

## ~ACTS~

## Lesson 21- Stephen's Defense (part 1)

In chapter 6, we were introduced to an amazing man of faith named Stephen. He was chosen as one of the seven deacons to support the Apostles in the daily distribution, but his ministry ran much deeper than that. In chapter 6 Luke describes him as having a good witnessing character, full of the Holy Spirit and full of wisdom because this was the criteria the Apostles designated for choosing the seven deacons in verse 3. Also, in verse 5, we are told he is a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. And in verse 8 he again is described as being full of faith and dunamis power and that he did great wonders and signs among the people. This is significant because this is the first time we see someone other than an Apostle doing wonders and signs through the power of the Holy Spirit. And we will see this again with Philip in chapter 8, proving that God will work through anyone who yields themselves to the working of the Spirit.

And in addition to these signs and wonders, we know that Stephen preached the Name of Jesus boldly. In fact, it was because of this, that the Hellenistic Jews confronted him, but Acts 6:10 says, "*they could not resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*" So they had to resort to lies and blasphemy to try to condemn him. So they bribed false witnesses to accuse him. They spread false accusations against him and they began to stir up the people and the elders and scribes of the Sanhedrin to the point that they come and arrest Stephen and bring him before the Council.

And as Stephen is standing in the midst of this supreme court in Jerusalem, and they are railing false accusations against him, before even saying a word, Luke tells us in Acts 6:15 that *everyone in the Council saw his face as the face of an angel.* The glory of God is just radiating out from him.

This is where we ended last time, now today we begin looking at chapter 7 continuing the trial before the Sanhedrin Council, and we will see Stephen make a bold defense of the Gospel. He takes a bold stance for Truth even unto death, and Stephen becomes the first martyr to die for the name of Jesus.

This is a long chapter, in fact it's the longest chapter in the book of Acts. But even though it's long, it has one main theme that runs through these 60 verses; that the Jewish people continue to resist the Holy Spirit and reject the chosen ones of God. That's the point Stephen is making to the Sanhedrin. In fact, Stephen drives this point home when he ends his speech in verses **51-52**.

That's the main theme throughout this chapter, but God is so good, because as Stephen goes through his discourse, he will continually make the point that God is faithful to keep His promises even despite the unfaithfulness of mankind who continue to reject His plan. Because God's plan is the redemption of mankind through His Son Jesus Christ and everything in the Bible has one focus, that is Jesus Christ and our redemption through His blood. Everything in the Old Testament points to the Messiah and the promise of Eternal Life in Him, and the New Testament is the unveiling of the Messiah in the manifestation of His Son Jesus Christ. Everything is focused on Jesus Christ and the cross, and the cross will always continue to be the central focus for all eternity.

Something else to keep in mind as we go through chapter 7 is that Stephen continually points out that the Jewish fathers always miss it the first time and get it right the second time. Which is foreshadowing the salvation of the Jewish nation. They rejected Jesus the first time, at His first coming, but at the end of this age, the nation of Israel will finally accept Him as Messiah at His second coming when they cry out, "*Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord.*" Matt 23:39.

That lays the foundation for what we can expect in this chapter so let's start with verse 1 as Caiaphas the high priest asks Stephen a question...

**1) Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"**

There are four charges of blasphemy against Stephen that Caiaphas is referring to, Acts 6:11-14: 1) blaspheming God; 2) blaspheming Moses; 3) blaspheming the Law; 4) blaspheming the Temple. Caiaphas asks this question expecting him to cower and admit his guilt. But instead, he gets a response he wasn't intending. The Holy Spirit rises up within Stephen and turns the tables. Instead of Stephen being on trial, the Holy Spirit puts the Council on trial, and convicts the Council of blasphemy and rejecting God. And just like Peter, he ultimately convicts them of their sin of rejecting and killing their Messiah.

And to make this point, Stephen through the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, gives the Sanhedrin a little history lesson on their Jewish heritage. And the premise to Stephen's entire speech is that all through history, the Jewish people have consistently rejected God's chosen men and His plan of redemption. And every example Stephen gives for the next 50 verses are examples from Jewish history showing that their fathers always have a habit of resisting the Holy Spirit and he says, "You're no different. Just as your fathers have rejected the chosen ones of God, you too have rejected and killed your Messiah." Stephen begins his history lesson to the Sanhedrin with Abraham, the first Jew and the father of the Jewish nation.

## Abraham

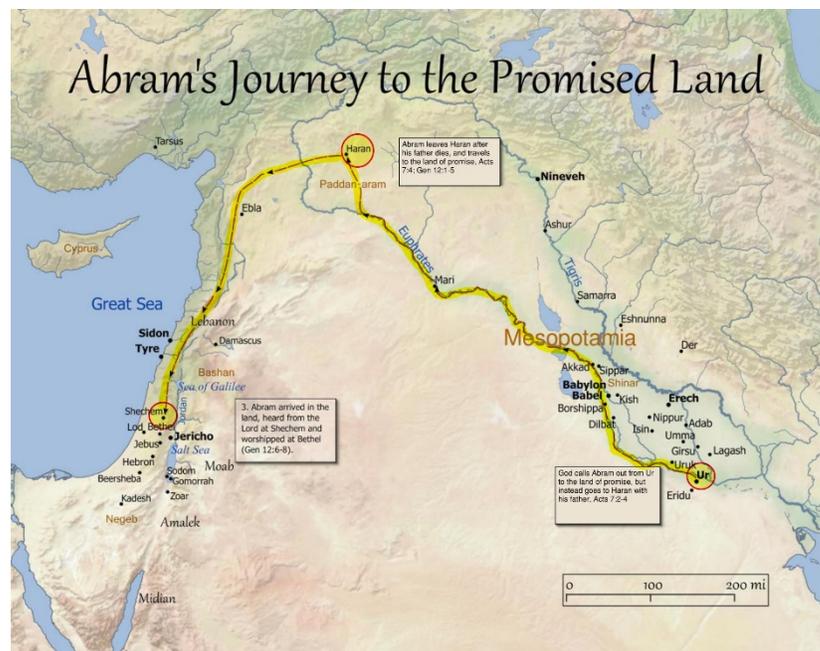
**2-4)** <sup>2</sup> And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' <sup>4</sup> Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.

Stephen begins his first example with the God of glory appearing to Abraham. Now notice where God first called Abraham... in Ur of Chaldeans **before** he dwelt in Haran. And God told him, "get out of your country, and from your relatives..." But Abraham didn't do that, he followed his father up to Haran.

Stephen is pointing out that Abraham resisted the Holy Spirit by not doing exactly what he was instructed. Abraham was told to leave his country and his family and move directly to the promised land. But instead, he moved up river to Haran with his family and stayed there until his father died (possibly even up to 25 years) and then he was obedient to God's word and moved down to the land of promise, **Genesis 11:31-32; 12:1-7**.

Haran wasn't the land of promise. God had to wait 25 years while Abraham was living in Haran before God could start working in Abraham's life to administer His promise. This just shows God's mercy and His forbearance toward His people. And it seems that God had to call Abraham a second time from Haran, because Stephen says in verse 4, **He** (God) **moved him to this land which you now dwell**. Fitting with the pattern that the fathers miss it the first time, but get it right the second time.

**5)** And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He **promised** to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.



Abraham is finally in the land of promise, but he is just a sojourner, he doesn't own this land. In fact, the possession of the land won't happen for another 470 years when Joshua takes the children of Israel into the promised land, but even then, the land isn't the culmination of the promise, it's just one of the building blocks leading up to THE PROMISE, that is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the promise and Eternal Life in Him. God has one objective in mind, and that is to establish the nation and the people through whom the Messiah would come forth, Gal 3:16, 19; Hebrews 11:8-16; 39-40.

Stephen very quickly is laying out this history of the Jewish people showing the providential hand of God working to fulfill and keep His promises.

**6-7)** <sup>6</sup> But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell (sojourn, *παροικος*) in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. <sup>7</sup> 'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.'

Stephen is quoting from Genesis 15:13-14 LXX, and Stephen is again making the point that God keeps His promises. That even after 400 years of sojourning, the children of Israel will come out of the bondage of Egypt as a nation. This was known before the foundation of the world, and it was part of God's sovereign plan to form the Jewish nation and bring them into the promise land so that ultimately the Messiah could come forth at the fulness of time, Galatians 4:4. So God promises Abraham's descendants deliverance after 400 years of sojourning and bondage, but notice that the 400 years is not all in bondage. The 400 years includes the sojourning of Abraham up to the Exodus and the giving of the Law. Some people say there is a discrepancy between the 400 years mentioned in Genesis 15:13 and the 430 years mentioned in Exodus 12:40. There is no discrepancy, just a different starting point. Exodus 12:40 and Paul in Galatians 3:17 start the 430 when Abraham left Haran. God starts the 400 years with Abraham's son Isaac.

Then Stephen continues through the history of the twelve patriarchs, the twelve sons of Jacob being the twelve tribes of Israel and he continues explaining the providential hand of God working to fulfill His promise even among the rebellion against His chosen men. Starting with the patriarchs, specifically the sons of Jacob, Stephen points out that they rejected God's chosen deliverer, namely Joseph.

### Patriarchs

**8-9)** <sup>8</sup> Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs. <sup>9</sup> And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt.

Joseph is God's chosen vessel to bring deliverance to Israel. Remember Joseph had two dreams foretelling of this, **Genesis 37:3-11**. This was God establishing Joseph to be the one to deliver Jacob and his family out from the famine and bring them into safety in Egypt. But, as Stephen points out, the patriarchs, their Jewish fathers, have a habit of rejecting God's chosen deliverers. Stephen gives this example of Joseph. He is going to relate this to Moses next and finally show them they also did this with Jesus. Just as John says about Jesus, *He came unto His own, and His own did not receive Him*, John 1:13. But this rejection and ill treatment toward Joseph was no surprise to God. Look at the rest of verse 9...

**9-12)** <sup>9</sup> ...But God was with him (Even among this rejection, God was still faithful to His promise, in fact God weaved this rejection into His sovereign plan of redemption, and He used this rejection to bring Israel into Egypt) <sup>10</sup> and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. <sup>11</sup> Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.

Again, Stephen is making the point that the children of Israel always resist the Spirit. The children of Israel wanted to kill Joseph out of envy and hatred, but what the enemy meant for evil, God worked it out for good, Gen 50:20. And He did this for the purpose to protect His people from the famine and great trouble that came over the land. This was God keeping His promise that the Messiah would come through the seed of Abraham and God used Joseph as His honorable vessel to preserve His people. Notice that phrase at the end of verse 12, “...he sent out our fathers first.” The first time Joseph's brothers came to Egypt, they didn't recognize him. But then look at verse 13...

**13) And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh.**

It was the second time they came to Joseph that they recognized him as the deliverer. This was true with Moses, and it was true with Jesus as well. They always have a pattern of missing the deliverer the first time, and then getting it right the second time. And the implication is that even among this rejection of Joseph, God kept His promise, and the children of Israel were made safe though God's providential hand allowing Jacob's family to grow into a nation in the land of Egypt. They went down to Egypt as a family of 75 people in total, and they came out as a nation amounting to over one million.

**14-15) <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. <sup>15</sup> So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers.**

The children of Israel came into Egypt as a family, and they left as a nation. Some critics claim an error in Stephen's count of 75 because Genesis 46:27 says there were only 70 people who went to Egypt. This is not an error, it's just a matter of counting. Genesis 46:26 says there were 66 souls who went with Jacob to Egypt, so if you include Jacob plus Joseph who is already in Egypt, along with his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, you get 70 total. But the Hebrew Bible is only counting the two most prominent sons of Joseph in Egypt, Ephraim and Manasseh. But the LXX, which Stephen being a Hellenistic Jew is quoting from, says there were nine souls in addition to the 66 because Joseph had more children in Egypt than just Ephraim and Manasseh, so therefore the LXX says there were 75 total. So its not an error, the LXX just give us more information.

**16) And they (the patriarchs) were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.**

Stephen is making the point that the patriarchs, namely Jacob and his sons, even though they died in Egypt, they were carried back to the land of promise. This was Joseph's last request, Gen 50:25, and Paul says this was by faith in Hebrews 11:22 because Joseph was trusting in the promises of God to bring them back to the promise land. However, just like verse 14, this verse has caused some critics to accuse Stephen of speaking in error, because according to Joshua 24:32, it was Jacob who bought the land in Shechem from the sons of Hamor and not Abraham. So some say this is an error in the Bible. But I reject that Stephen or Luke made an error, because I believe the Bible is inerrant, breathed out by the Holy Spirit, and it's the Holy Spirit that is speaking these words through Stephen in front of the Sanhedrin Council. So there are a couple of possibilities to resolve this seeming contradiction.

The first possibility is that Stephen is recounting two burials into one statement for the sake of brevity. Because we know there were two different burial sites for the patriarchs in Canaan; one that Abraham purchased in Machpelah, Gen 23:12-20, this is where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried; and another burial site that Jacob purchased in Shechem, Gen 33:18-20; Josh 24:32, this is the place Stephen is referring to where Joseph and the other sons of Jacob were buried. And for the sake of simplicity and brevity, it is possible that Stephen is combining the burial of the fathers into one account, with the main focus being that all the fathers were buried in the promise land.

Another explanation is that Abraham may have originally bought the burial site in Shechem when he first came to the land of promise when he first built an altar to God, Gen 12:6-7, and then because Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were sojourners, they didn't stay in Shechem, over the next 100 years they traveled from Egypt back up to Haran, and so the original purchased land fell out of their name, and then 100 years later Jacob came back to Shechem and repurchased the land from the sons of Hamor, Gen 33:18-20. Either of these are valid solutions.

Now in verse 17, Stephen makes the transition from the birth of the Jewish nation, which originated with Abraham, and continued through the patriarchs, and now he begins speaking of the promise of the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. Notice Stephen's pattern, he is always pointing out the errors and disobedience of the Jewish fathers, but then follows it with God's faithfulness to His promises. That's an example of His divine mercy on fallen man. That's why it took 4,000 years for the Word to become flesh.

### **17) But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt**

This was the divine purpose for sending Israel to Egypt, so that they would grow and multiply into a nation. Remember back in verses 6-7, Stephen told us this is what God had promised Abraham; that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land for 400 years, and then afterward come out and serve Him in this place. Now today, nearly 4,000 years from Abraham, we have the advantage of looking at the fulfillment of these promises and seeing this from God's perspective. Isaiah says that *God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts*, Isaiah 55:9. But the advantage to fulfilled prophecy, is we can look back and get a glimpse into how God sees things.

God was preserving His people for the sole purpose of ushering in the Messiah. God first needed a nation who would serve Him, so He promised them a land to dwell in. But before they could inherit the land, they had to become a people, a chosen nation of God, separated unto Him. And to do this, God first chose Abraham to be the father of many nations. Then out from his loins came the patriarchs. Then he rose up Joseph as their deliverer to deliver them from famine and destruction. This deliverance came by preserving them in Egypt and allowing them to multiply as a nation. But then, because of the cruelty of the new Pharaoh that did not remember Joseph, they were put into bondage which then gave rise to another deliverer, namely Moses; one who would free them from the bondage of Egypt and bring them into the promised land.

Next week Stephen will lead us into the life of Moses, again showing the rejection of yet another deliverer sent from God. They first rejected Joseph, next week we will see them reject Moses, which foreshadows the whole point that Stephen is driving toward, the fact that they rejected God's ultimate Deliverer, the Messiah, His Son, Jesus Christ.

But again, even among all the rejections, God is so faithful to His promises and His plan will be accomplished. Joseph still gave refuge to the children of Israel; Moses delivered the Israelites out of the bondage of Egypt; and Jesus died for our sins and was resurrected, leading us out from the power of darkness into His marvelous Light. And all who would believe in His Son, will have Everlasting Life with Him.