

Acts 7

This chapter is referred to as Stephen's martyrdom. He was killed for telling the truth. They falsely accused him of blasphemy. They knew that they would have to manufacture something false to silence him.

Stephen could not have had a better or more honorable entrance into heaven. All that we can ever do is to speak the truth in love. We cannot control who will go crazy under demonic influence. Was Stephen's death a total loss to the church? Did the Kingdom of heaven also make a gain? Saul of Tarsus was right there, doing what he could to shut down Stephen. This chapter leads into the conversion of the man who would become Paul the Apostle. Paul was perhaps one of the most-powerful witnesses and church builders. Stephen surely had an impact on Paul.

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good... (Genesis 50:20)

¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has granted me [the needed] strength and made me able for this, because He considered me faithful and trustworthy, putting me into service [for this ministry], ¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer [of our Lord] and a persecutor [of His church] and a shameful and outrageous and violent aggressor [toward believers]. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted out of ignorance in unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord [His amazing, unmerited favor and blessing] flowed out in superabundance [for me, together] with the faith and love which are [realized] in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ This is a faithful and trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance and approval, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost. ¹⁶ Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost [of sinners], Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example or pattern for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. (1 Timothy 1)

Read Acts 7:1-8: Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, which is the equivalent of our Supreme Court. These are the religious and legal experts. They should be able to make quick work of this food ministry upstart. The idea was that if Stephen could be classified as a blasphemer they could silence him. They lied about him, just like they did with Jesus and Daniel. God entraps the powers of darkness when they entrap the righteous.

Stephen schools these experts on the history of their own people. Instead of making Stephen look like a simpleton, the Sanhedrin and the priests are brought into the spotlight and shown to be ignorant about the fundamentals of God.

The history of Israel has always been about God, not men. The religious leaders tried to make it about Abraham and Moses. It is far more about God using whoever he chooses. Joshua speaks of Abraham and Moses in the context of God's deliverances and mercy. They were both blind-sided by God to transform them. The Jews are a peculiar people for many reasons. One reason is that they keep traditions, even if they do not know what they really mean. God used them despite themselves, not because of themselves. Stephen ties the forefathers of the faith to God's hand on his people.

Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, 'Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, lived beyond the [Euphrates] River in ancient times; and they served other gods.' ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the [Euphrates] River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants, and I gave him Isaac. ⁴ To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and to Esau I gave [the hill country off] Mount Seir to possess; but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. ⁵ Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt by what I did in its midst; and afterward I brought you out. ⁶ Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ When they cried out to the Lord [for help], He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea upon them and covered them; and your own eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness a long time (forty years). ⁸ Then I brought you into the land of the Amorites who lived on the other side of the Jordan, and they fought with you; and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel, and he sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. ¹⁰ But I would not listen to Balaam. Therefore he had to bless you, so I saved you from Balak's hand. ¹¹ You crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho; and the citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Girgashite, the Hivite and the Jebusite; and so I gave them into your hand. ¹² I sent the hornet [that is, the terror of you] before you, which drove the two kings of the Amorites out before you; but it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you live in them; you eat from vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.' (Joshua 24)

Stephen also goes on to reveal Israel's history of making ungodly decisions and rejecting God, despite God's goodness. First, he takes the emphasis off of the fathers of the faith. Next, he shows how his people utterly failed their tests of faith at every step.

We are told that Stephen is speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit, so we should really pay attention to his words. This is the best Old Testament commentary that you can get. He speaks of Abraham, the patriarchs, and Moses. This is a great strategy. Abraham was considered to be the father of the Jewish nation. Moses is regarded by the religious Jews as *the lawgiver*. The Jewish religious writings used Abraham's faith and Moses' laws as the ultimate sources of all of their laws. Like Jesus, Stephen is showing them that the religious Jews are the antithesis of what they proclaim. Their additions to the Law (Mishna, etc... actually work against God's Laws). Their fathers have killed the prophets.

He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? ⁴For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' ⁵ But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God"— ⁶then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. ⁷ Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ⁸ 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. ⁹ And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' " (Matthew 15)

In reality, Abraham and the patriarchs and Moses reveal the lack of faith and disobedience Israel has always had towards God. There were many promises made by God to his people. Jesus is the sum total of God's promises, wrapped up into a person. To believe God's Word and promises is to believe in Jesus. The Old Testament faith came by believing God's promises. Abraham actually met with Jesus, and he was excited to spend time with him.

Now the Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinth trees of Mamre [in Hebron], while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. ² When he raised his eyes and looked up, behold, three men were standing [a little distance] from him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed down [with his face] to the ground, ³ and Abraham said, "My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass by your servant [without stopping to visit]. ⁴ Please let a little water be brought [by one of my servants] and [you may] wash your feet,

and recline and rest comfortably under the tree. ⁵ And I will bring a piece of bread to refresh and sustain you; after that you may go on, since you have come to your servant.” And they replied, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Quickly, get ready three measures of fine meal, knead it and bake cakes.” ⁷ Abraham also ran to the herd and brought a calf, tender and choice, and he gave it to the servant [to butcher], and he hurried to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before the men; and he stood beside them under the tree while they ate. ⁹ Then they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ He said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in years; she was past [the age of] childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself [when she heard the Lord’s words], saying, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure and delight, my lord (husband) being also old?” ¹³ And the Lord asked Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh [to herself], saying, ‘Shall I really give birth [to a child] when I am so old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too difficult or too wonderful for the Lord? At the appointed time, when the season [for her delivery] comes, I will return to you and Sarah will have a son.” ¹⁵ Then Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh”; because she was afraid. And He (the Lord) said, “No, but you did laugh.” ¹⁶ Then the men got up from there, and looked toward Sodom; and Abraham walked with them to send them on the way. ¹⁷ The Lord said, “Shall I keep secret from Abraham [My friend and servant] what I am going to do, ¹⁸ since Abraham is destined to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him? (Genesis 18)

Your father Abraham [greatly] rejoiced to see My day (My incarnation). He saw it and was delighted.” ⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not even fifty years old, and You [claim to] have seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus replied, “I assure you and most solemnly say to you, before Abraham was born, I Am.” ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus concealed Himself and left the temple. (John 8)

Moses talked about Jesus too. The Sanhedrin thought they were putting Stephen on trial...but the Holy Spirit was putting them on trial.

¹⁵ “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me [Moses] from among you, from your countrymen (brothers, brethren). You shall listen to him. ¹⁶ This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb (Mount Sinai) on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear the voice of the Lord my God again, nor see this great fire anymore, so that I will not die.’ ¹⁷ The Lord said to me, ‘They have spoken well. ¹⁸ I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him [and there will be consequences]. ²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet shall die.’ ²¹ If you say in your heart, ‘How will we know and recognize the word which the Lord has not spoken?’ ²² When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the thing does not happen or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. (Deuteronomy 18)

The religious Jews prided themselves about being people of the Law and enforcers of the words of God. In reality, they missed the main points, because their hearts were in it for the wrong reasons.

“Woe to you, [self-righteous] scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you give a tenth (tithe) of your mint and dill and cumin [focusing on minor matters], and have neglected the weightier [more important moral and spiritual] provisions of the Law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the [primary] things you ought to have done without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You [spiritually] blind guides, who strain out a gnat [consuming yourselves with miniscule matters] and swallow a camel [ignoring and violating God’s precepts]! ²⁵ “Woe to you, [self-righteous] scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and robbery and self-indulgence (unrestrained greed). ²⁶ You [spiritually] blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the plate [examine and change your inner self to conform to God’s precepts], so that the outside [your public life and deeds] may be clean also. ²⁷ “Woe to you, [self-righteous] scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. ²⁸ So you, also, outwardly seem to be just and upright to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. ²⁹ “Woe to you, [self-righteous] scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build tombs for the prophets and decorate and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ and you say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we

would not have joined them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the [allotted] measure of the guilt of your fathers’ sins. ³³ You serpents, you spawn of vipers, how can you escape the penalty of hell? ³⁴ “Therefore, take notice, I am sending you prophets and wise men [interpreters, teachers] and scribes [men educated in the Mosaic Law and the writings of the prophets]; some of them you will kill and even crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues, and pursue and persecute from city to city, ³⁵ so that on you will come the guilt of all the blood of the righteous shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah [the priest], the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ I assure you and most solemnly say to you, [the judgment for] all these things [these vile and murderous deeds] will come on this generation. (Mathew 23)

When Saul of Tarsus came after Stephen he unknowingly was being transformed by God into the most effective processor and distributor of scripture. He became the prime church builder. God uses evil intent to bring about good. When the Pharisees came after Jesus, he used their attacks to illustrate the blatant difference between God’s love and truth verses self-serving manmade religious replicas. They were using personal attacks against Stephen because logic was not on their side. We see the same kinds of things against President Trump today. Those who are invested in his demise will do whatever is necessary to do to stop him. At some point, the opposition gets so far out there that they just make fools of themselves. God will not be mocked.

Read Acts 7:9-16: The ultimate context of Stephen's inquisition is about Jesus. Every chapter of Israel’s history has glimmers of Jesus. He moves onto Joseph. Joseph was the envy of his brothers; so they did away with him. In the end he saved them who tried to kill him. He was a betrayed savior of the world. Every one of these history cameos should hammer home something about Jesus.

Read Acts 7:17-37 : Now we move onto Moses, whom the religious leaders held in the highest esteem. They tried to accuse Stephen and others of violating Moses’ laws. Stephen teaches them that they missed Moses’ point altogether. The children of Israel initially rejected the one who tried to save them from Pharaoh. Moses, their icon, told them to listen to the coming prophet who would be like himself. That is Jesus.

Read Acts 7:38-50: Stephen points out that the entire wilderness experience was all about idolatry and refusing to follow God. He also points out that the temple they literally worship is not really God's house at all.

Read Acts 7:51-60: Now Stephen concludes that this tradition that the Sanhedrin held onto was literally a demonic and bloodthirsty history. Their ancestors ignored or killed every good prophet that came along. They went crazy and killed Stephen. Interestingly, the Jews had lost their right to execute capital punishment by the Romans. In other words, the Sanhedrin had to break the law to stone Stephen.