

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

Chapter Seven

Steven’s Sermon and Sacrifice

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This chapter is such a wonderful abstract of the work of God in choosing His people and the work that He did with His people that I strongly recommend that we just read it all the way through at least twice before we begin any comments about it. It shows clearly that God is at work in people in all parts of the world. Abraham was chosen before he came to Haran. Joseph being set apart for service to the Lord was initiated by his being sold into slavery by his brothers. The high priest was most certainly Caiaphas, the same man who so served at the trial of Jesus for he remained in office until A.D. 36. How about this episode for a repeat? We have the same high priest and the same false charges.

Acts 7:1 “And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

At any such trial the man being accused had the right to state his appeal and so the high priest opened this chapter with the question that allowed Stephen to speak. We see however that Stephen did not present a testimony that was aimed at appealing his charges but rather Stephen became the first recorded apologist for the Christian faith. [An apologist is someone who is defending the topic, in this case the Christian faith.]

Acts 7:2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, Acts 7:3 and said to him, ' Depart from your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.'

Acts 7:4 "Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, God removed him into this country in which you are now living.

Acts 7:5 "And He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground; and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his offspring after him.

Acts 7:6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.

Acts 7:7 "'And whatever nation to which they shall be in bondage I Myself will judge,' said God, 'and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.'

Acts 7:8 "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.”

Stephen begins this trail of God choosing and interacting with His chosen people with God choosing Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia. It is interesting to me that the written language is presumed to have started in this area about 3000 BC so that Abraham

would have been familiar with writing and he could have even begun keeping records of his interacting with the Lord at this time. [Of course this possible record keeping of Abraham is just conjecture on my part but it could be true.] Note that God told Abraham to leave his home land and go to a land of which he was not familiar. Stephen seems to be making the point that God is everywhere and that He appeared to Abraham first in a Gentile land. God told him to leave his homeland and his relatives and to go to a land that He would show him. Abraham did as God commanded but he did take with him his father. Abraham lived in Haran until his father died and then he came into the land now occupied by the Jews. God made no promise of possession of land to Abraham but Abraham trusted God completely so that God promised a land to his offspring even before Abraham had a child. God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision and when Isaac was eight days old Abraham had him circumcised. This sign then was transmitted from Isaac to Jacob and from Jacob to his twelve sons as the twelve tribes of Israel.

Acts 7:9 “And the patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt.

And yet God was with him,

Acts 7:10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

Acts 7:11 "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it; and our fathers could find no food.

Acts 7:12 "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time.

Acts 7:13 "And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.”

Acts 7:14 "And Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.

Acts 7:15 "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there passed away, he and our fathers.

Acts 7:16 "And from there they were removed to Shechem, and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

Stephen then traces the ancestors of the Jewish faith from Canaan into Egypt. Stephen tells the trial council how God prepared events before the tribes were sent into Egypt by His work with the life of Joseph. Joseph's brothers meant harm to Joseph but God meant the events to lead to a time when the entire nation could be saved during a time of famine. God is indeed sovereign over all events of time. So after the second visit of Joseph's brothers to Egypt, Joseph revealed to them who he was and they then had to recognize Joseph as their savior in this worldly situation. What a turn of events this must have been as the brothers remembered all that they had done to Joseph and now because of the hand of God the family would be saved by the one that they sold into slavery. Stephen used the number 75 as the total number of people who now went into Egypt to be saved from the famine. In Egypt the elders died but they were buried in the land of promise where Abraham and Isaac were already buried. Their burial in the land of

promise was a sign that they had all died in faith knowing that God would provide them this land.

Acts 7:17 “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,

Acts 7:18 until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.

Acts 7:19 "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race, and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.

Now Stephen gives us a recounting of the time of the tribes in Egypt. Boy, did they indeed multiply! Seventy five came in and we will see that millions go out! But there came a time of a new king of Egypt who was not intimately familiar with Joseph. This king refused to recognize the rank given to Joseph and he then began a fierce treatment of the refugees. This king became afraid of the numbers of the people and of their ability to work. We have to go back to Exodus to read the details of these events for Stephen is just giving a broad overview of events. But the time came during which the tribes were living in Egypt that the king mandated that all male children would be killed either by the midwives or by the parents leaving them out to die. But of course this plan was not going to work because God had other plans.

Acts 7:20 "And it was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God; and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.

Acts 7:21 "And after he had been exposed, Pharaoh's daughter took him away, and nurtured him as her own son.

Acts 7:22 "And Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.

Moses was not put out to die but his parents kept him at home for three months. During this time he would have been circumcised so that anyone looking closely would know that he was indeed a Jew. But when he became old enough to be heard (we parents know that the three-month old can make a pretty loud noise!) and noticed his parents made a plan to finally obey the king and to keep him safe. His mother put him into a basket, placed him into the water near where the Pharaoh's daughter bathed, and had his sister watch to see what happened. From the story in Exodus we know that by God's providence Pharaoh's daughter did indeed see him, take him out of the water, choose his mother (again by the providence of God!) to nurture him and then took him as her own son. What a tremendous story! Notice that since he had been circumcised, Pharaoh's daughter would have known that he was a Jewish baby and so chose a Jewish woman to take care of him initially.

It is fascinating to me that Pharaoh took away one Jew (Joseph) and God replaced him with another Jew (Moses). Moses then received the best education available for a person during this time period. Moses distinguished himself as a man of power and words. Here Stephen does not paint the total picture of how distinguished this man was but other historians have given us considerably more details about Moses' abilities. A Hellenistic

Jew, Eupolemus, describes Moses as the inventor of the alphabetic writing. Moses was evidently a forceful and persuasive speaker as recorded by Josephus. Moses seems to have been proficient in geometry, arithmetic, poetry, music, philosophy, astrology, and other branches of learning. Josephus even describes him as being unique in wisdom, stature, and beauty. Perhaps Moses was even a bit stuck up on himself? It would be hard for someone with his background, talents, and education to be terribly humble!

Acts 7:23 "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.

Acts 7:24 "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.

Acts 7:25 "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand.

Acts 7:26 "And on the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?'

Acts 7:27 "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?'

Acts 7:28 'You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?'

Acts 7:29 "And at this remark Moses fled, and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons."

Stephen gives the age of Moses as 40 when he began to act out on his own to try to help his kinsmen (remember that he had been circumcised so that he knew he was a Jew). It does indeed seem that Moses at this time tried to take matters into his own hands to take care of his brethren but that was not God's plan at this time. Moses defended his brothers and killed an Egyptian. But when he came back the next day to try to break up a disturbance among the Jews they did not recognize him as their new leader. Indeed they must have just seen him as a member of the king's family. The book of Hebrews tells us that Moses did reject his royal family and choose to be recognized as one of God's people.

Heb 11:24 "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;

Heb 11:25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin;

Heb 11:26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."

But since the Jewish people did not accept Moses as their leader at this time, Moses chose to leave his royal family and go into the desert, where he had two sons.

Acts 7:30 "And after forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush.

Acts 7:31 "And when Moses saw it, he began to marvel at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:

Acts 7:32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.' And Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.

Acts 7:33 "But the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'"

But when God's time was perfect, He appeared to Moses in the form of a burning, but not burning up, bush. God telling Moses that this was holy ground was perhaps another way for Stephen to tell the people that God ruled everywhere since this appearance was on Gentile land just as was the appearance of God to Abraham. Moses' reaction to the presence of God is the same as should be true of everyone who comes into the presence of Holy God. Such was the reaction of John when he came into the presence of the Lord:

Rev 1:17 "And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,"

Acts 7:34 "I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt, and have heard their groans, and I have come down to deliver them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'

Acts 7:35 "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.

Acts 7:36 "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

Stephen now briefly relates how Moses led God's people out of Egypt even after the people had rejected him at first. We all know the many events that led up to the people finally being allowed to leave and how God worked many miracles under the leadership of Moses as he led the people in the wilderness for forty years.

Acts 7:37 "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.'

Acts 7:38 "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

Acts 7:39 "And our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt,

Acts 7:40 saying to Aaron, ' Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt-- we do not know what happened to him.'

Acts 7:41 "And at that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands."

Stephen then briefly narrates the story of other events in the life of Moses with God's people as he led them. The story is not a pleasant one for the people were still not submitted to God and thus not submitted to God's chosen leader. It is rather hard for us to understand how the people would rather go back to Egypt and be slaves rather than live in the wilderness fed by God. However is it really hard for us to understand? Should

we begin to think about what has happened to our country as we started out as a people wanting to be led by God but then transforming our seminaries like Princeton into universities where mainly a man-based education is taught? Just as the people asked Aaron for false gods, many church members today ask their leaders for man-centered churches! Then they wanted gold idols and today they want rock music and other entertainment so that they can be amused! How many of our churches have been transformed from a Christ-centered teaching into a secular religion? We also have turned from God to slavery to sin. I think that it is easy to understand what went on in the minds of those people as they asked for idols that they could see and feel rather than to worship God who is spirit but has revealed Himself by all creation (see chapter one of Romans). These people rejoiced in the work of their hands and so do we today!

Acts 7:42 "But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel?"

Acts 7:43 'You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship them. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.'

Acts 7:44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.

Of course God sees the hearts of people and He destroyed those who did not believe:

Jude 1:5 "Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe."

1Cor 10:5 "Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness."

How long will God put up with our nation? Of course I do not know but I do know that we children of God need to put our faith in Him first and heal our visible churches. I do believe that God has already turned away from many "churches" today.

Acts 7:45 "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David.

Acts 7:46 "And David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

Acts 7:47 "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.

Acts 7:48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

Acts 7:49 'Heaven is My throne, And earth is the footstool of My feet; What kind of house will you build for Me?' says the Lord; ' Or what place is there for My repose?"

Acts 7:50 'Was it not My hand which made all these things?'"

Stephen again covers a lot of time to briefly make his point about how God chose His people and led them into the Promised Land. Even though David sinned, he was blessed by God but not allowed to build a temple for God. David's son Solomon did build a house for God but Stephen is quick to say that no man-made structure could contain God. God made everything. How could those whom God made make a house for God? He is quoting now from Isaiah 66:1-2.

Isaiah 66:1 "Thus says the Lord, "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?"
Isaiah 66:2 "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."

Look up into the night sky at all the stars and at the huge distances represented by those stars. Look on the web at some telescope pictures of some of the magnificent creations of God and then ask yourself if you think that puny man can build a temple for God. How quickly we can lose the understanding that we sometimes begin to have of the magnificence of God! We are something only because God loves us. In fact the temple of God is made by God:

1Cor 3:16 "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"

1Cor 6:19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"

John 14:23 "Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."

We need to carefully look at Isaiah 66:2 to see who it is that God deems worthy of looking upon and it is not those who proclaim to build a house for God.

Acts 7:51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

Acts 7:52 "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;

Acts 7:53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it. ""

Stephen has been building up to this indictment throughout his speech and now he digs in the sword. He makes the discussion personal to these specific people for indeed they are acting just like their predecessors. Just as Stephen knew the writings of the prophets so also we have them available and we can read so many times when the prophets made such accusations against the people. But now Stephen is making these accusations against those leaders of the religion who were acting as his judge. These people were

certainly not the people that God would look upon as we saw above in Isaiah 66: *"But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."*

Acts 7:54 "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him."

This reaction is no surprise for it is the same reaction the people had shown to the prophets of God throughout history and then finally to the Lord Jesus Himself.

Acts 7:55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;

Acts 7:56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Surely their reaction was no surprise to Stephen either but he had been prepared by God and he was then allowed to see the glory of God and even to see Jesus standing at the right hand of God (indicating the judgment seat). It is very significant that Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He was ready to serve as the defense council for Stephen!

1John 2:1 "My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;"

Rom 8:33 "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies;"

Stephen then told everyone what he saw. The world reacts the same today. The visible church members tell the world about the truth of Jesus and the world reacts with violence at the speakers.

Acts 7:57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse.

Acts 7:58 And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 7:59 And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Acts 7:60 And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep".

Their covering of their ears is symbolic of the fact that they could not hear the truth that was being told them. I remember the picture of the three monkeys: one with his ears covered, one with his eyes covered, and one with his mouth covered. They could not bear to hear the truth and they showed that God had not opened their ears and eyes by symbolically covering them. They took him outside of the city for fear of being seen by the people who had begun to believe the apostles and for the same reason that they quietly took Stephen to the court. They killed him in a terrible way even as Stephen called out for the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit. Note that Jesus asked for God to

receive His spirit so that we have evidence here for a high Christology in the early church. His last action was the same as that of our Lord Jesus as he asked his Lord to not hold the sin against them. What a way to go home!

Luke 23:34 "But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves."

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