

## Acts 7.1 - 8.3

### v. 1 The High Priest's Question: "Are these things so?"

- Spoken blasphemous words against Moses and God (6.11)
- Spoken words against this holy place (i.e. the temple) and the law (6.13)
  - Jesus will destroy this place (temple) and
  - change the customs that Moses delivered (6.14)

### vv.2-8 Abraham

God spoke to him outside land and temple

### vv.9-16 Joseph

Joseph is rejected by his brothers/the Patriarchs because *they are jealous of him* (v.7. Cf. HP and Sadducees in 5.17)

- "but God was with"
- pagan Pharaoh recognised in him the Spirit of God (Gen 41.38-39).

### vv.17-43 Moses

Moses is "beautiful in God's sight", wise and "mighty in his words and deeds" [1<sup>st</sup> 40 years, vv. 17-29]

but rejected by his own people - "became an exile in the land of Midian" (29) even though "God was giving them salvation by his hand" and had appointed him as a ruler and judge over them – because "they did not understand".

[2<sup>nd</sup> 40 years, vv.30-34]

God appears to Moses and sends him back to Egypt to deliver his people

[3<sup>rd</sup> 40 years, vv.35-43]

Moses leads Israel out with signs and wonders in Egypt, the Red Sea and the wilderness

This same Moses prophesied: "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers" (v.37) = Jesus

Hardly "blasphemous words against Moses"!

But, unbelievably after their deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites rejected him again,

- refusing to obey him
- thrusting him aside
- in their hearts they turned to Egypt –
  - making a golden calf,
  - sacrificing to an idol,
  - rejoicing in the works of their hands

“But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven” (cf. Rom 1) – “and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon”

### **vv.44-50 Tabernacle and temple**

“the most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” – as Solomon himself acknowledged (1 Kgs 8.27), and the prophet Isaiah affirmed (Isa 66.1-2) Simply, the temple cannot contain his glory – heaven is his throne, earth his footstool.

### **vv.51-53 Indictment of the Council**

Stiff-necked cf. Exod 33.3, 5

Uncircumcised in heart *and ears*, i.e. not members of God’s covenant people)

1. Always resisting the Holy Spirit cf. Isa 63.10
2. Just like their fathers, who
  - persecuted the prophets
  - killed those who announced the coming of the Righteous One (cf. 3.14; Isa 53.11)
3. They have betrayed and murdered (the Righteous One)
4. Though they received the law as delivered by angels, they did not keep it. NB. A positive assessment of the Law = implicit in this.

Willimon: Stephen’s speech says, in so many words, “You have your nerve to charge that I have violated Moses and his law – look at you! You’re just like your ancestors who rejected Moses.”

Wall: The harsh implication is that the priestly establishment has forged temple practices and manipulated torah observance into a kind of idolatry that keeps Israel in a spiritual wilderness without Jesus, the true medium of sacred worship.

### **vv.54-60 The Stoning of Stephen**

#### Council

- enraged (lit. “their hearts were ripped open” – as in 5.33, but cf. the response of repentance in 2.37)
- ground their teeth at Stephen (Wall: this phrase is used in the Psalter of the angry response of the wicked against God’s servant - Pss 35.16; 37.12; 112.10 and in Matthew’s Gospel of those excluded from the kingdom of heaven – Matt 8.12; 13.42, 50; 22.13; 24.51; 25.30)

## Stephen

- full of the Holy Spirit
- gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God
- said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”
  - “standing” = welcoming and witnessing to Stephen (to the Father) – as he confessed Christ, so Christ confessed him (

## Council

- Cried out with a loud voice
- Stopped their ears (NB. uncircumcised ears! See v.51) – to see a crucified man as the Son of Man, exalted to God’s right hand = blasphemy. It is this ‘sin’, not the others, which proves fatal.
- Rushed together at him
- Cast him out of the city
- Stoned him. Not a judicial sentence but a lynching by enraged mob.
- Called out
  - “Lord Jesus receive my spirit” (cf. Luke 23.46)
  - (falling to his knees) “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (cf. Luke 23.34)
- “Fell asleep”  
FF Bruce: “An unexpectedly beautiful and peaceful description of so brutal a death.”

## Saul

- The witnesses laid down their garments at his feet
- He approved of Stephen’s execution
- Went on to “ravage the church, entering house after house, dragged off men and women and committed the to prison

BUT, according to Saul’s own testimony, Stephen’s martyrdom makes a significant impression upon him (22.20)

## **Consequence (8.1-3):**

- Devout men buried - echoing Jesus’ burial by Joseph of Arimathea
  - On that day arose a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem
  - All except the apostles were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria
-

Some dismissive of Stephen's speech, e.g. GB Shaw, who in his preface to *Androcles and the Lion* called Stephen "a quite intolerable young speaker" and "a tactless and conceited bore". He describes him as having "delivered an oration to the council in which he... inflicted on them a tedious sketch of the history of Israel, with which they were presumably as well acquainted as he." (Quoted by Stott).

Barrett, on the other hand, describes it as "the most important speech in Acts".

### **I. God is spoken of as 'the God of glory' (v.2)**

– an ancient title (Ps 29), his glory being his manifestation of himself

In a neat inclusion, Stephen is said: "saw the glory of God" (v.55)

### **II. God in his glory appeared outside of the temple, indeed outside of Israel:**

- in Mesopotamia (v.2)
- in Egypt (v.9)
- in the land of Midian/wilderness of Mt Sinai (v.30f.) "the place where you are standing is holy ground" (v.33).
- in the wilderness and the lands of the nations they dispossessed (Amon, Edom, Moab)

Stephen demonstrates that the OT never imagined God was imprisoned in a building. On the contrary he was a God on the move...

### **III. God takes the initiative in revelation and redemption**

He: appears, sends, promises, punishes, rescues... judges those who oppress Israel (v.7) and turns away from an unfaithful Israel in sorrow (Wall).

### **IV. God grants wisdom, special insight, and signs and wonders to those he has chosen and called to lead repentant Israel (7.10, 22, 36)**

He did this even before Israel was Israel (Wall)

### **V. He is the God of second chances**

Joseph rejected by his brothers, but God still uses him to deliver them.

Moses rejected by his people (vv.25-29, 35) and has to flee, but God sends him back to deliver and rule them (v.34f.). When they reject him again, then he turns away from them and send them into exile.

- ⇒ Message is that two rejections risks exile, a timely warning to Stephen's audience that further rejection of the Living Temple will result in the loss of the building made by hands, and exile.

Paul is a wonderful example of God's giving of a second chance, which he marvels at.

**VI. His glory and presence and saving work are not tied to the temple, but to those who are his people – in any place or age.**

Stott: Long before there was a holy place, there was a holy people, to whom God had pledged himself.

Wall: Israel's principal identifying mark is neither its fertile land nor its sacred sites <nor its law> but its covenant relationship with God.

**VII. Unbelieving Israel rejects those God sends to deliver them - a stiff-necked people.**

The way this generation has treated Jesus, and now the apostles (and those anointed by the HS like Stephen) who preach and perform signs and wonders (the hallmarks of a prophet of God) is no different from the way their fathers treated Joseph, Moses and the other prophets of old.

The way Israel rejected Moses and the living oracles he delivered (v.39) is paradigmatic of the way Jesus has been treated, and now the apostles and Stephen.

Just as Joseph's brothers were jealous of him, and his God-given gifts and call, so the Jewish religious leaders are jealous of the apostles and Stephen.

Wall: Israel's rejection of Moses and then Stephen illustrate how difficult it is for God's people to hear harsh and honest words that call us to repentance.

**VIII. Stephen is positive about Moses, Law and Temple**

NB. He doesn't respond directly to the specific charges brought against him:

He speaks of Moses with love and awe, and of the Law as given by God/an angel and the law as "living oracles" (v.38)

There is nothing wrong with tent or temple, but what is wrong is thinking God dwells only in them, or can only be worshipped at them. Danger too of worshipping the temple itself – as an idol.

Moses prophesied the coming of the Messiah, Jesus.

**IX. As the flame of the Gospel spreads, so persecution rises:**

- warning (4.21)
- flogging (5.40)
- stoning (7.58)

Progression from ignorance and openness (ch 2) to anger and closedness (chs 6-7).

The same charges levelled against Stephen will one day be levelled against Saul/Paul himself! - when he visits James in Jerusalem:

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place..."(21.28)

**X. Yet pagans (like Pharaoh with Joseph) will be God-fearers**

Points forward to the spread of God's mission to Gentiles – to Samaria and ends of earth (where God's glory has been revealed in past, and patriarchs have been buried)

**XI. Stephen does not seek to defend himself from what he knows are false charges: rather, his concern is to call unfaithful Israel to repentance and faith in her Messiah – the glorified Jesus.**

Suggested Discussion Questions

Please do begin by reading the whole speech.

1. What can we learn from Stephen about how to respond to false charges? How do you respond when falsely accused of something, or slandered? Or if you've never had such an experience, how would you respond if someone attacked you for belonging to WHCC (e.g. for leaving the Anglican Province of NZ over the blessing of same-sex unions)?
2. Can you think of any instances in church history when the church has fallen into the trap of limiting how the Gospel might be shared? E.g. Wesley and English clergy being forbidden to preach outside a church.
3. In what ways might we be in danger of limiting how, where and when God reveals his glory today?
4. Have you any experience – either in your own life or in the life of someone you know – of God giving a second (or even third) chance to turn to him?

5. Why do you think that Christ-like suffering (for the sake of Christ/the Gospel) is such a powerful witness to others, including persecutors?
6. Is there anything else in Stephen's speech which you think is noteworthy or instructive?