

Jewish authorities had to have been frustrated and extremely upset with the Apostles by now, don't you think? I mean, c'mon, they already called these people to stop doing this preaching about Jesus. They even sent a couple to prison. Think about what these Jewish authorities are discussing among themselves... After all this, these Jesus followers continue to be in defiance of our authority?!! Now Stephen comes along, who is this guy? He is teaching and preaching to Grecian Jews, now. Don't we already have enough problems between the Hebraic Jews and the Grecian Jews? We have got to make an example.

You will recall that in Acts 6, the Apostles were inundated with duties and the Grecian widows were being ignored. They appointed Stephen and 6 others who they considered full of the Spirit and wisdom to help out. God's hand was upon Stephen in a very special way so that he, like the twelve apostles, was performing many great works. Also, his preaching was so powerful that no one was able to successfully refute it. But you know that wherever God's word is spoken, opposition comes. And this was the case with Stephen. Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, and thus his ministry appears to have been primarily in the Greek-speaking synagogues. Do you all remember the detail given in Acts 6:9? *“Opposition arose, however from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen – Jews of Si-Ree-Na and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Sil-ish-ia and Asia.”* These were not Hebraic Jews he was speaking to, these were Grecian Jews. Since no one could successfully oppose him, his accusers gave up their debate and took a different approach. Not able to stand up to anything Stephen said, the opposition resorts to half truths & partial lies. In the beginning, it was charged that Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against Moses and also against God ([Acts 6:11](#)). This developed into the more specific accusation that he continually spoke against **“this holy place and the law”** ([Acts 6:13](#)). This is further explained as teaching that **“Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us”** ([Acts 6:14](#)). In other words, Stephen is accused of teaching what Jesus taught. And what Jesus taught, so far as Stephen's accusers claimed, was that He would destroy the temple (along with Jerusalem) and the customs which the Jews attributed to Moses. And he stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law, enough so that they placed Stephen before the Sanhedrin. The thinking here is that Jesus was a threat to the well-being of Jerusalem and the temple. And here was Stephen continuing this threat. But you all know, Jesus had not come to judge but to save. Jesus came to turn people from their sins and thus

to spare them from the horror of divine judgment. Judgment came upon Jerusalem because God's people rejected their King.

The second accusation against Stephen was that he continued to preach, as Jesus did, that the customs Moses gave them were to be ignored. It was true that "their customs," which were wrongly attributed to Moses, would be set aside. But Jesus made it clear that His coming **did not simply do away with the law, but that he ended or fulfilled it**. Jesus said, "*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill*" (Matt. 5: 17). Gal 3:23-25 "*Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.*" But the coming of Jesus did mean that radical changes had come.

So they seized Stephen. He is now in front of the Sanhedrin. Is he shaking in his boots? After all it takes only 23 of the Sanhedrin to sentence him to death. What Stephen does do is give perhaps the most powerful sermon in the Bible. He explains to them their error and asks that they turn to God, to Jesus. Standing before the Sanhedrin. Stephen's sermon is really not a defense as we know it. Stephen is not seeking to prove his innocence, but rather he is strongly showing his accusers for their guilt. Stephen is not acting as an attorney for his own defense. Stephen acts as the prosecutor. Stephen dies because he proves his case.

And this is where chapter 7 begins. (pray):

Read vs 1. The opposition no doubt mixed partial truth with lies. Btw, I think that is perhaps the best way to deceive. Cults do it. We spoke about Mormonism about a month ago. Their doctrines deceive this way. We need to make sure we are not deceived. Study scripture. Remember the Bereans who studied scripture to make sure what Paul preached was truth? Paul? So the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

So Stephen takes them on a little history lesson. They may know what scripture says, but they don't understand the overall theme of it all. They have dwelt on the little things and missed the big picture. So Stephen takes them on a historical ride. His overall theme? Don't take God for granite. Remember the 10 commandments were written on stone? Well they are now at a point where they idolize the law and miss what it was all about.

Through the next 50 verses, Stephen starts off reminding them of their father Abraham, then goes into Joseph and finally ends with Moses.

Vs 2-7 The Jews of Stephen's day seem to have concluded that the temple in Jerusalem was the only dwelling place of God. To speak against "**this holy place**," then, was to blaspheme. These Jews, who may have spent their life's earnings to return to the "holy land" including & especially, the temple, must have believed that no one could worship God as well from foreign soil as from the sacred soil of Israel and from the sacred temple. This worship, they would have insisted, was rooted in the Law of Moses. It was as though God would no longer be present with men if Jerusalem and the temple were to be destroyed. So, you see the temple was set aside as the only place of worship, and the customs of Moses were being altered by misinterpretation of scripture. Stephen will destroy this misinterpretation. Stephen starts out with Abraham and Faith. (read Hebrews 11:8-13), . Stephen reminds the Sanhedrin that God- the God of glory, appeared to His people at a number of other places besides "this holy place." The place is not earthly Jerusalem. Abraham doesn't even know the place, he trusts God. To begin with, He appeared to Abram in Mesopotamia. Next, as Genesis informs us, God spoke to Abram at Haran. Once again God instructed Abram to leave his family and his homeland and to journey to a land not yet revealed. So it is not about what is seen, but what God said. It is all about Trusting God.

The inference is clear here – and is clearly stated in Genesis 12:1-3 – that God would bless Abraham in this place to which He would lead him. The point is that God's presence and His power are not limited to, and is definitely not restricted to, one place. Abraham had no land - nothing physical to lay claim to – except later a burial cave. All he had was the word of God. Stephen is saying, there is no geographical boundary for God. If God is with you, then that is the holy place. God continued to care for His people, even during the days of their captivity. You see, God's purposes and promises were not limited to the borders of the Promised Land.

Let me ask you something...Are you trusting God like Abraham? Are you willing to go where God leads you? Or are you putting God in a cage, like the Sanhedrin did - limiting God to work in you, only where you want Him to, and when you want Him to. Trust in Him. He is everywhere and is all powerful. He cannot be limited.

Vs 8 We need to remember how much the Jews of Jesus' day made of Moses, the law, and circumcision. Circumcision, which was so important to the Jews, was linked more to the Mosaic Covenant than to the Abrahamic Covenant. But Stephen is quite clear here, and links the "Covenant of Circumcision" to the Abrahamic Covenant. It is this Covenant which is dominant in the remainder of Stephen's sermon. So remember that as we go thru the rest of chapter 7. That is because this covenant promises God's blessings by faith, and not by works, and it promises God's blessings to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

Let me explain to you this Abrahamic Covenant. It was unconditional. It was one way. God did not require anything of the Israelites to have the covenant fulfilled. There are three main features to this Covenant: (Genesis 12:1-3) 1. The promise of land; 2. The promise of descendants - God promised Abraham that He would make a great nation out of him; 3. The promise of blessing and redemption - God promised to bless Abraham and the families of the earth through him. Only hundreds of years after Abraham's death did his descendants possess the land. Abraham's blessings never came in his lifetime, but it didn't matter because "**the city**" he looked for was a heavenly city, not an earthly one. Abraham was saved and blessed by faith, not by works, on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant, and not on the basis of the Mosaic Covenant.

Moses in Exodus is about fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant is all about faith. That is where New Testament springs from - faith. When Jews thought of Moses, they thought of the law. They should think of Moses as the partial fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. It is important to understand that the Mosaic Covenant differs significantly from the Abrahamic Covenant because the Mosaic Covenant is conditional in that the blessings that God promises are directly related to Israel's obedience to the Mosaic Law. If Israel is obedient, then God will bless them, but if they disobey, then God will punish them. The Mosaic Covenant itself, with all its detailed laws, could not save people. It is not that there was any problem with the Law itself, for the Law is perfect and was given by a holy God, but the Law had no power to give people new life, and the people were not able to obey the Law perfectly. The Mosaic Law would reveal to people their sinfulness and their need for a Savior, and it is the Mosaic Law that Christ Himself said that He did not come to abolish but to fulfill. Stephen's opponents are jealously seeking to preserve a covenant that has been superseded.

If Stephen were to have stopped here, we would really have the core of his whole argument. His accusers are upset because Stephen, like Jesus, emphasized the Abrahamic Covenant over the Mosaic Covenant. This is because salvation comes through the Abrahamic Covenant, not through the Mosaic Covenant. Their obsession over the Mosaic Covenant misses the point, forgetting how it all began with the Abrahamic Covenant.

As Stephen's argument unfolds, watch how this core argument is expanded.

As we read vs 9-15, note that the Jews prided themselves in their history. They had great affection for their "fathers". Stephen will remind them of their history, and remind them that their fathers were not as glorious as they want to remember.

Read vs 7:9-15 did you notice in vs 15 that Joseph is not included in the term "our fathers". The rotten brothers who sold Joseph were actually "our fathers". So these last verses you read say that the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph and thus they sold him into Egypt – but Stephen points out in vs 9 "**But God was with him.**" His point is that God was with Joseph *in Egypt*. He did not have to be in Canaan to be blessed or cared for by God. He not only survived in Egypt, he thrived there, being elevated to the second highest position in the land.

Vs 16-17 During the first two hundred and fifteen years after the promise made to Abraham, the children of the covenant were increased just to seventy; but in the latter two hundred and fifteen years they increased to six hundred thousand fighting men

Vs 7:18-33 Several things are significant about these words. First, God is speaking to Moses while he is in the desert of Mount Sinai. Far from Jerusalem, God is there, and He is speaking with Moses. Second, this is not "the holy land," or, as the Jews of Stephen's day would say, "**this holy place,**" and yet God informs Moses that the ground on which he is standing is "**holy ground.**" This is a holy place, even if not in *the* Holy Land. Third, God identifies Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, God identifies Himself to Moses in relation to the Abrahamic Covenant, before the Mosaic Covenant has even come into being.

Vs 7:34 God sees, God hears, and God has come to help. God hears your cry, God hears your call, and He responds. God has come to help – wherever you are.

Vs 35-38 Earlier, it was declared that God had ordained Joseph as a ruler over his brothers, but they rebelled against that and they tried to get rid of him by selling him as a slave to Egypt. And yet, God did exalt him and made him a ruler there in Egypt, and they came under his rulership later. Now the same thing is true with Moses. They cast him out. Moses thought that they would know that God had ordained him - that he would be a ruler and leader among them, but they did not know. And they cast Moses out. But forty years later, God brought him back as a ruler and a deliverer for the people.

And so Stephen uses these two—Joseph & Moses, as examples of the mistakes that their fathers made of recognizing God's ordained plan and God's ordained ruler. There's a pattern that exists in this nation.

When Moses first sought to be a deliverer for his people, he was rudely rejected (remember - **“Who made you a ruler and judge over us?”**). Now it is God Himself who declares Moses to be the deliverer. He became both the ruler and the deliverer of this people through the hand of God, which became evident by the signs and wonders he performed in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness.

This Moses, who was initially rejected but who God raised up as ruler and deliverer, spoke of the One who would come after him: Remember in Acts 6:11 that Stephen was accused of speaking against Moses and against God. But yet Stephen spoke of Jesus, of whom Moses also spoke. This prophet that Moses spoke of in vs 37, - God will send you a prophet like me – was Jesus. How was Jesus **“a prophet like Moses”**? Stephen explains he was rejected by his people, and yet he was raised to the position of ruler and deliverer by God. And when it came to Moses, the people were wrong about him, and God exalted him, overruling their rejection of him. When it came to Jesus the Israelites rejected Him, but God raised Him up as Leader and Savior, once again overruling the rejection of the people. (p)The problem was not with the leader (Moses or Jesus), but with the people. That is what Stephen now calls to the attention of his accusers.

Vs 39-43 Your fathers rejected the law of God. They again cast Moses out and in their hearts they returned back to Egypt. In the end, they were just idolaters. When Moses was out of sight the people decided they wanted a **“god”** they could see and touch, so they instructed Aaron to fashion a golden calf for them, which they would worship. And God gave the Israelites over to their desires.

Throughout their years in the wilderness, in spite of the many evidences of God's care for His people, the Israelites worshipped the idols they had served in the past. So Moses as a man of God, was rejected and rejected and rejected throughout his entire life. Even when he performed signs and wonders, he was rejected by his people.

So, when Moses told the Israelites that God would raise up another prophet, like him...do you suppose he was telling them that that prophet would be rejected by his people as well? Yep. When the people made a golden calf when Moses was out of sight, do you suppose that that was similar to how they idolized the temple in Stephen's day? I say yes.

As prominent as Jerusalem and the temple were in the thinking of the Sanhedrin, most of Israel's history -that Stephen cites, takes place outside the land. This, in fact, is where the hearts of the Israelites were. Their hearts were in Egypt, and the gods they worshipped were foreign. They were false. And this Moses, whom the accusers so greatly revered, never set foot in "the Holy Land." He only saw it from a distance, at the time of his death. What was so important to the Sanhedrin was not important. Where they worshipped was not important. The temple was not important. In vs 42-43 Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27. The prophet Amos wrote to those living in the northern kingdom - warning them of God's coming judgment because of their idolatry, idolatry like that of their forefathers in the wilderness.

Vs 44-50 The temple was Israel's idol. But remember, it was David's idea, not God's, to build a temple, and God granted his request, but Solomon would be the one to build it, not David. You can go back to the Old Testament and you can find that the Lord doesn't dwell in temples. In fact in 1Kings 8:27, Solomon says "*But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*" And so, Solomon is saying, "I have no illusions that this is going to be Your exclusive dwelling place. The heavens of heavens cannot hold You, how much less this house that I have built. But Lord, we want this house as a place where we can just come and meet You."

So, the temple became Israel's idol. They assumed that so long as the temple was with them, God was with them. You see, they have an exaggerated view of the importance of the temple. No wonder they thought of speaking of the destruction of the temple as blasphemy. The temple would be destroyed, along with Jerusalem, because the true temple (Jesus) had come to Jerusalem, and they had sought to destroy Him.

Let me ask you something...Are there idols in your life? Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones defined an idol in his book LIFE IN CHRIST: STUDIES IN 1 JOHN, saying "an idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone." He goes on to say that "anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol." Does anything in your life occupy a position that should be the position of God? Does money or a material thing occupy that position? Do you have an idol in your life? Time to give it up and give it to God.

Vs 51 Stephen is revved up and he is letting it go. (p) Do you think Stephen doesn't know his own life is at stake? In the next few verses, you will read that Stephen says "the law pointed to Jesus ...and you crucified Jesus." Even though God is screaming to his people, they plug their ears. When they stone Stephen, it confirms them in their unbelief.

You know what repentance is. I read this, and I thought it was very good. Repentance >> if you could do your sin all over again, would you do it? No? That is repentance. Here the Jews and their leaders were given the opportunity to repent, they were given an opportunity for a second chance. Not only did they not repent, they killed Stephen with a vengeance. And the church disappears in Jerusalem. The gospel is now propelled to other lands.

Vs 52-53 In other words, these prophets who were telling them of the coming of the Messiah, these true prophets of God, they had killed these prophets who had prophesied of the coming of the Just One, the Messiah. And YOU killed the Messiah!

You claim you keep the law, but you have failed. In fact you have rejected the law of Moses. And if you go back into their history, you'll find that their fathers persecuted every true prophet of God. Isaiah was persecuted and was sawn in two, ultimately. Jeremiah, thrown into the dungeon for speaking in the name of the Lord. Elijah and Elisha were persecuted because they spoke out against the evil kings. "Your fathers? Tell me now which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" And you, you blind Sanhedrin are doing that in our day.

Stephen is certainly not pleading for his life here. He is pressing charges against his accusers, for it is they who have blasphemed God. It is they (and their ancestors- their fathers) who have rebelled against Moses and the prophets. Stephen's accusers have betrayed and murdered Jesus. Those who talk so proudly about keeping the law, given by angels, have been shown to be disobedient to it. They murdered the only One who ever met the demands of the Law.

Jesus was sinless! It is not Stephen who is guilty; it is his accusers! The only thing you can say for them is that they are consistent – consistently disobedient to God.

Vs 7:54 As you know, Stephen's audience was the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court in the land. These men were the religious and political giants of the land. No doubt they were all about maintaining appearances so they would probably dress in a very distinguished manner and sit with great dignity and composure. This may have been the way things started out with the trial of Stephen, but it is not the way it ended! His message was not subtle; it was clear, condemning, and, worse yet, irrefutable. It was hopeless to debate him because he was right. So these men gave way to their anger. They were furious and even gnashed their teeth at Stephen. This crowd wanted blood, Stephen's blood. The description of the crowds is one of near insanity. They were out of their minds.

Vs 55-56 Well, this is the only time in the bible that Jesus is standing at the right side of God. Stephen sees Jesus on the right side - meaning he is our High Priest, Mediator, and intercessor. Standing. Jesus is usually said to sit there; but Stephen sees him standing there. Standing because Jesus shows concern for his suffering servant. He stands ready to receive him and crown him, and in the mean time to give him a prospect of the joy ready for him. This was intended for Stephen's encouragement. He sees Christ is for him, Stephen knows it doesn't matter who is against him.

Vs 57-60 This was more than they could take. Stephen beholds the Son of Man – Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified – standing at God's right hand, in heaven. The One they rejected and killed is alive, and God the Father has made Him both "**ruler and deliverer**". Stephen, whom they accused of blaspheming God, is beholding God, who awaits his entrance into his eternal reward. I am sure the Sanhedrin have been sufficiently shocked that Stephen does not cower in fear, or plead for his life, but instead looks forward to being with God in Heaven. You know when Joseph Stalin died – a brutal dictator who killed millions, his daughter said he raised his fist as if in defiance of God. What a contrast. Stephen with maybe a glow on his face welcoming his entrance to Heaven. Stalin - still in defiance. Stephen will die beholding the face of God. This was the last straw for the Sanhedrin. They could stand it no more. They covered their ears and rushed at him, at one heart and mind with all the others, whose intent was to silence Stephen as quickly as possible. After dragging him out of the city, they stoned him.

Here, Luke introduces us to Paul (or, more precisely, Saul). No doubt he was among those who debated with Stephen. He might even have led the opposition to Stephen. He was very probably among those who heard Stephen's sermon preached to the Sanhedrin. He was certainly present at Stephen's execution. Saul watched the cloaks of those who laid them aside to stone Stephen. Is it possible that this sermon actually gave Paul the basic points of his theology? Paul was there. I can imagine that this scene, along with Stephen's sermon, was permanently embedded in Saul's mind, never to be forgotten.

When Stephen died, I believe that God provided an exit worthy of a courageous martyr, and thus we are told he simply fell asleep. What a way to go, proclaiming Jesus to his very last breath. Stephen did not fear death and did not revere the physical temple in Jerusalem. He was a man who "saw" a better temple and whose hope was not earthly. He was free to die, as were the saints of old, because of His faith in God and the promises which were sure to come.

You know, interesting that Stephen's death was very similar to that of Jesus Christ. *When Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, it is almost as though Jesus was on trial a second time.* Notice the similarities -both were executed for things they did not do, convicted on the basis of false charges. Both committed their spirit to God. Both asked God's forgiveness for those who executed them. Aside from the fact that Jesus alone died as a sinless substitute, bearing the guilt and punishment for our sins, there is another great difference. Stephen died while looking into heaven, beholding heaven's approval. When Jesus died, He was at that moment forsaken by God, because He bore our sin and guilt. Praise the Lord.

Let's pray.