

Acts 7:1-16 | And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,<sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’<sup>4</sup> Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.<sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.<sup>6</sup> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.<sup>7</sup> ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’<sup>8</sup> And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.<sup>9</sup> “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him<sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.<sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food.<sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.<sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh.<sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.<sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers,<sup>16</sup> and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

## Acts 7:1-16 | Stephen’s Speech, Abraham

Stephen is arrested and brought to trial before the Sanhedrin. False witnesses are brought forward who bring two charges. They claim Stephen is speaking against the temple, and against the law of Moses. The center of the accusation is Jesus of Nazareth, they say;

Acts 6:14 | for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”

Today we begin looking at Stephen’s speech before the Sanhedrin, this is the longest speech in Acts and will take us several weeks to get through. You’ll notice that most of the speech is history. In fact I think on a first reading through the passage you might wonder how this is a defense against the charge of neglecting the temple and blaspheming Moses and God?

Christianity is uniquely about history. Machen says in his landmark work, *Christianity and Liberalism*, “All the ideas of Christianity might be discovered in some other religion, yet there would be in that other religion no Christianity. For Christianity depends, not upon a complex of ideas, but upon the narration of an event.” That is why liberal Christianity which took root in the

United States in the mid 20th century, which presumed the impossibility of miracles, the mythological nature of the resurrection, and the reducibility of Christianity to a moral framework is not Christianity but another religion entirely. If Christianity is fundamentally ethical principles, you are dead in your trespasses and sins and have no hope in the world. Still unjustified before God. But Christianity is news, therefore Christianity is history. In fact it is the center of history, I make this point non-controversially because its been 21 centuries since what?

The charges require Stephen to relay the history of Israel, because it is in this history that we discover what the temple and the laws of Moses mean. That's what the conversation is about. And the way to describe what they mean, is to place them in the history of God's people. Stephen will reveal that the keepers of the temple and the supposed upholders of the law of Moses do not understand the temple or the law or who they are in God's story.

## 1. Abrahamic Covenant

Acts 7:2-3 | And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’

Within Stephen's opening statement of deference he demonstrates that he is not some rogue revolutionary. He is not seeking to break fellowship with the men he calls brothers and fathers, but rather hopes to awaken them to a right understanding of what he is accused of saying. So he begins with the story of Abraham, the man from whom they draw their self-understanding. Throughout the story, he will hit on details which emphasize their misunderstanding. The first detail he hits on is the initial working of God in calling his people takes place outside of Jerusalem. Their own story begins among a people who are no people.

Secondly what we see in this summary is the emphasis that God is the one who comes down to chose his people. They did nothing to chose him. The salvation of God from the beginning is by his grace alone.

Acts 7:4-5 | ...God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. <sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.

While Jerusalem enters the story it is no possession. In fact Abraham never owns even a foot's length of Jerusalem. What Abraham has is a promise. But all he has is the promise. And even the promise has a lot of interruption. Which Stephen highlights.

Acts 7:6 | And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.

Abraham is a man from no heritage, who has no birthright to claim the people of God. But God in his own good pleasure chose Abraham and gave him a far off promise. God then gives to Abraham the sign of this promise, so that his offspring would be marked as the people of the promise.

Acts 7:8 | And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

We are fundamentally the people of the promise of God. We are saved by Grace alone, through the faith alone in the promises of God. This is the fundamental identity of the people of God. Stephen's argument here is that we are saved by faith alone, and it is sensible that there would come a time in which the temple and customs of Moses are eliminated, never to be returned to. Paul is listening to Stephen's speech. And I'm sure he remembered it because you can hear his theology developing from Stephen. In fact I think Stephen begins Paul's ministry here. Paul completes this argument in Romans 4.

Romans 4:11-12 | He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,<sup>12</sup> and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

It is the explicit argument lingering in the background of Stephen's history. Who are the people of God? They are the ones who hold to the promise of God in faith. Then they are counted righteous by faith *apart* from works of the law. You can tell right in the story as Paul explains. Was Abraham counted righteous before or after he was given the sign of circumcision, which is the image of the works of the law? Before! That was so that he would be the father of all who believe without being circumcised but who walk in faith like Abraham.

The Temple and the law of Moses which mark out a distinct people are not the culmination of the story. There is a righteousness prior to the temple rites which has superseded the temple rites. So if we're talking about the destruction of the temple and changing the customs of Moses it is not straying from the covenant of God. He moves onto Joseph's story, and it draws close to Jesus of Nazareth.

## 2. Joseph

Acts 7:9-10 | "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him<sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.

The patriarchs, the twelve sons of Jacob, turn upon their brother Joseph out of Jealousy, and they sell him to Egypt. But God was with Joseph and rescued him out of all his afflictions. He gave him favor with the king and made him ruler over Egypt.

The people of the promise turned on the promised one. They sold him to their enemies. And then God raised the one they betrayed to be king over them. Do you hear it. This is the story of Jesus. How is the child of promise treated by his brothers? He is betrayed by them out of jealousy. When there is a famine in the land of promise, God uses Joseph to bring the rescue to his brothers by extending grace to them.

Acts 7:14-15 | And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers,

Here is the pattern of the history of God's people that Stephen is developing. The people of God are the ones who are counted righteous by faith in the promise of God. When the promise of God is fulfilled in his offspring, the brothers of that offspring betray the promised one.

You'd expect the Sanhedrin to step in. "Stephen, you haven't answered the charge against you. Did you say Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and change the customs of Moses? But they don't step in. They're hearing what we're not hearing.

What is the temple and what are the customs of Moses. They are the markers of the people of God. That is of course why it would be blasphemous to destroy them. But here is the argument of Stephen.

There is a deeper marker of the people of God. There is in fact an older story, a deeper magic to borrow a phrase. None of these things mean anything apart from faith. In fact if the story that started is going to be fulfilled it requires something to which the uncircumcised will draw near, in faith. That rules out the temple.

Secondly, we know how the the circumcised brothers will respond to the child of promise. In telling the story of Joseph he has told the story of Jesus. He came to his brothers, the Jews, and it is them who rejected him. Selling him to the gentiles so to speak. But in his rejection he is raised to the level of King. And from his position as king he offers grace and life in returning to him.

He tells the history because Christianity happened. The Son of God was rejected by those he came to save. He reigns in the heavens now. He offers grace to his enemies who rejected him. If you reject this grace your whole world will be destroyed and you are still in your sins. That's Abraham and Joseph but there is still more to say.