

Rejecting God (Stephen's speech)

Acts 7:1-53 on January 17, 2021

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Last Sunday we focused on Stephen's martyrdom; how Stephen was a man "full of faith" who made the ultimate sacrifice by dying for His faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Today, we're now going to take a look at Stephen's speech; the speech that He gave right before his martyrdom. His speech was given in front of the Sanhedrin, a powerful, imposing body of 71 top Jewish religious leaders. This is a long speech, the longest recorded speech in the entire book of Acts. Luke, the author, considered it to be of SUCH importance, that he recorded it in full. For those of us who were blessed in our childhood with a strong, Bible-based SS experience, much of this speech will sound familiar. But for those of us who didn't have that luxury, there will be a bit of a steep learning curve in today's text. Regardless of our Bible background though, most of us share a common deficit, simply because of the fact that most of us listening to this sermon, are Gentiles. We didn't grow up with a rich Jewish history. So, as Stephen SPEEDS us along through HUNDREDS of years Bible history, we'll need to buckle up, and put on our helmets. Before reading further in this transcript, please take a moment to bow your head and ask God's Spirit to enlighten your understanding of what you're about to read.

Please turn in your Bible to Acts 7:1. It begins, "Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" The charges that he's referring to, are back in Acts 6. We read through these last Sunday. The Synagogue of the Freedmen had secretly persuaded some people to go before the Sanhedrin and accuse Stephen of blasphemy. They are startling and serious accusations. In Acts 6:11, Stephen is accused of blasphemy against Moses and God. In Acts 6:13-14, Stephen is accused of speaking against the temple/the law.^{1 2} In Jewish circles, these were particularly SERIOUS accusations. So, in Acts 7:1, Stephen is asked: "Are these charges true?" Then, in Acts 7:2, Stephen replies, "Brothers and fathers, listen to me!" And then, Stephen LAUNCHES into a long, Spirit-empowered teaching about some of the key history of God's people.³ Ultimately, Stephen isn't really trying to plead his defense though, or to console his accusers. What he's really doing is calling His fellow Jews to STOP REJECTING Jesus! Stephen's speech lays out an argument that proves that Israel has a long history of "Rejecting God," of failing to accept God's leadership in their lives. To put it simply, Stephen's speech is not a defense, but rather an indictment. My study Bible says it this way: "The defendant becomes the prosecuting attorney."⁴

There are various ways that we could outline Stephen's speech. For today, let's break it down into 5 main parts.⁵ First of all,

1. Acts 7:2-8 - God promised a land where Abraham's descendants could worship Him. Very appropriately, Stephen begins his speech with God's call of Abraham and his covenant with him, which is foundational to Israel's identity as God's people.⁶ Stephen begins his speech in Acts 7:2-8, "...Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to THIS land where you are now living."

¹ Acts 6:7 mentions "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." "The temple charge may be related to the Christian claim that Jesus' sacrificial death completes and fulfills the temple's sacrificial system and that Jesus and his body, the church, represent the new temple of God." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2228 footnote on Acts 6:13-14.

² The accusation about changing the customs handed down from Moses "may come from the Christian claim that salvation comes through faith in Christ rather than by the works of the law." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2228 footnote on Acts 6:14.

³ See Acts 6:3, 5, and especially verse 10.

⁴ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2228 footnote on Acts 7:1-53.

⁵ Based loosely on Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 276.

⁶ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2228 footnote on Acts 7:2-8.

There's a map at the end of this transcript. Please turn there each time you see "**MAP**" in all caps.

MAP – If we take a look at our map, we'll see that Mesopotamia is way over here in the east, verse 4 clarifies that it's the "land of the Chaldeans. Abraham then traveled NW up to Harran. Then, Abraham ends up SW in the land where the Jews would eventually settle down, the Promised Land, known as Canaan at the time. This is the place where Stephen and the Sanhedrin were currently gathered.

Verse 5 goes on: "He [God] gave him [Abraham] no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs."⁷ In summary, God brought His messenger Abraham over from the land of the Chaldeans because He had chosen to raise up the Jewish people, the Israelites.⁸ God did this not only so that they could possess the Promised Land, but also so that they could worship God in that place; the very place where the temple stood; the very place where Stephen and the Sanhedrin were gathered.

The 2nd part of Stephen's speech is...

2. Acts 7:9-16 - God used Joseph to rescue the Israelites from famine. Acts 7:9-16 continues, "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace." Let's notice, that in verse 9, Stephen is already beginning to build his case for how the Jewish people persecuted and rejected God's chosen instruments.⁹ Joseph is just one name in a long list of God's chosen individuals, who have been despised and rejected by God's people. The story continues in verse 11, "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money."

MAP – If we look at our map again, Jacob and all 12 of the Patriarchs died in Egypt. But their bodies were later brought back up north and buried in the Promised Land.¹⁰ In summary, God sent His chosen instrument, Joseph, down to Egypt ahead of the famine, in order to rescue the Israelites.

The 3rd part of Stephen's speech is...

3. Acts 7:17-43 - God used Moses to rescue His people, and they rejected Him. This is, by far, the longest part of Stephen's speech, so we'll only be able to touch on just a few key points. Let's keep in mind, that Moses is the one whom Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemy against, back in Acts 6:11.¹¹ Acts 7:17-43 says that "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. Then 'a new king, to whom

⁷ In other words, "The essential conditions for the religion of the Israelites were already fulfilled long before the temple was built and their present religious customs began." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1836 footnote on Acts 7:8.

⁸ So, even though Abraham was literally standing right in the midst of the land that his descendants would one day possess, standing on the very soil of the Promised Land, he himself was given no inheritance there. Abraham didn't even have kids yet, and yet God was making promises that applied to Abraham's offspring. God then predicts in verse 6 that the Israelites will end up, "enslaved and mistreated," in Egypt, "a country NOT their own." In verse 7, God also predicts that He will one day punish Egypt and bring Abraham's descendants "out of that country," so that they can worship God "in this place." Once again this is a reference to the Promised Land, the very place in which Stephen and the Sanhedrin were currently located.

⁹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1836 footnote on Acts 7:9.

¹⁰ Shechem is just north of Jerusalem and some of them were actually buried in Hebron, which is just south of Jerusalem.

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 134.

Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. “At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.”

Verse 22 might throw some of us off a little. Stephen says that Moses, “was powerful in speech and action.” However, some of us are probably familiar with Moses’ words way back in Exodus 4:10, “...‘Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.’” So which one is it? Was Moses “powerful in speech and action” or was he “slow of speech and tongue?” At first glance, Exodus 4:10 seems to be referring to some kind of a speech impediment or stuttering. However, in light of Acts 7:22,¹² it actually appears more likely that Moses was making the excuse that he wasn’t “eloquent or quick-witted enough to respond to the Pharaoh.”¹³ Either way, the point that Stephen is trying to make in his speech, is to remind his listeners of how Moses was a leader specially prepared by God and called to His service. Moses was God’s chosen instrument to lead the Israelites. And, the people rejected his leadership, thereby “Rejecting God.” Once again, we see Stephen continuing to build his case against his listeners, for the worst rejection in their entire history: the rejection of God’s chosen Messiah, Jesus!

Verse 23 continues: “When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’ “But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us?’¹⁴ Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons. “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is HOLY ground.’” Stephen was recounting this incredible history while he himself was standing on holy ground, in God’s holy temple. One has to wonder how powerfully this statement must have resonated with his Jewish listeners.

Verse 34 continues, “I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.’ “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.”

Acts 7:36 confirms that Moses was indeed from God, by reminding us of the signs and wonders God performed through him “in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for 40 years in the wilderness.” This of course parallels with the signs and wonders that Jesus performed during His earthly ministry, as well as those performed by Stephen himself back in Acts 6:8.

Verse 37 continues, “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’” Stephen quotes Moses’ words here because they refer to Jesus. The

¹² Always remember, Scripture is its own best interpreter.

¹³ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 102 footnote on Exodus 4:10.

¹⁴ This was a foreshadowing of the role that God was preparing Moses to fulfill.

point Stephen is building toward is that “The Israelites rejected Moses, their deliverer, just as the Jews of Stephen’s day were rejecting Jesus, their deliverer. Yet BOTH were sent by God.”^{15 16 17}

Verse 38 continues, “He [Moses] was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.¹⁸ “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and, in their hearts, turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.”

MAP – We don’t know the exact route they took, but we do know that God miraculously rescued His people from their slavery in Egypt, brought them across the Red Sea, provided manna/quail for them in the desert for 40 years, and then gave them the Promised Land. Even so... they rejected God by turning their hearts toward other gods. So eventually, God exiled them far to the east, to Babylon (roughly the area of the Chaldeans).

What Stephen has now made clear to his listeners, is that the ones who TRULY blasphemed Moses, were those who failed to honor him as their heaven-sent deliverer in verse 25; those who ‘pushed Moses aside’ in verse 27; those who rejected his leadership in verse 35; and those who ‘refused to obey him.’ In verse 39.^{19 20}

The 4th part of Stephen’s speech is ...

4. Acts 7:44-50 - The temple doesn’t guarantee God’s presence. In Acts 7:44-50 Stephen says, “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?”

MAP – The arrow on our map shows that eventually God’s people returned to the Promised Land. However, these words about the temple may have actually stung a little for the Jews gathered in front Stephen. You see, the temple that Stephen and the Sanhedrin were gathered in, was NOT Solomon’s Temple. Solomon’s Temple was destroyed back in 586 b.c., when God’s people were taken to Babylon. When God’s people returned to the Promised Land, another temple was built: Zerubbabel’s temple. However, by the time of Stephen’s speech, that temple had now been replaced by Herod’s temple.²¹

¹⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1837 footnote on Acts 7:35.

¹⁶ Back in Acts 3:22 Peter had made a similar point, “For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.’ Jesus is a prophet like Moses, and here Stephen points out how Jesus fulfills Moses’ words from back in Deuteronomy 18:15. Moses, and now Stephen, are warning God’s people “against rejecting the one who speaks for God.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2223 footnote on Acts 3:22.

¹⁷ See the footnote on Deuteronomy 18:15 on p. 285 in *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

¹⁸ Acts 7:38 declares that, “[Moses] received living words to pass on to us.” (See Deuteronomy 32:45-47 and Hebrews 4:12.) “LIVING WORDS,” that’s a curious way of summarizing the 10 Commandments. Jesus has also been called the Living Word. (See John 1:1 and 1:14.) Another way of understanding verse 38 is that “Moses was the mediator between God and Israel on Mount Sinai.” (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1837 footnote on Acts 7:38.) Jesus is also known as the mediator between God and man. 1 Timothy 2:5 reminds us, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.”

¹⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 140.

²⁰ Israel rejected God’s messenger, Moses, and now Stephen wants his listeners to make the connection to Jesus: God’s messenger whom they rejected by murdering Him. See Acts 7:52.

²¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, Merrill C. Tenney, Gen. Ed. Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, pp. 633, 641, 645, and 653. See John 2:20.

In Acts 7:48 Stephen drives home the main point he wants to make about the temple: “the Most High does not live in houses made by humans.”²² In other words, the temple doesn’t guarantee God’s presence or God’s favor. There isn’t a temple anywhere on this planet that can contain or control God.²³ The temple was designed to be a place where God’s people could worship him. And yet, the VERY place, where God ought to be worshipped MOST reverently and fervently, had become a place filled with Jews who rejected God’s rule and reign.

This leads us right into the 5th and final part of Stephen’s speech.

5. Acts 7:51-53 - The hard-hearted history of rejecting God continues. As Stephen brings his speech to its final crescendo, he switches gears from talking about their ancestors, to talking directly to the men gathered in front of him. He switches from talking about “THEM” to talking about “YOU”! In Acts 7:51-53, Stephen concludes: “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now YOU have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” Stiff-necked is a not-so-polite way of saying that they were unwilling to yield, to God’s leadership in their lives. Like an unresponsive, stubborn mule, they were unwilling to bow before Him, unwilling to follow His lead.²⁴ Uncircumcised hearts/ears is Stephen’s way of say that although the Jews listening to him had been outwardly circumcised, their hearts/ears were uncircumcised; it was CLEAR that they were NOT fully devoted followers of the Lord.^{25 26} Here at the end of Stephen’s speech, rather than summarizing his own defense, for the accusations that THEY had brought against HIM, Stephen now lays the accusations that HE is bringing against THEM. YOU are JUST LIKE your ancestors!²⁷ Stephen’s speech ends with a firm rebuke against God’s people, for rejecting God’s messengers throughout their history, and now, ultimately rejecting Jesus, ‘the Righteous One.’^{28 29}

These members of the Sanhedrin were living in the Promised Land. They had the temple. They had God’s law. They had story upon story of God’s miraculous provision for them. They had their seats in the Sanhedrin. But there was one thing that they were missing: Jesus! Brother or Sister in Christ, if we don’t have JESUS, then all we have is our empty religion, our nice buildings, and our own sinful, hard hearts. Stephen’s listeners didn’t care for his conclusion, and as we learned last week, “they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.” They end up dragging Stephen out of the city, away from the temple, and then throwing stones at him until he’s dead. The irony here of course, is that these Jewish leaders end up acting precisely the way that Stephen said they would...³⁰ JUST LIKE THEIR ANCESTORS, they end up persecuting and killing yet ANOTHER, of God’s messengers!

²² See also the words of King Solomon when he prays at the temple dedication back in 1 Kings 8:27, “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”

²³ Stephen then quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2. It’s interesting to note the words that come right after the end of his quote. Consider this: Isaiah 66:1 begins “This is what the LORD says: Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?” Then, Isaiah 66:2 continues “Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?” declares the LORD. “These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.” One has to wonder if Stephen was implying this as his main point to Jews who may have had the rest of Isaiah 66:2 memorized. This sure seems at least possible, especially once we read the very next verse. Acts 7:51 says, ““You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!”

²⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 145 footnote on Exodus 32:9.

²⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1838 footnote on Acts 7:51.

²⁶ The NIV Study Bible has a helpful note on circumcision. This brings Stephen’s speech full circle, back to God’s covenant with Abraham: “Circumcision was God’s appointed ‘sign of the covenant’...which signified Abraham’s covenanted commitment to the Lord – that the Lord alone would be his God, whom he would trust and serve. It symbolized a self-maledictory oath: ‘If I am not loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut off me and my offspring...as I have cut off my foreskin.’ Thus Abraham was to place himself under the rule of the Lord as his King, consecrating himself, his offspring and all he possessed to the service of the Lord.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 37-38 footnote on Genesis 17:10.

²⁷ “You always resist the Holy Spirit!” You have betrayed and murdered Jesus, the Righteous One! You have not obeyed God’s law, even though it was your own Jewish ancestors who received it! John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 140-141.

²⁸ See Isaiah 53:11.

²⁹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1836 footnote on Acts 7:2-53.

³⁰ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, footnote on Acts 7:57-58a, p. 2232.

As I was wrapping up my sermon prep this week, I realized that there's an implicit question behind all of the history that Stephen shared in his speech: **How did we get here?**

MAP – The question becomes a little more explicit if we look at our map one more time. How did we get here? After God's amazing kindness in bringing Abraham over from the land of the Chaldeans and promising such amazing blessings. After God's providential care in sending Joseph ahead into Egypt, so that the Israelites wouldn't be wiped out by a major famine. After using Moses to deliver His people from Egyptian slavery and lead them to the Promised Land. Before and after their exile into Babylon, providing them with the tabernacle, and then the temple, and then another temple as places to gather and worship Him. How did we get here? After all these years of God's faithfulness toward His people. How did we get HERE? Not just HERE, in the Promised Land, in Jerusalem, in the temple where Stephen and the Sanhedrin had gathered. But HERE, in this place of spiritually hard hearts, that reject the Living God. How did we get to THIS place, of being SO FAR away from God, when God has tried SO HARD to be NEAR to us? There's one simple answer for how we got her: By being like our ancestors. Stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts, with ears that refuse to listen, that refuse to obey God, that resist the HS.

Brother or Sister in Christ, may God save us, from becoming JUST LIKE our spiritual ancestors. May God save us, at E-Free Bemidji, from having all of this spiritual history, from having this beautiful church building, from having SO MANY spiritual opportunities, but then missing JESUS. Rather than hardening our hearts toward God, let's soften them. **Rather than rejecting our God and resisting the Holy Spirit, let's accept the rule and reign of Jesus Christ in our lives!**

