

STEPHEN'S SENSE OF HISTORY AND GOSPEL FAITH

Acts 7:1-60

Key verses: 59,60

“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Stephen was one of the seven deacons chosen to serve the church practically, as one of the administrators. He was not one of the official messengers or Bible teachers. But he proved himself to be a more forceful and charismatic Bible teacher and preacher than most of the apostles. He is the first martyr mentioned in the book of Acts. His death marked a turning point in church expansion. The persecution that followed his death scattered the church. His witness to Jesus in death planted the gospel in the heart of a man named Saul. And Saul met Jesus. He became Paul, the man who was used by God to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. In this chapter we can see the source of Stephen's powerful witness to Jesus. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was a man of the Book. He was a Bible teacher from first to last.

The synagogue leaders could not stand up against Stephen's wisdom. They could not defeat the Holy Spirit who spoke through him. So they brought him before the Sanhedrin and charged him with blasphemy. They charged him with speaking against the temple and against the law. They accused him of saying that Jesus would destroy the temple, and that Jesus would change the law of Moses. Stephen answered their charges by teaching them the Bible. He traces the history of God's redemptive work, including the law and the temple—and the Israelites' historic rejection of God's servants.

First, God called Abraham. He called him to leave his home in Ur and go to the land God would show him. So Abraham obeyed and went. He settled in Haran, then God sent him to Canaan. He did not have a child, and he did not have even one foot of land, but God promised him that his descendants would inherit the whole land. God told him about his plans to send Abraham's descendants to Egypt, then bring them out as a great multitude with great wealth. He mentioned the covenant of circumcision, then moved on to mention Abraham's son, Isaac, then, Jacob, the father of the 12 patriarchs. The patriarchs sold their brother Joseph as a slave in Egypt. But God was with Joseph and he became ruler over Egypt.

Second, God raised up Moses. The Israelites in Egypt increased in number. They were enslaved and oppressed and forced to kill their newborn babies. God saved Moses. Pharaoh's daughter raised him and he was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He became powerful in speech and action. He believed that God had raise him up so that he could rescue his people, but the people rejected him. They said, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” He fled to Midian, settled there as a foreigner and had two

sons. After 40 years, God called him from the flames of a burning bush and sent him back to Egypt. Verse 35 says, “This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’” was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself.” This is the Moses who told the people that God would raise up prophet like Moses. (Dt 18) In Acts 3, Peter claims this prophecy as one which looked forward to Jesus. This is the Moses who met God on Mt. Sinai and from the angels received the living word of God to pass on to the people. This is the law that the Sanhedrin accused Stephen of breaking. But Stephen did not break the law—the Israelites did. And they rejected Moses. Their hearts turned back to Egypt. They built and worshiped a golden calf.

From this point, Stephen talks about the persistent idolatry that plagued Israel throughout her history. He jumps over the wilderness wandering, the period of the judges and the time of the kings and speaks about the exile to Babylon. The primary reason for the demise of the kingdom was the Israelites’ rejection of God’s servant Moses and their rejection of the law. They were guilty of the very things of which they accused Stephen.

Third, God reigns in heaven. The second charge concerned the temple. Stephen traces the history of the temple. God gave Moses the pattern for the tabernacle of the Testimony while they were encamped at Mt Sinai. He built the tabernacle according to the pattern God gave him on the mountain. Joshua and the people took it with them as they conquered the promised land, and it remained there until David sought permission from God to build a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. David’s son, Solomon, built the temple. But Solomon knew that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men.” Through the prophet Isaiah God said, “Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?” No building can confine the living God. He came to dwell in the temple by his grace, but his throne is in heaven and he rules the whole earth.

Fourth, “You stiff-necked people.” Stephen counter-charged those who accused him. He called them “stiff-necked” –proud people who do not bow their heads before God. He said that their hearts were uncircumcised. They did not repent, nor did they love God. They are a part of the history of rebellion against God and his servants. Their fathers killed the prophets who predicted the coming of the Righteous Christ, and they betrayed and murdered the Christ. They had received the law, but they never obeyed it.

Fifth, Stephen is killed. They could not excuse or defend themselves because what Stephen said was right. So they rushed him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He looked up to heaven and saw Jesus, standing at the right hand of God, waiting for him with outstretched arms. As they stoned him he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” and, like Jesus, he prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And he fell asleep. His death planted seeds of the gospel in the hearts of those who witnessed it and in the hearts of all of us who read

about it. He brought more people to faith in Jesus through his death than he had reached by his brilliant preaching during his lifetime.