

ACTS 6:8 – 7:60

STEPHEN STANDS TRIAL

Last week we saw how the tempest that had once been without the church, had moved into the church. Every which way they turn, the fledgling group of believers were facing resistance. The enemy was throwing everything he had at the church. But Jesus promised that the gates of Hell would come crashing down against the onslaught of the church and the Gospel.

This week, we see that right on the heels of dealing successfully with the internal strife in the church, one of the men chosen to minister to the Hellenistic widows has been targeted and will pay the ultimate price. This man's name is Stephen – Greek/Hellenistic Jew himself. He will face opposition from other Hellenistic Jews who will then take him before the Sanhedrin, the same group before whom Peter and the others were taken.

Please pay attention to the names of those Stephen brings up in his answer to the charges levied against him. Reading the story, at first you may not think Stephen does a good job of answering his accusers, but he actually does a splendid job, he just attacks the charges in a different way than we might think is best. He will, in a round-about way, plead innocent to all but one of the charges. And it is in looking carefully at his defense that we see the real message he wants to get across to his accusers. I believe that he knew the outcome of the trial before he even began to speak. And even in this, he showed a peace about him as well as the grace to intercede for those killing him, just as Jesus did.

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom

and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous 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 change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Stephen had been ministering among his fellow Hellenistic Jews and was full of the power of the Holy Spirit. This brought him to the attention of a group of men from a particular synagogue. If you look at where they were from, you will see that they were not from Jerusalem, but from outlying Greek centers and cities which had large Jewish populations. Therefore, he is being confronted by people from his own Hellenistic culture. He was chosen to minister in that culture, and he has now been confronted by leaders from a synagogue of that culture. But they were not able to deal with his reasoning and theology. They simply had no answer for his arguments. Therefore, they took him up the chain of command, to the Sanhedrin. The charges leveled against him are a mixture of the Gospel of the kingdom as well as some trumped up charges. If you look at verse 15, you will see that he appeared to them to have the face of an angel. This is meant to show that he was anointed, and the Spirit was on him, as well as showing that he was at peace throughout the whole thing.

But how will he respond to the charges? He answers, but he does not come straight out in his own defense. Let's look carefully at what he says. You may see that he doesn't speak of the resurrection at all. Hmmm.?

1 Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

2 And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' 4 Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. 5 And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. 6 But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 7 'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.' 8 Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.

The Patriarchs in Egypt

9 "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. 11 Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. 13 And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. 15 So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. 16 And they were

carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.

Leaning tower of Pisa – building on a bad foundation. The Sanhedrin need to rethink they're foundation, or at least the way they were looking at it.

He begins with "The God of glory!" This tells them right away that he is working with the same God they claim to serve, (nullifying the charge of blasphemy) and then quickly launches into the story of Abraham. If you don't start, at least as far back as Abraham, then you won't understand who Jesus is and why he came. For the Jews, this was foundational. But as we shall see, their view of their own history was a bit skewed. Instead of taking the charges head – on, he outflanks his accusers, hitting thins from a different angle. This was a common way of doing things both in the OT and in the secular world of their day.

He is saying, "Tell the story this way, and you will see what I am saying about Jesus."

The story of Abraham comes on the heels of the Tower of Babel incident. The first 11 chapters of Genesis show a world that had been in a downward spiral from Genesis 3 through 11. Abraham was chosen out of (geographically speaking) Mesopotamia, the heart of the rebellion at Babel. He had no land of his own, but God promised to give his offspring the land on which he walked, upon entering the Promised Land. That land was also God's inheritance. From there, God would make a nation that would eventually take back the whole earth, which had been given over to rebellious "sons of god." (Dt. 32 and Ps. 82, et al.) This was all a way of marking Abraham out as a child of the one true God, YHWH. This was foundational to the Jews and there is no way they can argue against it. It also sets the stage for the next part of

his argument – the exodus. This was another foundational part of their history, faith and culture.

Now, let's look at how Stephen builds his argument in order to get across his point. Don't forget the mention of Joseph in the verses we just read.

17 “But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt 18 till another king arose who did not know Joseph. 19 This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live. 20 At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months. 21 But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. 22 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.

23 “Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. 25 For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. 26 And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?’ 27 But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?’ 29 Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.

30 “And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. 31 When Moses saw it, he marveled at the

sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, 32 saying, 'I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and dared not look. 33 'Then the Lord said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. 34 I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt." '

35 "This Moses whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

Once again, don't forget Joseph, he is a hyperlink that will build on Stephen's argument as he uses Moses to prove a point. Also remember that Moses looms larger than any other figure in the OT, other than YHWH Himself. He, Moses, is the one who gave them the Law and brought them out of bondage from Egypt. He is the hero of heroes as far as they're concerned. Stephen has been accused of going soft on the Law and Moses, so he tells the story of Moses in such a way as to highlight 3 things in particular.

1. Moses was raised up by God in such a way, having eventually been trained in all the wisdom of Egypt that he was especially prepared to be used by God so as to be able to deliver Israel from Egypt. He was, through God's providence the one and only one who could carry out God's plan.
2. Though Moses was the one God chose, he was rejected by his own people, when asked, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us?" He was the rejected rescuer who had to

leave town for a while until God was ready to this new thing, we call the exodus.

3. Moses was the one to whom and through whom, the God of glory, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob revealed himself in a new way! He is showing them that Jesus is not a different God from the one they have always worshipped, but is the same God, doing things in a new and fresh way in order to deliver His people according to the ancient promises. Stephen then goes on to mention the burning bush, where Heaven and earth “overlap” and create what was known as sacred space. To the Jew, the Temple, and even more so, the Holy of Holies was the sacred space where Heaven and earth came together. Stephen will address that in a minute, but for now he is showing them something in a round-about way. Stephen has never spoken against Moses, rather they have failed to see that Jesus is doing the same thing as Moses. He has been chosen for this specific time by God to deliver His people and has been rejected by them. God is attempting to reveal Himself to them in a new way, just as He did to Moses in the burning bush, but they won't hear it. And what about Joseph? He was also the man chosen and used by God after having been rejected by his brothers. He was the rejected rescuer himself. Can you see the connection? And now Stephen is about to send things into a crescendo that leads to his death. Let's see how he does this.

37 “This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.’

38 “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, 39 whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron,

'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'* 41 *And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. 42 Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets:

'Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

43 You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.'

Stephen mentions how Moses said there would come a prophet like him to whom they need to listen. That would be Jesus. ("Who do they say I am?" Jesus asking at Caesarea Phillipi.)

Stephen goes on to agree to Moses' greatness, but then turns the story to the idolatry and lack of faith Israel had in the wilderness. See the star language in v. 43.

Idolatry is their biggest problem here! Stephen's account of their history has gone from being a friendly point they have in common to an indictment! Now look at where Stephen focuses their idolatry!

44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, 45 which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46

who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built Him a house.

48 “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:

***49 ‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool.***

***What house will you build for Me? says the Lord,
Or what is the place of My rest?***

50 Has My hand not made all these things?’

***51 “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!
You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, 53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”***

Stephen accuses them of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised in their hearts, resisting the Holy Spirit. How are they doing this? Look at what he says about the temple. He brings the temple, their greatest treasure to the fore and then shows them that God doesn't live in a temple made with hands. And even if it was built, God created all that it was built of anyway. This drives them over the edge. Their temple has become an idol that does not allow them to see the new thing God is doing in their midst. Jesus is like Moses and Joseph, the rejected rescuer, chosen by YHWH to deliver His people, but they won't budge from what they know. Stephen tells them that although they had the Law given to them by angels, they have not truly kept it. And they are now doing the same thing their forefathers did – they kill those sent to them by God to instruct them.

***49 ‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool.***

What house will you build for Me? says the Lord,

Or what is the place of My rest?

This is Isa. 66:1,2.

50 Has My hand not made all these things?’

This is Ps. 102:25. Both of these sections of scripture mention the inclusion of the Gentiles – a fresh new thing. And if God doesn’t dwell in temples made with hands, where does He dwell? He now dwells in the heart of the believer! Paul will later say that we are the Temple!

To quote Dragline in Cool Hand Luke, “There’s a whole lot of world shakin’ going on, a whole lot of world shakin’!”

God has and is revealing Himself in a fresh and brand-new way. But they can’t see it because of their tradition which has become idolatry.

54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

So, what do you do when you can’t win the argument? You resort to violence. They killed him, stoning him to death. But even as he

died, he was interceding for them. He showed the same love for the lost that Jesus did.

There are burning bushes, or the equivalent all over the place in our lives, if we know where to look. And maybe it is that we have allowed some of our own traditions to become idols, hindering us from seeing what God wants to do and how He wants to move in a fresh, new way, in our lives. Perhaps we need to see the story told a little differently and see where we are within that story. Maybe we will then see the burning bush that is right in front of each of us.