts
 - Luke, the author of Acts, devotes this whole chapter to what Stephen had to say
- **Stephen's Response was focused on:**
 - 1) Their accusations against him in regards to the destruction of the temple
 - 2) Their accusations against him that He was a blasphemer of God and the Law
 - 3) Israel's History of repeatedly disregarding God and the prophets He sent.
- ❖ **Our Application: 2 things**
 - To evaluate ourselves against Israel and their many turnings away from God
 - To consider the boldness, and the soundness and the faithfulness of Stephen.
 - And from that evaluate our lives in comparison to him
- ❖ **The Beginning of Stephen's Response**
 - **And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 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,**
 - **The God of Glory**
 - Stephen immediately addresses God as the God of glory
 - He is establishing his viewpoint on who God is
 - **He also identifies himself with the leaders**
 - When he tells them that God appeared to "Our Father Abraham"
 - ◆ So He has now identified his belief system about God.
 - ◆ Saying, I am serving the same God you claim to serve.
 - **Stephen will now use some examples from their history to prove to them**
 - They are continuing in the rebellious ways of their fathers...
 - And that Stephen is not the one being blasphemous toward God...
 - They are! Just like their forefathers
- ❖ **Father Abraham**
 - ³and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴Then 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. ⁵Yet 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. ⁶And 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. 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.' ⁸And 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.
 - Expound

❖ The 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. 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. 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.
- **The rest of the children of Israel were not such great guys**
 - First of all the sold their brother.
 - Because they were jealous over his dreams
 - Then they lied to their poor father over what happened
 - Some of them were vindictive murderers
 - Another one was with a prostitute
- **Stephen is making the point that these guys rejected Joseph...**
 - Who eventually became their Savior in the land of Egypt
- **The 400 years in Egypt**
 - And here we see how the children of Israel made it into the land of Egypt...
 - And if you remember, God promised Moses they would be enslaved in another land
 - But, God would indeed judge that nation
- Now we see Moses... and God’s deliverance of His people...

❖ Moses, Rejection, Idol Worship and the Tabernacle

- ¹⁷ “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ 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. 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, 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.
- 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. 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?’ ²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.
- 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. 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.**
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.’ 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,** 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. 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.’ 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.**

➤ **Here we see the children of Israel continuing their ways.**

- They reject the leader God sent them.
 - Many of them refused to obey Moses
- They began to worship false gods, idols while in the desert.

➤ **Interestingly**

- **They made an idol in the desert... and they claimed that it was that idol that delivered them.**
 - They acted as if they were serving Yahweh, but their knowledge of who He is was warped
 - And they built an idol to worship saying this is the God who delivered us out of Egypt
- **I want you to see this is the same thing those who had come up against Stephen were doing**
 - They were claiming to worship the God of Abraham...
 - Yet they had rejected Jesus, who was indeed the God of Abraham
- **Stephen says that one of the Prophets wrote: And we know this to be the prophet Amos**
 - That God saw their worship as worship of Moloch and Rephan
 - Moloch was a false god of the Ammonites
 - ◆ He was worshipped by human sacrifice
 - Rephan was likely a god served by the Babylonians and Assyrians
 - ◆ And he was associated with the planet Saturn

➤ **So, this is where the children of Israel would find themselves**

- Worshipping false gods

➤ **The Tent of Wilderness**

- So, finally we are coming to the connection with the temple
 - The tent of wilderness – this is just the precursor to the temple
 - This is the tabernacle constructed from what Moses saw from God
- This Tabernacle was a symbol of God’s presence with the people
 - God would come and dwell their and bring His glory as He would spend time with Moses

➤ **Stephen is making the point:**

- Our fathers had the tabernacle...

❖ **The Tabernacle, Joshua, David and Solomon**

➤ **Here is where it gets really interesting... and here is where Stephen is getting to his point**

- He started out rather easy going, bringing his hearers into the story
- But, now He is about to show them their connection to rejection of God

- 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. 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?’
- **The Tabernacle was brought in with the children of Israel**
 - The Tabernacle was with them when they ran out all the nations
 - All the nations living in the land that God had promised Abraham
- **We Know:**
 - Even then, the Israelites left some nations with them
 - They did not listen to God
 - **The book of judges is a constant battle of them wondering away from God serving other gods**
 - God bringing judgment to them
 - And their cry to God
 - And God sending deliverance to them
- **Finally we see the crossover from tabernacle set up and moved**
 - To a Temple placed in Jerusalem
- **David: Who found favor in the eyes of God**
 - David wanted to build a temple for God
 - A stationary place for God’s people to come and worship God
 - David’s thinking:
 - Why should I live in a nice house
 - While the ark of God is in a tent
 - So He goes to God and asks to build him a House...
- **God makes it clear that He does not dwell in houses made with hands...**
 - But, he does allow David to begin preparation for building the temple
 - Yet, God lets Solomon build the temple
 - Since David was a man of war

❖ God Does not Dwell in Temples Made with Hands

- 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?’
- **Stephen is making sure they understand this temple is nothing but a building**
 - It is not the dwelling place of God
 - They are holding on too tightly to this structure made with hands
 - Made with things God has created
- **The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands...**
 - Heaven is His throne
 - The earth is where He props up His feet
 - Man can not make me a place of rest
- **Who does man think they are?**
 - And here we see the mistakes of the people of Israel
 - What was meant as a great gesture toward God
 - Was turned into a place that was greater than God
- **The people of Israel**
 - Had their minds so fixed on their religious system

- And their Temple
- That they missed the real temple when He came
- They missed out on the God they thought they were serving

❖ **Stephen's Deadly Accusation Toward Israel**

- 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."
- **Stiff necked people, Uncircumcised in hearts and ears**
 - This is where Stephen literally just lets them have it
 - He is not worried about political correctness
 - He is not worried about offending them
 - **He is not worried He may push them further away from God**
 - He is ready to tell them the truth
 - So they can hear from Him
 - What God thinks of them...
 - **What Jeremiah said was true of them:**
 - **Jeremiah 6:10** To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.
- **You always Resist the Holy Spirit**
 - Just like Annanais and Saphira did not recognize the Holy Spirit
 - These people were resisting God's Holy Spirit... they were resisting God
 - **When Jesus walked the earth**
 - They got together and said that Jesus had the power of devils to cast out demons
 - They disregarded the Holy Spirit...
- **You are just like your Fathers:**
 - Which prophet was not persecuted by your fathers
 - **Your Fathers killed those who announced the coming of the Righteous One**
- **You are doing the exact same thing you have always done...**
 - **Whom you have now betrayed and murdered...**
 - In their zeal to protect their religious ways...
 - They betrayed their true God and murdered Him...
- **You who received the law as delivered by Angels**
 - You had the law... you had no excuse
 - God personally gave you the law
 - And in it, He told you He would send you a prophet
 - He told you he would make a new covenant with you
- **And did not keep it**
 - You did not keep my law
 - Stephen tells them they have the law but are not keeping it.
- **They were accusing Stephen**
 - Of blasphemy against God
 - Against Moses
 - And saying He kept telling people Jesus is going to tear down the temple...
 - And Jesus was going to tear it down...
 - He would use the Romans to do that not many years from Stephen's death

- **But the temple is not the point...**
 - Stephen wants them to see this and to hear this
 - The temple is not the point
 - Even if it stays up, or comes down...
- **Jesus is the temple... Jesus is the dwelling place for man...**
 - Revelation 21:22-26 ²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

❖ The Leaders Response

- ⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.
- **They Killed Him like they did Jesus**
 - Like the Nation had killed so many of the prophets that had come before
 - They are a nation of people that murder the messengers of God
- **Stephen had the Grace of Jesus**
 - Even though Stephen had some very harsh things to say towards them
 - He said them because He wanted to see them be saved.
 - I also believe the Holy Spirit was speaking through Stephen
 - And God wanted them to hear... He knows what they have done and are doing
 - **Yet, Stephen, just like God...**
 - Is willing to forgive
 - **Stephen prays to God with a loud voice...**
 - ◆ **Do not hold this sin against them...**
 - And then He dies...
 - **God continued to offer grace to these people**
 - And the offer is still there for them today

❖ The People Ignored Another Messenger of God

❖ Can you see yourself in these people:

- Ignoring what God is telling you over and over
- You who claim to know Jesus, to be someone who worships God
- Are you truly serving Him
 - Or do you find yourself more caught up in the outward things, instead of who God really is

❖ Children of God:

- Are you prepared to die like Stephen
 - He knew this would likely happen...
 - Yet He stood there and preached regardless of the possible outcome
- Are you prepared to live like Stephen?

- With faithfulness
- With boldness
- Full of the Spirit

❖ **Invitation:**

- To those of you who have never given their life to Jesus
- **To those followers of Jesus**
 - Who find themselves following others things more than their Savior
- **To all of you:**
 - I want you to see the grace of God that is offered toward men
 - If God is willing to offer salvation to murderers
 - To those who have constantly ignored Him and killed His messengers
 - Is there anything He is not willing to forgive you of today?
 - **For His children:**
 - Do not continue to live in the despair that sin brings
 - And see yourselves as someone God is angry with all the time
 - Jesus turned away the anger of God toward your sins
 - He removes your sins from you
 - They are paid for, you are pardoned from them
- **I was reading in Colossians this week... and amazing verse I will end with.**
 - Colossians 2:13-14¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.