

LESSON 7:

**PREACHING IN JERUSALEM,
PART 5 (ACTS 7:37-8:3)**

Stephen was accused of blasphemy before the Sanhedrin. Now, he had begun giving a defense by discussing some points of Jewish history. Up to this point, he has demonstrated points from God's promises to Abraham through Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (ACTS 7:37-43)

7:37. Stephen reminded his audience that Moses (who the ancestors rejected) foretold God raising a Prophet like him from among them (another Lawgiver and Deliverer, Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Ironically, Stephen was accused of blaspheming Moses and God, though he was preaching in the name of that Prophet they had rejected (Jesus of Nazareth, Acts 3:22-26)!

7:38-43. God used Moses with the Israelites in the wilderness after exiting Egypt to give the living oracles of God's Law to Israel (Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23). This was given to Moses through an angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai (e.g. Exodus 19-23; Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2). The ancestors of the Jews in Stephen's audience received these living oracles (words) from God communicated to Moses but were ultimately unwilling to obey him. Instead of receiving and obeying this prophet, lawgiver, and deliverer God had sent to them with the living words and with wonders and signs, they pushed him aside and turned their hearts to go back to Egypt (e.g. Numbers 11:4-6; 14:1-4). Specifically, they told Aaron (Moses's brother) to make gods to go before them since they did not know what had happened to Moses (when he was on the mount receiving the living words, Exodus 32:1). Aaron obliged, and they made a golden calf to worship and celebrate (Exodus 32:2-6). God was furious (Exodus 32:7-35). Such acts were evidently typical of Israel during this time in the wilderness, which led to God turning away from them and giving them up to worship their false gods (including the stars). This rebellion against Moses and God continued throughout their history. Although they offered sacrifices to God during their 40 years in the wilderness, they were rebellious toward God (including taking up the tent/tabernacle to worship Moloch, the star of the false god Rephan, and images they made to worship (Ezekiel 20:16; Amos 5:25-27). Consequently, God would ultimately bring their rebellious ancestors into exile in Babylon (e.g. 2 Kings 24-25).

THE TEMPLE IS BUILT IN JERUSALEM (ACTS 7:44-50)

7:44-50. Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple (Acts 6:13), and now turned his attention to when the temple was built. After showing their ancestors had turned to the tent/tabernacle of false gods, Stephen spoke of their ancestors originally making the tabernacle of the testimony (Numbers 1:50; 17:7; housing the stone tablets of the testimony, Exodus 31:18; 32:15-16; 34:29). This was made through the command of God to Moses, according to the pattern God showed to him (Exodus 25:40; 26-30; Hebrews 8:5). The tabernacle (tent) was moved as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness and was brought into the promised land later under Joshua's leadership. The tabernacle continued to serve its purpose through the days of King David. David, who found favor in God's sight, asked if he could provide a dwelling (house) for God (2 Samuel 7:1-2) since God had settled the Israelites in the Canaan land (the land He had promised to give to Abraham's descendants). It was David's son Solomon, though, who God granted to build the house (temple, 2 Samuel 7:4-17; 2 Chronicles 3-8). Despite the temple being built in Jerusalem, though, it could never fully contain the Most High God, whose throne is Heaven and footstool is the earth, having made all things with His hands (Isaiah 66:1-2; 1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chronicles 6:18). This reality that the temple could not house the fullness of God made it possible for the temple structure to lose the special place it once had.

A HISTORY OF RESISTING GOD (ACTS 7:51-53)

7:51-53. Having made these significant points in responding to the charges against him, Stephen accused those in the audience of being stiff-necked (like a stubborn animal, Exodus 33:3, 5; 34:9) and uncircumcised in hearts and ears (demonstrating allegiance to God in their flesh but not in their hearts, Leviticus 26:40-42; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:25-29). Thus, they were unwilling to listen to the gospel's message foretold by and now preached through the Holy Spirit! This was continuing the same pattern of rebellion that Stephen had demonstrated concerning their ancestors. Their ancestors had persecuted the prophets and even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One (Messiah; 2 Chronicles 36:15-16; Nehemiah 9:26; Jeremiah 2:30; Matthew 23:29-32, 37; Luke 11:47-51). Now, they had betrayed and murdered the Messiah (the Deliverer, Lawgiver, and Prophet who had been foretold, Luke 22-23)! Although they had received the Law (of Moses, given

under the direction of angels, Acts 7:38), they were the ones who had not kept it! They had rejected Who it was all pointing to and were guilty of murder (Exodus 20:13)!

STEVEN IS KILLED (ACTS 7:54-60)

7:54-60. Stephen's audience was outraged and gnashed (grinded) their teeth. Stephen, however, was full of the Holy Spirit, looked into Heaven, and saw the glory of God with Jesus (the Son of Man) standing at His right hand (designating Him as the Messianic King, Daniel 7:13-14). As Stephen told his audience what he saw, they yelled (perhaps to cover Stephen's voice), covered their ears, and all rushed against Stephen. They dragged him out of the city (Leviticus 24:14) and began to stone him. The witnesses (who were to cast the first stones, Deuteronomy 17:2-7) laid their outer garments aside (to free them to move in throwing the stones) at the feet of a young man named Saul. As Stephen was being stoned, he called out for the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit, knelt down, and loudly cried for the Lord not to hold this sin against them (similar to Jesus's prayer from the cross, Luke 23:34). God would provide forgiveness to any who would repent and obey the gospel (as we will see)! Then, Stephen fell asleep (a reference to the temporary state of death, John 11:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

PERSECUTION AGAINST THE CHURCH (ACTS 8:1-3)

8:1-3. Saul agreed with putting Stephen to death (Acts 22:20). Although Stephen's stoning appeared to be a spontaneous reaction of the Sanhedrin, this ignited further efforts to severely persecute the church that day in Jerusalem (which had previously been held back, Acts 5:33-42). This persecution was so intense that all the disciples in the Jerusalem church were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, with only the apostles staying in Jerusalem. Some devout men (likely Christians) buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him. Saul then acted as the main aggressor in this persecution of the church, devastating it – even entering house after house and dragging off men and women to put them into prison (Acts 9:1-2; 22:3-5; 26:9-11).

CONCLUSION

After a period of building opposition to the gospel from the Jewish leadership, Stephen's bold sermon ignited persecution against the church. Stephen has now been murdered and many disciples had either been arrested or scattered. Yet, even this did not defeat the gospel!

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

Who had Moses foretold and what had Stephen's audience done with that One?

How did the Jewish ancestors respond to Moses and the living words given through him?

How far did the Jewish ancestors' rejection of Moses go and how did God ultimately respond?

Why could the temple not fully contain God?

Why was the temple's inability to fully contain God such an important point in Stephen's sermon?

What did Stephen charge his audience with?

How did Stephen's audience respond to his message?

What began after Stephen's death?

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