



# Stephen's Defense

## Kicking It Off

What is a rule you had growing up that you didn't understand at the time but now see the purpose behind?

## Read

Acts 6:8–7:53

## Summary

As I'm sure many of you are in a Bible reading plan, you've come across a lot of various Old Testament laws. The ones about what to eat, what to wear, how to worship? Those were actually meant to be a good thing. They were basically God's way of saying to his people, "You're mine, and here's how we do life together." It was about the relationship, not the rulebook.

But over time, people turned it into a system. The religious leaders became the referees, deciding who was in and who was out based on how well they followed the rules. They even took it a step further and basically said the only place you could really connect with God was the temple. They put God in a box.

That's what Stephen pushed back on. He was just a guy who served tables in the early church, but he understood the gospel so deeply that religious leaders couldn't win an argument against him. So they made up charges and dragged him before the council.

Stephen walked them through their own history and pointed out that God's presence was never stuck in one place. Abraham followed God out of his homeland. Moses met God at a burning bush in the middle of nowhere, and then God's power went with Moses, not the bush. The whole story of Israel shows a God who moves with his people, not one who stays locked inside a building.

Then Stephen told the leaders they were the ones resisting God, just like their ancestors who killed the prophets. They received the law but never actually kept it because keeping it was never just about the rules. It was about submitting to God.

If you think you can manage your own spiritual life through enough discipline and good behavior, you're missing the point. The whole thing was always meant to drive you to say, "I can't do this without God," and that's exactly where God wants you.

### Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. The Old Testament laws were originally meant to express God's relationship with his people, not to burden them. In what areas of your life have you turned something God intended for relationship into a rigid set of rules?
3. The religious leaders centralized God's presence in the temple and made themselves the gatekeepers of who was "in" and who was "out." Have you ever felt like someone else was acting as a gatekeeper between you and God?
4. Moses encountered God at the burning bush but never went back to it, because God's presence traveled with him. Is there a past spiritual experience you keep trying to return to instead of following where God is leading you now?
5. Stephen told the council they were "stiff-necked" because they resisted the Holy Spirit, insisting they could handle things on their own. Where in your daily life do you tend to rely on your own effort instead of asking God for help?

### Significant Quotes from Sermon

"God is not interested in enslaving an enslaved people. He is not looking to free slaves out of Egypt to enslave them under the religiosity of Yahweh. He wants to release them from slavery because he wants them as children."

"If you think you can manage your sin, religion is perfect for you. But when you come to realize you can't manage your sin, Jesus is perfect for you."

"The dwelling place of the Lord is not a place made with brick and mortar. The dwelling place of the Lord is not built by human hands. He has made himself a dwelling place in your hearts. And the only question is, do you actually need him in there?"

"The law is beautiful, and it is beautiful because it points to God's perfect plan for humanity. Only one man was able to fulfill this law, and his name is Jesus."

## Sermon Notes

**Acts 6:8–7:53**

*8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 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.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

## Outline

1. When Wisdom Wins (Acts 6:8–15)
  - a. Stephen, a deacon and table-server, operated in the power of the Holy Spirit with great wonders and signs
  - b. Opposition from synagogue members could not withstand his wisdom and Spirit (v. 10)
  - c. When argument failed, they escalated: false witnesses accused Stephen of speaking against the temple and the law of Moses
  - d. The accusation contained twisted truth; Stephen was proclaiming the gospel, not inciting destruction
  - e. Stephen's face shone like an angel, echoing Moses in God's presence
2. The God They Couldn't Contain (Acts 7:2–50)
  - a. Stephen recounts the patriarchs to show God's presence was never bound to a location
  - b. Abraham was sent from Mesopotamia to the promised land, then his descendants to Egypt; the relationship, not the land, was the point
  - c. God allowed Egyptian bondage to reveal himself as deliverer (vv. 2–16)
  - d. Moses encountered God at the burning bush, a holy place, but never returned to it; the presence of God traveled with Moses, not the location (vv. 30–36)
  - e. Moses performed wonders through God's presence, not through a sacred site
  - f. Stephen draws the parallel: the council honors Moses for following God's mobile presence but condemns Jesus for the same reality on a greater scale
  - g. The tabernacle moved with Israel; Solomon built the temple, yet "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" (vv. 44–50)
  - h. The religious leaders centralized God's presence in the temple and turned covenant relationship into a gatekeeping religion
3. The Accusation Reversed (Acts 7:51–53)
  - a. Stephen turns from defendant to prosecutor
  - b. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit" (v. 51)
  - c. Their fathers persecuted the prophets; they betrayed and murdered the Righteous One
  - d. They received the law but did not keep it (v. 53)
  - e. Resisting the Holy Spirit means insisting "I don't need God; I can do this on my own"
  - f. The religious person manages sin through rules; the gospel says Jesus manages sin through grace

## Notes

There is a moment in the life of every person who reads the Bible, usually somewhere around Leviticus, where the sheer volume of laws and regulations begins to feel suffocating. Rules about food, clothing, purity, festivals, sacrifices. The natural question surfaces: what is the point of all of this? But that question, as understandable as it is, misses the original intent. These laws were never meant to be a burden. They were God's way of telling a people, "You are mine, and you are going to be different from everyone around you." The laws were an expression of relationship, not a replacement for it.

This distinction matters enormously because it sits at the center of one of the most dramatic confrontations in the early church, recorded in Acts 6 and 7. Stephen, a man appointed to serve tables, ends up delivering the longest monologue in the New Testament, and in it he dismantles the very framework that the religious establishment had constructed around the presence of God.

Stephen was a deacon, not an apostle. He was not ordained to preach. He was selected to serve the practical, logistical needs of the growing church. And yet, Acts 6:8 tells us that Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. When members of various synagogues rose up to dispute with him, they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. This is a critical detail. Stephen's authority did not come from his position or his rhetorical training. It came from the presence of God working through him. The wisdom of the Spirit was simply winning the argument.

This created a problem for the religious leaders. When you cannot defeat someone's argument on its merits, you have two choices: concede or escalate. They chose escalation. They secretly instigated men to accuse Stephen of blasphemy, claiming he spoke against Moses and against God. They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, and they dragged Stephen before the council. False witnesses were set up to testify that Stephen claimed Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the temple and change the customs Moses had delivered.

The accusation contained a kernel of truth, but it was twisted. Stephen was not saying the law was worthless or that the temple should be burned to the ground. He was not inciting a riot. He was proclaiming the gospel, which necessarily reframed the role of both the law and the temple. He was saying that the religious establishment had placed too much weight on the structure and not enough on the God the structure was supposed to point toward. And as he stood before the council, his face shone like the face of an angel, an echo of Moses himself standing in the presence of God.

Stephen's defense is not really a defense at all. It is a history lesson, and a pointed one. He walks the council through the story of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, all figures the Pharisees revered. But the thread Stephen pulls through each story is the same: the presence of God was never tied to a single location. It moved with the people.

Abraham was called out of Mesopotamia and into the promised land, but even the promised land was not the point. God sent Abraham's descendants into Egypt, not because the promise had failed, but because God wanted to demonstrate that he was their deliverer. The whole point of the Egyptian captivity and the Exodus was to show Israel that no world power, not even Egypt, could hold them from the promises of God. The relationship was the point. The land was an instrument of it.

Moses encountered God at the burning bush, a place so holy that God told him to remove his sandals. But notice what happened after that encounter. Moses did not build a shrine at the burning bush. He did not return to it when he needed to feel close to God. The burning bush was not useful when Moses stood before Pharaoh demanding the release of God's people. What mattered was that the presence of God was with Moses. The miracles, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, none of it flowed from a sacred location. It flowed from the presence of God moving with and through a person.

Stephen is making a direct parallel. The council would never have argued that Moses was wrong to leave the burning bush behind. They understood that the presence of God traveled with Moses. And yet, they could not accept the same logic applied to the temple. Stephen was saying, in effect, "You revere Moses for following the presence of God wherever it led, and yet you condemn Jesus for doing the same thing on a greater scale." The temple, like the burning bush, served its purpose. But the Savior had come, and he was greater than the temple.

This is where the tension becomes unbearable for the religious leaders. Stephen is not attacking the law. He is not dismissing Moses. He is showing that the entire trajectory of Israel's story points to a God who refuses to be contained. The tabernacle moved with the people through the wilderness. David wanted to build God a house, but it was Solomon who eventually did. And yet, as Stephen quotes from the prophets, "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands. Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?"

The religious establishment had done exactly what God warned against. They had centralized his presence into a building and turned relationship into religion. They had made themselves the gatekeepers, the referees who could declare who was in and who was out based on adherence to their system.

Then Stephen turns. The man on trial becomes the prosecutor. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers

did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

The accusation is devastating because it uses the council's own history against them. They prided themselves on keeping the law, but Stephen points out they never actually kept it. More importantly, the heart of the law was always obedience to the Spirit of God, and they had been resisting the Spirit for generations.

This is not merely a historical problem. It is a human one. The religious impulse to systematize God, to reduce relationship to a set of manageable rules, is perennial. It shows up whenever someone believes they can handle their own righteousness. The person who says, "I read my Bible, I attend church, I follow the commandments, I don't have any major problems," is the person most at risk of missing the point entirely. Because the law was never meant to be manageable. It was meant to be holy, perfect, and ultimately beyond human capacity, so that it would drive people not to self-sufficiency but to dependence on God.

The good news, the actual gospel that Stephen was proclaiming, is that God does not love conditionally based on religious performance. God loves his people, and he sent Jesus to fulfill the law that no one else could fulfill. Jesus lived the perfect life, not just following the letter of the law but embodying its heart. And because he fulfilled it, he opened a new pathway to relationship with God, one based not on human effort but on grace.

The dwelling place of God is no longer a building made with human hands. It is the human heart. And the only real question is whether you will invite him in or insist you can renovate the place yourself. The person who says, "I don't have it together, I can't do this on my own, I need the Lord," is exactly the person God is looking for. Because the kingdom of God is not built by people who have it all figured out. It is built by people who show up each day and say, "Lord, here I am. Use me. I have no idea how, but I am yours."

## Blog

Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin in Acts 6:8–7:53 is the longest speech in the book of Acts. It's also one of the most misunderstood. Readers often treat it as a rambling history lesson, a man buying time before his inevitable execution. But Stephen isn't stalling. He's building a case. And the case he builds doesn't defend himself. It puts his accusers on trial.

The charges against Stephen were serious: blasphemy against Moses and God, speaking against the temple and the law, claiming Jesus of Nazareth would destroy "this place" and change Moses' customs. These charges were distortions, but they weren't random. Stephen had clearly been teaching that Jesus changed everything about how we understand the temple and the Torah. The council wanted to shut that teaching down. So Stephen stood before them, and Luke tells us before he even opens his mouth: "All who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). The reference is unmistakable. Moses' face shone after being in the presence of God (Exodus 34:29–35). The man they are about to condemn for blaspheming Moses looks like Moses. Luke wants us to feel the weight of that irony before the speech begins.

Stephen opens with three words that function as a thesis for everything that follows: "The God of glory." He says, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran" (Acts 7:2). This is not a throwaway introduction. It's the argument. The God of glory, the God whose manifest presence Israel associated with the Jerusalem temple, appeared first in Mesopotamia. Not in the promised land. Not in a temple. Not in any established religious structure. He showed up in a pagan territory and called a man to leave everything behind and follow Him to a place he'd never seen. Abraham obeyed, and yet God "gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length" (7:5). Abraham was a sojourner in the very land God promised him. He held the promise by faith, not by deed of ownership. The God of glory was already on the move, and He expected His people to move with Him.

Stephen continues with Joseph. The patriarchs, Israel's founding fathers, were jealous of their brother and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Then Stephen makes the statement that serves as the hinge of his entire speech: "But God was with him" (7:9). Joseph was rejected, enslaved, falsely accused, and imprisoned, and God was with him in all of it. Not back in Canaan waiting for Joseph to return to the right geography. In Egypt. In a prison. In a pagan court. God's presence was not contingent on Joseph being in the right place. It was contingent on God's own faithfulness. And the rejected brother became the one who saved the family. His brothers had to come back to him for bread.

Stephen doesn't draw the explicit parallel to Jesus here. He doesn't have to. The pattern speaks for itself. The one who is rejected by his own people becomes the one God uses to deliver them. This is not a footnote in Israel's history. It is the opening chapter.

The longest section of Stephen's speech is devoted to Moses, and for good reason. Moses is the figure the council claimed Stephen was blaspheming, so Stephen takes them through Moses' story in painstaking detail, emphasizing what they'd rather forget. Moses went to his own people, "supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand" (7:25). A fellow Israelite thrust him aside with the words, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" (7:27). The deliverer was present. The people were blind to him. Moses fled into exile in Midian.

Forty years later, God appeared to Moses at a burning bush in the Sinai wilderness. He told Moses to remove his sandals because the ground where he stood was holy (7:33). Consider where this happened. Not in the promised land. Not on the temple mount. In the wilderness of Midian. The most sacred commissioning in Israel's history took place outside Canaan, before any temple existed, and God called that dirt "holy ground." Holiness was not a property of a building. It was the presence of the living God, and He showed up wherever He chose.

Stephen then delivers the line that functions as the Christological center of the entire speech. He quotes Moses himself from Deuteronomy 18:15: "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers" (7:37). Moses pointed forward. He told Israel that another was coming who would complete the pattern. To reject that prophet would be to reject Moses. The council charged Stephen with blaspheming Moses, and Stephen shows them that Moses himself prophesied Jesus. To refuse Jesus is to refuse the very Moses they claim to defend.

And what did Israel do while Moses was on Sinai receiving the law from God? They made a golden calf. They "thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt" (7:39). They wanted a god they could see and control, one that would stay where they put it and never demand anything unexpected. They traded the living God for the work of their own hands. Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27 to show that even in the wilderness, even at the founding moment, Israel's heart was divided.

From here Stephen turns to the temple itself. He notes that the Tabernacle was God ordained and portable. It moved with the people through the wilderness and into Canaan. It went wherever God's people went. The structure itself enacted the truth that God accompanies His people. David later asked to build God a dwelling, and Solomon built it. But Stephen immediately quotes Isaiah 66:1-2: "Heaven is my throne, and the

earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" (7:49-50). Stephen is not condemning the temple. He is condemning any theology that reduces the Creator of all things to a resident of a building. The word he uses for "made by hands" (*cheiropoietos*) is the same word the Greek Old Testament uses for idols. Stephen doesn't call the temple an idol. But he places temple worship and idol worship in the same logical category: both attempt to fix the infinite God to a finite location.

Then he stops defending and starts accusing. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (7:51). The word "always" is the most devastating word in the speech. Not sometimes. Not lately. Always. The wilderness generation rejected Moses. The pre-exilic generation killed the prophets. And the present generation, Stephen says, "betrayed and murdered" the Righteous One (7:52). The shift from "your fathers" to "you" is abrupt and intentional. The historical distance collapses. The Sanhedrin isn't the corrected version of their ancestors. They are their continuation. His final sentence is the last turn of the knife: "You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" (7:53). They charged Stephen with speaking against Moses and the law. His closing line is that they are the ones who never obeyed it.

Stephen's argument matters for us today in ways that go beyond ancient history. We live in a moment of significant geopolitical anxiety, particularly as conflict intensifies in the Middle East involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. For many Christians, instability in that region triggers deep concern, sometimes even a kind of theological panic, as though God's purposes might be at risk if certain territories fall into chaos. Stephen's speech speaks directly to that fear. The God of glory has never been tied to a single geography. He appeared in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in Midian, in the wilderness. His presence was with Joseph in a foreign prison and with Moses at a bush in the desert. The land of Israel matters in the biblical story, but God's presence and His purposes have never been contingent on the political stability of any nation or region. He is not a local God, and He never has been.

The question Stephen leaves for every generation is whether we will trust the God who moves or cling to the structures we've built to contain Him. They are not always the same thing. Stephen preached this, and then he embodied it. As they stoned him, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60), echoing his Lord's own words from the cross. The first Christian martyr died praying for his killers. The pattern of the rejected righteous didn't stop with Stephen. It is the shape of the life that follows Jesus, all the way through suffering to the presence of God.