

Stephen's Defense and Condemnation of Israel

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[0 : 00] If you'd please take your Bibles and open up to Acts 7. We're going to pick up where you and I left off a few weeks back.

And I want to, I have personally said thank you, but I would like to give a public acknowledgement to Ken Joy, covering for me last week in the pursuit of studying biblical justice was a heavy undertaking.

And there's a lot there and you can only cover so much. And I can only imagine that Ken Joy is looking for justice for all the goats that he lost last week.

So just, that was good. I did appreciate your concentration on the justice aspect though. When you're preaching through a book, there's, you know, you come, especially a book like Acts, you come across passages that have multiple themes.

And you can't always cover it all, right? And so for the intent of what I was doing, I chose not to focus so much on that, but I'm glad you picked it up. Thank you. So as we've seen in the book of Acts so far, the beginnings of the church and the spreading of the gospel in Jerusalem.

[1 : 14] The ministry of the apostles was affirmed by God through the wonders and signs that they performed. The acceptance of the gospel was gaining ground, and the Jewish council did not like that, so they warned the apostles to stop preaching in the name of Jesus.

And they even beat them for disregarding their command. As the church was growing, there was injustice taking place in the distribution of goods toward the Hellenist widows, which prompted the need for seven men to be chosen to serve in that task.

You want to avoid, as much as possible, disunity in the body of Christ, because the body of Christ is supposed to be united, one body together for the glory of God.

Stephen, one of the seven, was an apostle who was full of grace and power. He was preaching about Jesus, and he was defending the faith against those who opposed him, skeptics or just those who had false teaching and did not want to learn or change what they believed.

And ultimately, that testimony that Stephen had is what leads to him becoming the first martyr on record in church history.

[2 : 48] And as we dig into Acts 7, I have to be honest with you, it was very hard, near impossible for me to come up with sermon content.

Because what Stephen presents in Acts 7 is in and of itself a sermon of sorts. So to sermonize a sermon, I find, is redundant.

And so we will be doing a lot of just reading in the text. I'll make some comments here or there, but let's let the text speak for itself. So let's start actually in Acts 6, verse 11, and we're going to see the accusations brought against Stephen.

The accusations against Stephen. Acts 6, verse 11. We'll actually start in verse 9.

Some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians and the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

[3 : 56] But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

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. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

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.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. So the accusations against Stephen, they come hard and heavy against him.

Those from the synagogue of the freedmen. As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, there's no real information out there telling us what this is. But I gather it is some sort of sect of maybe Judaism or some cult of its own.

[5 : 13] I don't know. You don't know. But we just know they come from the synagogue. Then you've got the Cyrenians and the Alexandrians and those from Cilicia and Asia. And they come and they contend, they dispute with Stephen and they cannot withstand the wisdom with which he spoke to them and defended the faith.

And I would say that wisdom is grounded in the word of God. And as we're going to go through Acts 7, I'm convinced this is probably the way in which he argued.

And in Acts 7, you're going to see that it is literally just a survey of the Old Testament from Genesis 12 on. And he's up there and he's speaking.

And the Holy Spirit is empowering him to be a witness for the glory of God and for the gospel. These folks claim that he spoke against Moses and against God and the temple would be destroyed and the customs changed.

We don't know what Stephen said in his arguments against these folks. And so we don't know the context. But we do know that these folks that brought these accusations are referred to as false witnesses.

[6 : 33] So what they are sharing, there may be some truth to it. But by and large is a lie or misrepresentation. These four matters, Moses, God, the temple, and the customs, or the law, ultimately will be addressed in Stephen's defense.

And as he gives his defense, now that we're going to start reading here in chapter 7, he ultimately accomplishes two major objectives. First, he defends himself against their accusations.

And as we're reading through it, I'll point that out to you and how that's happening. And two, he shows the guilt of all Israel in these very matters.

So the accusations they bring against Stephen, he's going to stand up and he's going to defend himself, and then he's going to flip the script. And it's amazing how this, you know, this is taking place.

It's really cool. And it just shows, ultimately, that we need to stay true to the text of Scripture and let God, through the Holy Spirit, do the talking in the hearts of people.

[7 : 45] So first, we're going to read verses, I should say, 1 to 35. And we see in this section here that the work of God has historically been resisted in Israel.

So pick it up in verse 1. And the high priest said, are these things so? 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, and said to him, go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.

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.

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.

[9 : 00] 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 400 years.

But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God, and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place. 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.

Verse 9, And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him 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.

Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.

[10 : 09] And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob, his father, and all his kindred, 75 persons in all.

And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. 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 Hamer and Shechem.

But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, so we're talking about the promise of delivering Abraham's descendants out of Egypt, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt.

Until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so that they would not be kept alive.

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. And when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son.

[11 : 18] And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. Verse 23, When he was 40 years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.

And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed, verse 25 is very important, He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.

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? With a man who was wronging his neighbor, thrust him aside, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?

Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

Now when 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire, in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord.

[12 : 39] 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. Then the Lord said to him, Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

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.

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.

All right. A little Old Testament survey for you. A lot taking place in this. And so, in this section, first of all, again, we're talking Stephen, making a defense for himself.

He acknowledges the work of God in Israel's history. So, their accusation is that Stephen was speaking against God. And he's saying, No.

[13 : 47] I understand how God has worked in our people's history. And I know the power that he has in what he has done. He knows that God called Abram from his land to a land that God would show him in Genesis 12.

And Stephen made clear that he understood that God revealed to Joseph that he would be a ruler over his parents and brothers in Genesis 37. If you remember that, that came about in two dreams that Joseph had that he shared with his family.

And it was from that that his brothers just really, I mean, they didn't like him to begin with. It was kind of sibling rivalry anyway. And then when Joseph, you know, talks about these dreams that are, you know, when you interpret them, they could interpret them.

And they understood that it was saying Joseph would rule over them. They didn't like it. Like this is even worse. Now, this would be like Galen sharing a dream with his siblings and saying, well, I guess Owen, because he's the youngest.

Owen sharing a dream and saying, Hey, no, this is what this was. And you're going to, I'm going to rule over you and you're going to bow down to me. His siblings wouldn't take it very well. I'm sure Judah would have a thing or two to say about that.

[15 : 00] And that was the case with Joseph and his brothers. But God revealed it to Joseph that that would be the case. And we see in Exodus chapter two, verses one to 10, that God prepared Moses to be the deliverer for Israel out of bondage.

Stephen in these verses here is making that clear. He's saying, I know about this God. I know what he has done. I respect it.

I believe it. It is great. It is basically what Stephen's doing here in his argument or in his defense. And then, as I said, his defense is accomplishing two things.

Defending his stance. I believe in God. I support him a hundred percent. And then he's now bringing condemnation to Israel. And we see in these verses that historically Israel has resisted God's plan before finally giving into it.

If you were to, and I should, I thought about stopping as we went, but I didn't want to keep interrupting the flow of thought. Um, so first of all, Abram, Abram was called by God, but he did not immediately obey.

[16 : 07] He settled in Haran until his father died before going to the land that God would show him. And if you, if you read in the text of Genesis chapter 12, verses one through five there, it's indicated in the text that when, that, when that calling, when Abram's coming out, it's actually the, like a second time or another time that God has reached out to him.

So we're between Stephen and what Moses records in Genesis 12. We understand that Abram was called to leave his kindred, to leave his family, but he couldn't do it.

He stopped in Haran. He wasn't to the promised land yet. He stopped in Haran and settled there. It was a land of comfort for him, but it wasn't the land of promise yet. And then when, when his father dies, God says, all right, come on, we've got a job to complete.

Let's go. But Abraham didn't obey right away. Joseph, specifically Joseph's brothers, they despised him.

So the God reveals to Joseph and his family, his plan for Joe. And his brothers despised him and they sold him into Egypt.

[17 : 21] They didn't, they didn't respect him as the, the ruler to come. They didn't love him as a brother, care for him as they ought to in his family. They sold him.

They tried to get him completely out of their lives. But eventually they would bow before him as ruler in Egypt on their visit to get grain.

The second time when he reveals himself to him. But again, they didn't want to accept it. They understood that this dream was given to Joseph by God. They wanted nothing to do with it.

And then eventually they were kind of forced to obey. And eventually with that reconciliation of relationship at the end of Genesis, they were willing to obey. And it seems that they ended their days on a more positive note.

Moses, Moses, we see that I said, verse 25 is important. Moses was rejected by the Israelites as a deliverer. Moses was planning.

[18 : 21] He had it in his mind that he's going to help deliver his people out of bondage. And he understood this to be the case, but his brothers didn't.

They rejected him as a deliverer until God brought him back to Egypt after 40 years in Midian. So while Stephen's saying, yes, I believe in God and I believe what he's done and the promises he's made and the way he's brought those about to be fulfilled.

Yet in our history, historically speaking, Israel as a whole has resisted the work of God. And he's, and he's setting up, he's setting them up here a little bit for what he's going to say at the very end of his defense.

But he's saying historically, you know, God, the work of God has been resisted in Israel. Verses 36 through 43, the deliverance by Moses did not prevent Israel's idolatry.

So picking up in verse 36. So Stephen's telling him what he believes. Now he's talked about God. Now he's going to talk about Moses. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years.

[19 : 46] This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. 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. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside and in their hearts, they turned to Egypt, 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. And they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

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 40 years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your God, Raphim, the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.

[20 : 58] Stephen acknowledges the deliverance by Moses. By no means is he shouting down Moses in his teachings, in what he's been sharing with the synagogue of the freedmen and the Alexandrians and all them that have come up against him.

By no means is he disregarding or disrespecting Moses. He recognizes that Moses was God's chosen man to lead his people out of Egypt into the promised land.

And he even recognizes that Moses had prophesied about another prophet like him to come later. And this is like another setup to what he's going to bring at the end of his closing argument.

But historically, Israel turned from Moses and God toward idols. Basically, so in speaking with the Jewish council, he's like, let me tell you about myself, then let me give you a little history lesson that reflects you and our fathers.

It's kind of what he's doing here. And we see that after they come out of Egypt, they turned away from Moses. They rejected him. They pushed him aside.

[22 : 23] And their hearts turned to Egypt in verse 39. And then we see in verse 42, God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven. The host of heaven, that's the sun, moon, and stars.

In the ancient Near East, those are gods in those religious systems. Those are the gods of the people who were dwelling in the land that God had promised Israel. So when they came through for conquest, they were being influenced by these false religions and these false gods, and they started worshipping them.

They turned away from Moses, and they turned away from Yahweh, and they started serving these idols. In similar fashion today, God lets people have their idols.

Romans chapter 1. If you want to flip over there for a second, you can follow along. But it was shocking and telling to me as I was reading that about Israel.

And then, you know, it's something you know. And I'm like, you know what? God let them do what they wanted to do. And then I thought, that's what Romans 1 says.

[23 : 33] Verses 21 through 32. It says here, For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.

Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations to those that are contrary to nature. And the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.

Men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They're full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They're gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

[25 : 07] Though they know God's righteous decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

Ladies and gentlemen, the message is clear from Old Testament through New, that if people choose to not submit to God and follow Him, He will gladly let you go your own way.

And when man goes their own way, it ultimately always ends up in idolatry, dishonoring God, turning away from Him, hating God, cursing God.

That's what happens. And that is exactly, this was not part of my point, but it is now, that is exactly what is happening in the United States of America, in Europe, in England, in Canada, is that people are turning away from God.

They may, at some point in the history of these nations, there was a, there was an understanding about God, there was a belief about God, there was the revelation of God before them, and they chose, they have chosen to turn away, and seek their own idols, to go, you know, it says in Romans 1, three times, God gave them over.

[26 : 47] It doesn't mean that God forced it upon them, no, God just let people go naturally the way they were going away from Him. And so we see in America all sorts of insanity that is being, that is trying to be legalized as being okay and normal and acceptable.

It's absurd. It used to be, the absurd thing was, how could we possibly think about legalizing homosexual marriage? Now the insane thing that we have to try to convince people of is, how can you possibly think that a boy is a girl?

or a girl is a boy? Or ever could be? Conversations that I even didn't think we would be having when I was in school.

And I only graduated 20 years ago. It's come hard and fast, but ultimately God has just let us go whatever way we want to go.

And we're seeing the fruit bear out in our country. And unfortunately, we see it invading our churches as well. But, so the deliverance by Moses, Stephen believed it, but it didn't prevent Israel's idolatry.

[28 : 11] verses 44 through 50. The temple cannot confine God. 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.

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, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophets say. 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? Did not my hand make all these things? Stephen acknowledges the function of the temple.

In fact, he even actually, like, says, it didn't start there, it started with the tabernacle with Moses and Exodus. And they had the tabernacle through their wanderings and through their conquest until they finally settled in the land.

[29 : 24] And David had a burden to build a house for God and God wouldn't allow him to do it, so he allowed his son to do it. You know, both structures, the tabernacle and the temple were representative of the presence of God with his people and it acted as a place where they could come and worship him.

Stephen acknowledges all this. He says, yes, I understand this is true. But historically, Israel ignores the fact that God is not confined to buildings. You know, Israel, their pride was in the tabernacle and how it represented the presence of God among them.

Their pride was in the temple and here it is in Jerusalem and this is where God is. And Stephen's saying, no, no. God cannot be confined by a building.

Heaven is his throne. The earth is his footstool. What possible house can we build for him? Didn't he make all these things? Like he transcends anything we could possibly give him?

And so this is both a hit against the Jewish council and the Israelites and it's also a hit against those who build idle boxes and shrines and, you know, oh, this is my God carved out of wood or this is where my God dwells at this shrine and so on.

[30 : 47] It's a hit against them all because it's like, no, no. First of all, there's only one true God and he can't be defined by this, this, or this. And he cannot be confined by this, this, or this. He's above it all.

So that was, that's a hit. So Stephen's like, okay, I acknowledge the temple and it's good and when it started and how we, you know, how we had it and it's like, at this point in his defense, he seems to be getting a little annoyed or frustrated or, you know, maybe he's getting the eye roll from the high priest all the time or something or, you know, maybe they're just kind of chuckling and laughing at him.

We don't know what the crowd is doing at this point. We just assume they're sitting and listening but as a pastor, I know that's not true. You know, I see the different, you know, the different, you know, twitches and, you know, gazes and such and I'm sure Stephen saw it too and he's getting frustrated.

He's like, you know, I'm telling you, it's, the most high does not dwell in houses made by hands. So he kind of gives a little of attack there. Then here in verses 51 to 53 where we're going to be dropping off, we see that the law pointed to the Messiah whom the Jews killed.

And it's like, he's getting frustrated. He's saying, look, the most high doesn't dwell in houses now. Verse 51, you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.

[32 : 15] Well, if he didn't have their attention before, he does now. As your fathers did, so do you. 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. You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.

Wow. Stephen acknowledges the importance of the law in preparing for the Messiah.

The prophets pointed to the righteous one to come and the law was given ultimately to imprison everyone. It says that they did not keep the law. The law was given.

He acknowledges that fact. It was given by God through angels, whatever. And he's saying it doesn't matter because you didn't keep it. And Paul writes in Galatians 3 verses 21 and 22 concerning the law.

[33 : 23] He says, is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

He's saying if you could keep the law and through that keeping of the law earn righteousness, then that is how it would come about by the law. But the scripture or the law imprisoned everything under sin so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

The purpose of the law was not to gain righteousness. The purpose of the law was to show the person's unrighteousness.

Historically, Israel has resisted the law and persecuted and killed its messengers. And to no surprise, they also resisted and killed the very one the law appointed to, Jesus.

Stephen not only gives a great defense for himself as a believer of these things, but he gives quite a condemning statement, especially to wrap things up about Israel's history and the Jewish people today or in his day.

[34 : 53] In conclusion, I'd like to read 1 Corinthians 10, 6 through 12. I want to turn over there real quick and follow along. So the Apostle Paul points out in his letter to the church at Corinth that these things about the Jews were recorded to be an example and a warning to us.

1 Corinthians 10, verses 6 through 12. Paul writes, Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written. The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. That's speaking of Mount Sinai, by the way.

Sorry, I lost my spot. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did and 23,000 fell in a single day.

We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

[36 : 11] Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

Paul is saying that the example that is written down and recorded for us is a warning. We need to take heed of ourselves lest we become like them.

And I believe that's why Acts chapter 7 in Stephen's defense is given for us. Because he's going through Old Testament, he's doing an Old Testament survey, going through Old Testament history.

And he's saying, look, he's talking to the people in his day, he's saying, look, you revere God and Moses and the law and the temple and I'm telling you, I do too, but even in the past, historically, that has not always been the case, and even now that's not the case.

And so he's bringing them to the carpet, he's showing them their sin and their shortcoming. And ultimately calling them to Christ by referring to him as the righteous one to whom the law and the prophets had pointed to, but yet they had put to death.

[37 : 41] And surely they had heard him preach the gospel before. They have heard the apostles, they know about Jesus. Jesus. And so Stephen stands there, a great defense for himself and a condemnation on Israel and the Jewish council.

And next week we're going to pick up in verse 54 and following and we're going to see how God uses this martyrdom of Stephen to do a tremendous work in spreading the gospel beyond Jerusalem.

let's pray. Lord, I thank you for this time of study to see in your word this man Stephen, a godly man who was committed to you, Lord, who stood firm to teach the truth of Scripture, the truth of who these individuals were, sinners in need of righteousness.

that only you can provide. And Lord, I pray that we would take from this a stance of boldness in our own lives as we live in a world and a society so dripping in sin and evil who are pushing you away, turning away from you and the truth of your word, Lord, to seek their own ways.

And we are just going down the tubes, Lord. It is awful to see and experience and to know what's coming. But Lord, we rejoice also in knowing that you are not going to leave us to suffer in this, Lord.

[39 : 30] You are going to return and come again as you have promised. And in that, Lord, we take confidence and comfort. But, oh, there are many, Lord, who do not know this.

Do not believe it, Lord. And I pray that you would embolden us. Help us to be bold as Stephen was bold to share the truth of your word. Not to sugarcoat it, not to shy away from it, Lord, not to be concerned about how someone might take it, but help us to be bold and unashamed of the gospel of Jesus because it is your power for salvation to all who believe.

Pray in Jesus' name. Amen.