

The Testimony of Stephen
Acts 7:1-60
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I'm sure, if we try, we all can picture ourselves sitting in our high school history class. It was 4th period for me. That was the place where my interest in Native Societies, the Middle Ages, and the American Revolution went to take a nap.

You might remember Vizzini from *The Princess Bride*, the character who treated the word "Inconceivable!" like it belonged in every sentence. As a teenager, I felt that same dramatic disbelief about history. How did people survive without a Walkman, the latest copy of *Beat Magazine* or cruising around in a cool car? It was inconceivable! Those were the things occupying most of my brain during Mr. Frommeyer's 4th period history class.

Last week, Ellen taught us that God is a master mathematician. He also creates great lessons for us throughout history. In Acts Chapter 7, Stephen delivered a history lesson to the religious leaders, and it was anything but boring. He was standing before the Sanhedrin, the supreme high council of Jewish elders and priests, who held the ultimate legal and religious authority to judge him. Stephen delivered a Spirit-filled masterclass - Israel History 101. He told a sweeping retelling of Israel's story used as his defense against their false accusations. The religious leaders expected a rebuttal. What they received was a mirror. Stephen walked them through their own history to reveal a painful truth: God had repeatedly raised up deliverers, and Israel had repeatedly defied them. It was a tragic pattern that ultimately culminated in their rejection of Jesus.

In this lecture, we'll follow Stephen's trail of clues and uncover the message he tucked inside his history lesson. Along the way, we'll discover how to:

- RECEIVE God's Leading
- RETRACE God's Faithfulness
- RECOGNIZE God's Presence

As one commentator notes, "Luke recorded this speech to show that the disciples of Jesus were carrying on God's plan, while the unbelieving Jews had committed themselves to beliefs and behaviors God had left behind." (The Underground Network)

If you recall from Acts chapter 6, Stephen became impossible to ignore whenever he spoke to the Jewish community. He was performing public miracles and winning every debate with a wisdom his opponents couldn't match. Acts 6:10 tells us, "*But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.*"

The visible power and influence Stephen possessed, not just his words, pushed the leaders to shut him down with these false accusations:

- Blaspheming Moses and God — Acts 6:11
- Speaking against the Temple — Acts 6:13
- Speaking against the Law — Acts 6:14

The high priest asked, "*Are these charges true?*" (7:1) Stephen didn't panic or argue. He responded with Spirit-given peace and strategic respect, saying, "*Brothers and fathers, listen to me!*" (7:2). He honored their leadership by calling them 'fathers' and acknowledged their shared heritage by calling them 'brothers'. This reminded me that when Stephen responded this way, he quietly echoed Jesus; Someone who stood falsely accused and refused to plead His own innocence. In his response to his accusers, Stephen taught Israel's history and preached Jesus as its fulfillment.

Being the mom of two wonderful boys has taught me many skills. I've learned how to see the beauty in a mud puddle. I've come to understand that being fearless doesn't necessarily mean you feel confident and I've learned how to deliver life lessons that are sometimes hard to hear. Over the years, I learned to deliver these lessons with a little finesse. I call it a "truth sandwich." You start with something kind, slip in the tough truth, and then finish with a soft landing. Stephen began by attempting to gently and respectfully connect with the religious leaders. However, his speech skipped the soft landing and went straight for holy-insight. No sandwich here, just the truth served raw.

RECEIVING GOD'S LEADING

Stephen began his defense by exposing their true motives, using the history of Israel to reflect their own hearts. He started with Abraham: "*The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia.*" (7:2) Two truths hit the religious leaders immediately.

First, God met Abraham in the wilderness before the Promise Land was promised and outside of any Temple. Stephen reminded them that God's presence was never confined to geography or religious structures, even though he knew how central both concepts were to the religious leaders.

Second, Abraham wasn't chosen because he was righteous. In fact, he came from an idolatrous family. We read in Joshua 24:2, "*...including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, (they) lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods.*" Abraham didn't go looking for God; God went looking for Abraham.

When God told him, "*Go to the land I will show you*", Abraham went. No negotiation. No analysis. Just obedience. His faith took root the moment he responded to God's voice - just

as ours should. Many of us may not hear an audible voice. However, through our convictions or moments of clarity, we can usually recall exactly when our own faith took root. Like Abraham, we won't always know where God is leading, but we can trust the One doing the leading. The strength of our faith rests not in our ability to see the future, but in God's faithfulness.

Commentator Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones beautifully captures the sudden change in Abraham's life. *"Faith is a response to divine revelation: the phrase 'The God of glory' explains why Abraham obeyed. In an area steeped in dark, silent idolatry, the Creator broke through the darkness with such undeniable majesty that Abraham immediately abandoned his culture and followed."*

Abraham's faith caught fire the moment he heard the voice of God. Yet, there is a special grace reserved for you and me. I'm reminded of Jesus' words to Thomas, *"...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* (John 20:29). Abraham heard the voice of God in real-time, but Jesus considers *our* unseen faith a unique and beautiful blessing.

My belief is that God shapes us through our obedience, not inside our comfort zones and more often well outside them. Stephen wanted the high council to understand that true faith obeys even when the path is unclear. Abraham moved when God spoke. Sadly, the religious leaders refused to move even when God stood before them.

In verses 4-8 Stephen next reminded them of the unfolding promises God gave to Abraham — land, descendants, blessings and the covenant, and a future far bigger than his present reality. God's plan was already in motion long before Israel existed or any Temple was built.

RETRACING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

From Abraham's obedience, Stephen moved us straight into the lives of the patriarchs — the very sons and grandsons who would carry the promise forward, yet stumble in their response to God's chosen leaders. Despite their failures, God remained faithful.

Joseph's life swung between deep valleys and astonishing favor. In fact, those deep valleys were the exact runway to all his astonishing victories. As we learned in Genesis chapters 37 and 41, He went from a beloved son who was betrayed and sold into slavery by his own brothers to an innocently condemned prisoner, and finally to a ruling Prime Minister. Every downward drop was a deliberate step in God's divine script to position Joseph for His purpose.

Verses 9-10 say, *"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt, but God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles."* Stephen was

emphasizing for the religious leaders that human jealousy cannot derail divine purpose. God's plan will always prevail.

Those two words— "but God" — mark the turning point of countless stories where human limitation meets divine intervention. It is estimated that the phrase "but God" is stated in Scripture 40-50 times, depending on the translation you use.

I've had my own "but God" moments. I remember the night of my oldest son's car accident, a moment that by all human logic should have ended very differently. When we were told, "He shouldn't have survived..." my mind went blank. I stopped hearing anything at that point. As I sat there, my faith took over and finished that sentence: *but God was with him*. Alex's life had been heading down a dark path, *but God stepped in*. Considering what could have happened, his injuries were entirely manageable. To me, that was a reminder that God chose not to let Alex's story end that night. Sometimes God intervenes because He is still accomplishing His purposes through a person's life.

God was quietly positioning Joseph for the purpose He had planned all along. Stephen used Joseph's story to illustrate a family pattern: God's chosen servant is often rejected before he is recognized. Joseph's brothers resisted him, but God exalted him. Stephen was subtly showing the Sanhedrin, "You are repeating the same pattern with Jesus."

Stephen then turned to Moses, Israel's most revered leader, to show that the same pattern continued. God sent a deliverer, and Israel failed to recognize him.

In verse 17 Stephen added that as the time approached for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham, the Hebrew population in Egypt exploded. God took seventy individuals and multiplied them into a nation. Pharaoh attempted to crush this growth with brutal cruelty, yet God was already positioning Israel's next deliverer. Moses, a child marked for execution, was raised in Pharaoh's own household! Through this piece of history, Stephen highlights a profound truth: God routinely defies human expectations, working out His plans through the most unlikely people in the most unexpected places.

At forty years old, Moses sensed that his unusual story might be part of God's plan for him. He wanted so badly to live for God and protect his people that he stepped out prematurely in his own strength. He defended a fellow Hebrew, assuming his people would recognize God's hand on him. But Stephen highlighted the tragedy in verse 25: "Moses thought his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not." Moses was relying purely on human reasoning. God would later declare through the prophet Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." Moses thought the time had come for God to use him, but divine timing required forty years in the wilderness. Rejected and exposed, Moses fled to Midian for forty years, a reminder that Israel's resistance to God's deliverers is not new.

Then, in the wilderness, far from temple or nation, God appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush. Stephen pressed this point hard: God is not confined to sacred structures or borders. He meets people where He chooses, and He commissions them for His purpose.

God commissioned Moses to carry out His plans. *"He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness. ...and he received living words to pass on to us."* (verses 36, 38). Yet even though Moses performed wonders and signs, Israel still turned to idols, rejected his leadership, and longed for the gods of Egypt. This point is pivotal to Stephen's defense. He was directly disputing the charge of blasphemy. When he reminded the religious leaders of the 'wonders and signs' Moses performed by God's power for forty years, Stephen was actually validating him. He demonstrated that he didn't disrespect Moses at all; rather, he fully recognized him as God's authentic deliverer. God chose Moses—a broken, stuttering, exiled shepherd who had been rejected by his own people 40 years prior. Stephen revealed to the religious leaders that God's chosen deliverers looked weak, rejected, and unlikely by human standards before they were exalted. By drawing this parallel, Stephen exposed a tragic, repeating pattern: just as their ancestors rejected Moses when he first came to deliver them, the current religious establishment had now rejected and crucified Jesus, the ultimate Deliverer. In both eras, the very people who claimed to guard God's truth were blind to the Savior He sent.

His underlying argument to the Sanhedrin was devastating: "Your ancestors saw the wonders of Moses in the wilderness and still chose rebellion; you have seen the wonders of Jesus in Jerusalem and chose execution." By rejecting the "living words" Moses brought, Israel proved they loved their religious institutions more than they loved God.

Stephen then turned his focus to the ultimate religious monument - the physical Temple itself.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S PRESENCE

We've reached a fast-paced stretch of Stephen's defense. From here, he moved rapidly toward his ultimate, explosive point: God cannot be contained in a building.

Stephen pointed out that David, the greatest king in Israel's history, wanted to build a permanent house for God. Instead, God chose Solomon, David's son, to build the Temple. Immediately after he mentioned Solomon's Temple, Stephen quoted the prophet Isaiah in verse 48: *"The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands..."*

By pointing back to David, Stephen showed that Israel's relationship with God was never dependent on a stationary building. God was perfectly content dwelling in a temporary tent during David's time. The religious leaders had treated the physical Temple building like an idol - as if they could restrain, control, and monopolize the presence of God. Solomon himself

confessed at the Temple's dedication what the religious leaders had forgotten: that the highest heavens cannot contain God, much less a house made by human hands.

Stephen's point was clear: God had never been confined to a building, nor to Abraham's land, nor to Moses' mountain, nor to David's dream and not to Solomon's Temple.

We need to remember; we cannot box God in. Just as the religious leaders tried to confine God to a physical Temple, we often try to confine Him to our church buildings and our two-hour Sunday routines. God will not be institutionalized, and He will not be managed. If our faith only exists within the walls of a sanctuary, we have missed the God who fills the universe.

STEPHEN'S INDICTMENT — WHEN TRUTH CUTS DEEP

As I read through this chapter, I could almost audibly hear the click when Stephen turned from storyteller to prophet. "*You stiff-necked people...*" (vs 51a). Stephen needed something to not only ring true with his accusers, but he also needed to grab their attention, not that they could have possibly been nodding off. In Exodus 32:9 we learned the reference to *stiff-necked* is the exact imagery God used for Israel when they built the golden calf in the wilderness. The term *stiff-necked* comes from agriculture—referring to an ox that stiffens its neck muscles so it cannot be guided by the farmer's yoke. The high council will prove that they refuse to be guided to the truth.

Stephen continued his accusations, "*...with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit.*" (vs 51b) Stephen wasn't just throwing insults; he had delivered a diagnostic breakdown of these religious leaders. He pointed directly to their track record: their ancestors persecuted the prophets, killed the messengers who predicted the coming of the Righteous One, and they had outright betrayed and murdered the Messiah Himself. This was perhaps Stephen's most offensive accusation. He was saying they might bear the physical mark of God's people, but they were spiritually compromised. Their 'uncircumcised ears' meant they were deaf to His voice, while their 'uncircumcised hearts' showed that their deepest desires were completely pagan.

F.F. Bruce from *The Book of the Acts* explained it this way, "*They were proud of their circumcision, but their hearts were out of covenant with God, and their ears were deaf to his word... Stephen's speech is not a defense of himself; it is an indictment of his judges.*"

THE STONING — WHEN HEAVEN OPENED

Truth often stirs up anger, offense and outrage in the hearts of people who hate hearing the truth. That is exactly what happened as the religious leaders exploded.

With Stephen's speech concluded, Luke steps back into the narrator's seat to show us the immediate aftermath. As he wrote verses 54 through 60, the striking parallels to his own Gospel account of the crucifixion must have weighed heavily on his mind and heart. Luke spent 53 verses charting Stephen's defense, exposing how the Sanhedrin continually failed to learn from history. Now, **that** history was repeating itself. Stephen, a devout follower of Jesus, was being treated exactly like his Savior. The high council erupted in a blind rage, but Luke leaves us with an incredible contrast: while they burn with fury, Stephen burns with glory. *"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'"* (vs 55–56). Think about how you welcome an honored guest into your home. You open the door, stand with great anticipation, and greet them warmly. That is exactly what Stephen saw as he looked into heaven. Jesus was standing at the right hand of His Father—taking the posture of a witness, a defender, and a welcoming King.

After reading commentaries and excerpts from Greek / Hebrew translations of this section of scripture, this is what I see in my mind's eye. Picture the scene: a group of Israel's most holy, dignified leaders completely losing their minds. They are so consumed by hatred that they are literally gnashing their teeth at him. This isn't a metaphor—it was a physical reaction of absolute, venomous fury. They cover their ears because the truth was physically painful for them to hear. Then, screaming at the top of their lungs, they throw off all dignity, swarm Stephen, and drag him toward the city gates. It was a terrifying display of what happens when religious pride is completely exposed.

But even in death, Stephen reflected Jesus, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* (Acts 7:59) and *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* (Acts 7:60)

Notice how gently Luke records this violent moment. Instead of focusing on the brutality of the stoning, Luke respectfully describes Stephen's death as simply falling asleep—a peaceful step into eternal rest.

THE MESSAGE FOR US

Stephen's story leaves us with three truths we can carry into our daily lives:

RECEIVE God's Leading. Like Abraham, we must value His voice over our own comfort zones. Step out in obedience even when you cannot see the full roadmap or final destination.

RETRACE God's Faithfulness. Like Joseph, we see that His hand is just as active in the valley of difficulties as it is in the palace of favor. When facing a setback, stop asking "Why is this happening?" and start asking "What is God building in me right now?"

RECOGNIZE God's Presence. God meets us exactly where we are. Look for God outside the church walls. Like Stephen, choose to focus on the glory of Christ rather than the hostility or chaos of the world around you.

In closing, Acts Chapter 7 can be seen as a "faith" reality check for all of us. We pray for God to move in our lives, but the second He asks us to change a habit, step out in faith, or embrace a messy situation, we start acting like toddlers throwing a tantrum at bedtime. We want God's blessing, but only if we get to approve the terms and conditions. We cannot say 'no' to change and 'yes' to God at the same time. We must learn not to push against the direction changes God asks of us. Let's not repeat the mistake of the Sanhedrin, standing rigidly in our comfort while the living God is calling us to move.

Trust God when He calls you into the mess. Like Joseph, we must remember that the God of the palace is the very same God who walks with us through the prison.