

“The First Christian Martyr”

Acts 7:1-60

Acts: The Unstoppable Gospel

I. Introduction

According to Open Doors, every month around the world:

- 322 Christians are killed for their faith
- 214 churches are destroyed
- 772 believers suffer violent attacks

Since the church began, over 70 million Christians have been martyred for their faith. Persecution is a reality in at least 60 countries right now!

Stephen’s speech is the longest recorded message in the Book of Acts, which signifies the importance Luke attached to it. It covers roughly 1000 years of Jewish history from the call of Abraham to the reign of Solomon. But it’s not a history lecture. It is a defense against the accusations aimed at Stephen (Acts 6:8-15).

II. Stephen’s Defense

Two charges against Stephen: he speaks against this holy place (the temple) and the law of Moses (Acts 6:13-14).

Stephen refutes the charges with three allegations against the religious leaders (James Montgomery Boice):

1. They were resisting the Holy Spirit, as they had always done.
2. They were persecuting and killing the prophets, as they had always done.
3. They were breaking the law of Moses, as they had always done.

He tells the story of Israel in order to tell the religious leaders a story about *themselves*.

III. Four Periods of History

Stephen’s speech is divided into four epochs of Israel’s history, represented by four main characters:

1. Abraham – age of the patriarchs (vv. 2-8)
2. Joseph – captivity in Egypt (vv. 9-19)
3. Moses – Exodus and the wandering in the wilderness (vv. 20-44)
4. David – establishment of the monarchy (vv. 45-50)

IV. Two Main Themes

1. God’s Presence Is Not Confined to a Place.

Example 1 – God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. He migrated from place to place, and never inherited any land in Canaan. Yet God was with him every step of the way.

Example 2 – God appeared to Moses in a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6). Mount Horeb was in Midian (modern-day Egypt). It wasn't in the land of Israel, but it was "holy ground." Even the tabernacle moved around in the wilderness for 40 years, but God was there.

Lesson – "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" (v. 48). God is not restricted to the temple or the land of Israel. Heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool (Isaiah 66:1). He is present everywhere and works anywhere he wishes.

2. Israel's Repeated Rejection of the Word of God.

Stephen proves the Israelites have a long history of rebellion and disobedience: they rejected Moses, made a golden calf, worshiped false gods, killed the prophets, went into exile in Babylon, and murdered the Righteous One – Jesus, the Messiah.

His conclusion is scathing: "As your fathers did, so do you..." (vv. 51-53).

V. Stephen's Death

Why is Jesus standing?

What impact did Stephen's sacrifice have on Saul? "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (v. 60 – See also Acts 22:20.)

From this point on, the focus of the book turns from Jerusalem to the nations... from the Jews to the Gentiles... from the temple to the mission field. F.F. Bruce - Stephen's message signals nothing less than the end of the temple order in Jerusalem.

Three Lessons:

1. Don't repeat Israel's pattern of resisting God's Word.
2. Expect persecution, and trust God for Grace.
3. Understand the temple's true meaning.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. Have you ever experienced persecution for your Christian faith?
2. What did you learn from today's message, and what main point will you take away?
3. How do you think we should pray for fellow believers are being persecuted? Spend some time in prayer.