

Stephen's Speech Parts 1 + 2 (condensed)(Includes 28-06-98)

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the AM service on Sunday the 21st of June 1998. The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled Stephen's Speech Part 1 and is from Acts Chapter 7 Verses 1 to 22.

You might like to open your Bibles to Acts Chapter 7 page 890. Let's pray. Our gracious God, we thank you for your word and we pray that now as the children go to their time of learning that you would help us to focus our hearts and minds on what your word has to say to us now and we pray that it would bear much fruit for your glory.

Amen. I wonder how we would respond to a hostile audience if we were asked to answer charges made against us that are false.

Is that an occasion to defend ourselves and our personal rights? Or do we try and preserve our good name and standing in the community by backing off and conforming with what people want us to say?

[1 : 25] Or do we defend what we know to be the truth regardless of the consequences? Well that's what we see here with Stephen in his speech to the Jewish council.

He is brought before the council to answer false allegations made against him about the things that he has allegedly said about the holy place or the Jewish temple and about the law which is the law that was handed to God's people by Moses and we looked at that last week in chapter 6.

The charge is that Stephen is firstly going to tear down the temple in a literal sense. That's what they think. Whereas as Stephen Carnaby pointed out last week about Stephen Stephen pointed out that he was only speaking metaphorically.

And secondly Stephen in this passage in chapter 7 is accused of wanting to change the laws that Moses the lawgiver had handed out to his people.

Well today I want to answer the first accusation made against Stephen and that is that he is going to tear down the temple. Next week I want to look at the other accusation made against Stephen about the law.

[2 : 51] Well let's begin by asking what is so important about the temple anyway? Now the temple which we are talking about is the temple that is in Jerusalem which is where Stephen is talking to his Jewish audience, the Jewish leaders.

And it is the place where the Jews met with God. Although the Jewish temple was a grand piece of architecture and believe me the stories of it was an amazing place.

The architecture of the place it was an awesome thing to look at and there's no actual pictures of it because it was destroyed but there's been remakes of it and so on.

And I was trying to find a photo to bring along to show you so you could just get an idea of the temple. But it was an awesome and grand piece of architecture. But that wasn't the reason that the Jews prized the temple.

It wasn't the major reason. They prized it because God had promised to put his name there and meet there with his people.

[3 : 54] In the Old Testament the Psalms bear witness to Israel's love for the temple. Israel the nation's love for the temple. For example the psalmist says in Psalm 27 verse 4 One thing I asked of the Lord that will I seek after to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

Well that was right. But many drew a false conclusion. They conceived of God as so completely identified with the temple that its existence guaranteed his protection of him where its destruction, the destruction of the temple would mean that God had abandoned them and that God was gone.

Well it's against these notions that the prophets in the Old Testament attacked strongly with words against the temple.

Look at Jeremiah chapter 7 sometime to see the oracle against the temple. And Stephen's speech here in chapter 7 points out that long before the prophets of the Old Testament the great figures in the Old Testament Abraham, Moses, Joseph and so on never imagined for a minute that God was imprisoned in a building.

So the problem is not that Israel had a temple where God was worshipped. That wasn't the problem. Jesus himself when he was on earth even visited the temple.

[5 : 38] The problem lies with the fact that Israel thinks that God only dwells within that temple. So when the crowd is stirred up to think that Stephen and possibly some other fanatics are going to destroy the temple physically there is no doubt great concern amongst the people.

Their thought is no temple no God no temple no God. It's a bit like thinking about someone suddenly losing their job.

Everything can be bright and rosy and so on and they go off to work one morning not worried about the next meal. They don't think they don't give it a thought. They know they've got income and so on. But then they get to work and they are given their marching orders.

They are told that there is no more work no more work for them and they are to pack up their desk or whatever their belongings and leave. Suddenly their mind is switched to the future.

Where is my next meal going to come from? If I haven't got if I haven't got a job then there's no food to put on the table and so on. Well the reality is however that there will be a next meal won't there at least for the time being.

[6 : 50] They've probably got money in their wallet and they'll go home and there'll be a meal but the future immediate future things they think no job no future. Well the analogy breaks down doesn't it but this was the thought of the Jewish people.

If there was no temple then God was all but gone too. and this is one of the things that Stephen is accused of and Stephen's speech here in chapter 7 sets out to debunk the myth that the myth he sets out to debunk that myth amongst the Jewish people and to do this he uses scripture to pick out four major epochs of Israel's history dominated by four major characters.

First thanks Warwick this is my multimedia presentation colour writing and so on first he picks out four things he highlights Abraham and the patriarchal age in chapter 7 verses 2 to 8 and then he moves on Stephen he talks about Abraham and then he moves on to talk about Joseph and the Egyptian exile in verses 9 through to 16 and thirdly he looks at Moses the Exodus and Moses' wilderness wanderings and Israel's wilderness wanderings in a long passage in verses 20 through to 44 and 17 through to 44 actually and then lastly he looks at David and Solomon and the establishment of the monarchy or the kingship in Israel in verses 45 through to 50 now the connecting feature in each of these four episodes of Israel's history is that in none of them was God's presence limited to any particular place on the contrary the God of the

Old Testament was the living God a God on the move move it down a God on the move and a God on the march who was always calling his people out to fresh adventures and he was always accompanying and directing them as they went thanks very much well let's have a look at the first scenario of what Stephen has to say about Abraham and we look at verses 2 through to 8 let me read it to you Stephen replied brothers and fathers listen to me the God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran and said to him leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran after his father died God had him moved from there to this country in which you are now living he didn't give him any of it as a heritage not even a foot's length but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him even though they had no child and God spoke in these terms that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others who would enslave them and mistreat them during 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 then 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 well

Stephen starts here by talking about Abraham and he starts talking about by Abraham by talking about the God of glory and it's no accident that Stephen calls God the God of glory for God's glory is his self manifestation self revelation and Stephen is about to give details here of how God made himself known to Abraham he appeared first to him when he was in a place called Mesopotamia and the name of the place he appeared was called Ur which was hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem now I had to draw a map and I'm really sorry about this I have shocking writing to help us understand Abraham's travel if you perhaps move it you can see Ur down in the bottom right corner and the green path is Abraham's trail and he moved up to Babylon and Haran and then finally down to Jerusalem we'll slow that across in a minute but that part of the world is Mesopotamia and we would know that today as southern Iraq where God first appeared to Abraham and when God appeared to Abraham he spoke and told him to uproot himself from his home and people and to migrate to another country which he would later show him and when Stephen is speaking here he is quoting from the Bible he's using scripture and he is quoting from Genesis 12 as he tells the story of Abraham to put forward his case so Abraham left the place of Ur that he was and eventually he moves up the place a little bit to a place called Haran and he settled in Haran but from there

[12:12] God had him move to the next stage of his journey in the land of Canaan we move down a little bit and you can see the picture of the Dead Sea and Canaan and that's Jerusalem as we would know it today God had him move from there down into Canaan what we call Israel and that is in fact the place where Stephen is now speaking to the Jewish authorities God didn't give Abraham any of it as a heritage he didn't give any of this place to Abraham as a heritage not even a foot's length we're told here in the Bible but God promised we've learnt all about promises here this morning God promised his descendants would inherit the land at the same time even they even his immediate descendants would not inherit immediately for first they were to be resident aliens in a country belonging to others who would enslave them and mistreat them and this is foretold well you'd think this figure would definitely qualify for

Madame Tussauds the Hall of Fame perhaps Stephen has nothing but respect for Moses for the Moses of history and more importantly for the God who chose who equipped and who used Moses to do great things and I guess on these points the Moses of Stephen's accusers might have been a reasonably close match with the Moses that Stephen is describing but from that point on they diverge well let's look at the bad part of Stephen's speech it's interesting that surveys have shown in Australia that Australians want strong leadership that's what they say and what's more they say that they're willing to forego in the present for future gain they're willing to have individual pain for the good of the country as a whole that's what they say in surveys there's many surveys that have shown that however when it actually comes time to vote this trend reverses and Australians vote on a here and now what's going into my hip pocket mentality forget the leadership forget the rest of it so they say one thing but when it comes down to it they're doing another well the

Israelites had some of this mentality they cried out to God in their slavery rescue us God save us save us so God sent Moses and this great leader Moses this man who was specially equipped in his upbringing in his supernatural powers that God had given him this Moses whom God used to bring the Israelites from slavery to freedom a leader of the very highest quality this Moses was repeatedly and frequently rejected by the Israelites the people he did so much for and of course in thumbing their nose at Moses they were rejecting the God whom he served God plans to fulfil his promise through Moses however Moses first attempt to champion the cause of the Israelites is rebuffed you see in verse 25 Moses supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them but they did not understand and the result of this was another 40 long years in slavery before Moses was sent back to

Egypt again they rejected him saying who made you ruler and judge who put you in charge we don't want you go away shoot and we see in verse 35 he was sent to be ruler and deliverer by God himself not ruler and judge but ruler and liberator ruler and deliverer he was sent to deliver them to save them to rescue them we see in verse 36 Moses led them out of Egypt having performed wonders and signs in Egypt at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years now this verse skims over 40 years in a sentence but during that 40 years the record shows that no sooner would God rescue the Israelites and make an effort for them they would reject him often within a very short space of time and then we see the ultimate rejection in verses 39 to 41 this was something that the Israelites in Stephen's day were not too fond of remembering they glossed over it our ancestors were unwilling to obey him instead they pushed him aside and in their hearts they turned back to

Egypt to the land of slavery saying to Aaron make gods for us who will lead the way for us as for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt we do not know what has happened to him at that time they made a calf offered a sacrifice to the idol and reveled in the works of their hands at the very moment when God is making a covenant with Israel when he's saying you will be my chosen my special people and I will bless you a generous gracious covenant overlooking the Israelites faults at this very moment they decide that they would rather give their allegiance to a calf made out of gold a dumb useless object but one that didn't require anything of them and I thought well what's kind of a modern day equivalent of this golden calf and I thought well Paul's away at the moment imagine this imagine if Paul Barker our minister were having these one on one meetings with God personally in his office every so often and we knew this because there was a ring of fire over the church so we obviously knew that something was going on something pretty spectacular and Paul had been told by

[18 : 22] God that he had to go to England for a few weeks to get a special message from God a special covenant that he was going to make between us and God and he was going to bring it back to us but Paul's been gone a couple of weeks and we think well where's he gone I mean we don't know if he's coming back I mean I don't know if we really believed him anyway when he was talking about that stuff we don't like this ring of fire around the church because it doesn't do anything for the decor so we go to Phil and we say Phil we want another God we want you to get us another God we're sick of this one we don't like this one so Phil thinks for a moment and says ah ok ok this is going to be your God what we're going to do is we're going to melt down all the rings of everyone in the church and all the necklaces get all the gold out of them we're going to cover this gorilla in gold and we're going to worship him as God we're going to stick him up the front and he's going to be God it's going to be great because he's not going to tell us to do anything he's just going to sit there while we worship him we don't like him we can put him in the safe toss him in the cover do whatever we want with him he's not going to demand everything of us won't it be great to have a God like this

I mean that's a silly example but that's the mentality of their rejection of God and we see because of this rejection God ultimately turned away from them for a time in verse 42 God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven as it is written in the book of the prophets did you offer to me slain victims and sacrifices 40 years in the wilderness O house of Israel no you took along the tent of Moloch and the star of your God Raphon the images you made to worship so I will remove you beyond Babylon Stephen casts his mind forward from the time of Moses some hundreds of years to when Israel's continual rejection of God finally led to them being banished from the promised land into exile under a foreign power well Stephen's

Moses like the Moses of his accusers is greatly respected an honourable leader under God but Stephen's Moses reminds the Israelites of their continual rejection of this great leader and the God who sent him something they'd rather forget a rejection that's symptomatic of their history over hundreds and hundreds of years and something that still persists at that time Stephen is showing them the true Moses he says a few times this is that Moses this same Moses he's leading up to say look you haven't changed you're just like your ancestors you say you follow Moses yet if Moses were right here in the flesh he would reject him you're like a Moses that you can control and shape just as your ancestors preferred a golden calf a dumb object as God because they could control it who are you to accuse me of blasphemy against

Moses Stephen is saying the disrespect of Moses came not from Stephen but from the Israelites and their ancestors well we've had the good and the bad of this picture of Moses now for the really ugly the ugly part of all of this is hinted at in verse 37 this is the Moses who said to the Israelites God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up now this prophet who's going to be like Moses comes out of the Old Testament Moses speaking in Deuteronomy chapter 18 where Moses said the Lord your God will raise up for your prophet like me from among your own people you will listen to such a prophet Stephen reminds his accusers that Moses had promised another like him would be sent by God as a new deliverer and then you see earlier in Acts chapter 3 that

Peter one of the leaders of the Christian church had already spoken publicly Jesus that Jesus so everyone in Jerusalem would have known about this Stephen's accusers would have known that in talking about this prophet like Moses Stephen was referring to Jesus who had just been killed Jesus is this prophet like Moses the Messiah the one come to save the Israelites and this image of Moses that Stephen gives us contains numerous allusions to Jesus Jesus too was sent by God Jesus was miraculously protected as a baby was powerful in speech and action he tried to protect his people to reconcile them to each other he was sent as a ruler and a deliverer he did miraculous signs and wonders had living words from God to tell them and was ultimately rejected Stephen is saying look it's bad enough that your ancestors rejected

[23 : 42] Moses now you have rejected the prophet like Moses the one who Moses said would be sent to them their picture of Moses is so distorted they don't recognize one like him when Jesus comes as a ruler and a deliverer in the same way they've distorted Moses they have in their minds a false picture of what a new deliverer a new prophet like Moses should be like God saved the Israelites from slavery and wanted to deliver them to a place of fantastic blessings and in return he asked for a change for obedience to him yet for the Israelites they were too comfortable where they were they didn't want to change they wanted a God whom they could build themselves one they could shape into their image one they could wheel around one they could hide when he became uncomfortable when he required anything of them and the Jews in Stephen's day his accusers were the same they rejected

Jesus God's son and there are a number of groups around the church today who are similar they decide which bits if any of Jesus that they like just take away the rest maybe touch him up here or there we might ask will the real Jesus please stand up I wonder which maybe you want your own personal Jesus one whom you can shape to your way of thinking one whom you can remodel in your likeness maybe you want a radical socially conscious Jesus maybe you want a middle class Jesus perhaps you want a Jesus who upholds good western morals do you want a religious Sunday type Jesus perhaps a Jesus who will save us when we're in trouble but not come out and make a nuisance of himself any other times maybe there are plenty of other ways in which we shape Jesus to suit ourselves but will we take the real Jesus the

Jesus who will change us the Jesus who will chip away at us rather than us at him yet the one who will set us free the Jesus who may make us uncomfortable at times yet who truly and deeply comforts us a seven day a week Jesus not confined to Sunday but who impacts every part of our lives the Jesus who said I have come that you may have life and you may have life in abundance which Jesus will you take let's pray Lord God forgive us for the times when we try to remake you to shape you into our image Lord I pray that you will shape us you will change us to be more like you to be more like

Jesus Lord that we will want to change that we will want to obey you that we want to serve you to seek after you Amen He only dwells within this building let us go confidently knowing that God is with us wherever we are in this world Amen Well that reminder of God's promises that he keeps to us unstpark that's me the face of the