

Acts 7 – Stephen acts in faith the church is built on the blood of martyrs

Act 7:1-8 *Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 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, and said to him, 'GET OUT OF YOUR COUNTRY AND FROM YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME TO A LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' 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. 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. 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. '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.' 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.*

This first section of the message takes us back to the beginning of the Hebrew nation. It is not exactly clear why Abraham's history is dealt with at such length, unless it is:

1. To show Stephen's familiarity with and love for the nation of Israel.
2. To lead up to the story of Joseph and Moses, both types of the rejection of Christ.
3. To show that Abraham worshiped God acceptably even though his worship was not confined to a specific locality. (Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple—"this holy place.")

The salient points in Abraham's biography are:

1. His call by God in Mesopotamia (vv. 2, 3).
2. His journey to Haran, then to Canaan (v. 4).
3. God's promise of the land to Abraham, though the patriarch himself was not given any of it—as was proved by his purchase of the cave of Machpelah as a burial place (v. 5). The fulfillment of that promise is still future (Heb_11:13-40).
4. God's prediction of Israel's bondage in Egypt and of eventual deliverance (vv. 6, 7). Both parts of this prediction were accomplished by men who had been rejected by the nation: Joseph (vv. 9-19); Moses (vv. 20-36). The four hundred years mentioned in verse 6 and in Gen_15:13 refer to the time when the Jewish people were afflicted in Egypt. The four hundred and thirty years cited in Exo_12:40 and Gal_3:17 cover the period from the arrival of Jacob and his family in Egypt to the Exodus and the giving of the law. The Israelites were not persecuted during their first thirty years in Egypt; in fact, they were treated quite royally.
5. The covenant of circumcision (v. 8a).
6. The birth of Isaac, then Jacob, then the twelve patriarchs (v. 8b). This, of course, brings the history up to Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons. - McGee

Act 7:9-14 *"And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him 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. Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob*

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heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people.

Act 7:15-19 So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. 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. "But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt till another king arose who did not know Joseph. This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live.

Of all the types of Christ in the OT, Joseph is one of the clearest and most precious, although he is never specifically stated to be. Surely the Jews of Stephen's day must have felt the sharp arrows of conviction as they heard Stephen review the steps of Joseph's career, then remembered what they had done to Jesus of Nazareth!

1. Joseph sold into Egypt by his brothers (v. 9).
2. The rejected one raised to power and glory in Egypt (v. 10).
3. Joseph's brothers driven to Egypt by famine, but failed to recognize their brother (vv. 11, 12).
4. The second time Joseph was made known to them. Then the rejected one became the savior of his family (vv. 13, 14). Note: There seems to be a contradiction between the seventy-five souls given in verse 14 and the seventy mentioned in Gen_46:27. Stephen followed the Greek translation of Gen_46:27 and Exo_1:5, which has seventy-five. The Hebrew text has seventy, indicating nothing more serious than a different way of numbering Jacob's family.
5. The death of the patriarchs, and their burial in the land of Canaan (vv. 15, 16). Another difficulty appears in this verse. Here it says that Abraham bought a burial place from Hamor. Gen_23:16-17 says that Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah in Hebron from the sons of Heth. Jacob bought land in Shechem from the children of Hamor (Gen_33:19). There are several possibilities: (1) Abraham may have bought land in Shechem as well as in Hebron. Later Jacob could have repurchased the plot in Shechem. (2) Stephen could have used Abraham's name for Abraham's descendant, Jacob. (3) Stephen may have condensed the purchases by Abraham and Jacob into one for brevity.
6. The growth of Jacob's family in Egypt and their slavery after Joseph's death (vv. 17-19). This, of course, prepares us for the next step in Stephen's argument—the treatment which Moses received at the hands of his people. – McGee

Act 7:20-25 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. But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds. "Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand.

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Act 7:26-28 *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?' But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE OVER US? DO YOU WANT TO KILL ME AS YOU DID THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY?'*

Act 7:29-34 *Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons. "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. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, 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. 'Then the LORD said to him, "TAKE YOUR SANDALS OFF YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE WHERE YOU STAND IS HOLY GROUND. 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." '*

Act 7:35-37 *"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. 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. "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.'*

Act 7:38-43 *"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, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, 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.' And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. 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? 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.'*

7:20-43 Stephen is showing with incisive boldness that the Jewish people were guilty on at least two previous occasions of rejecting saviors whom God had raised up to deliver them. His second proof is Moses.

Stephen had been charged with speaking blasphemous words against Moses (Act_6:11). He proves that the nation of Israel is the guilty party—guilty of refusing this man of God's choice.

Stephen reviews the life of Moses, as follows:

1. Birth, early life, and education in Egypt (vv. 20-22). The phrase, mighty in words, may refer to his writings, since he disclaimed being eloquent (Exo_4:10).
2. His first rejection by his brethren when he defended one of them against an Egyptian (vv. 23-28). Note verse 25! How it reminds us of Christ's rejection by His own!

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3. His exile in the land of Midian (v. 29).
4. God's appearance to him in the burning bush, sending him back to Egypt to deliver his people (vv. 30-35).
5. He became the savior of the nation (v. 36).
6. His prophecy concerning the coming Messiah (v. 37). (Like me means “as He raised me.”)
7. His role as law-giver to the congregation in the wilderness (v. 38).
8. Moses rejected a second time by the people, as they worshiped the golden calf (vv. 39-41). The idolatry of Israel is elaborated in verses 42 and 43. While professing to offer ... sacrifices to the Lord, the people took up the tabernacle of Moloch, one of the most loathsome of all ancient forms of idolatry, and bowed to Remphan, a stellar deity. For this sin God warned that they would be carried off into Babylonian captivity. In verses 42 and 43 Stephen quotes from the Septuagint version of Amo_5:25-27. That is why the captivity is said to be beyond Babylon instead of “beyond Damascus.” Both are, of course, true.

History repeats itself. In every generation we can find the same pattern. People are the same. When confronted with God's message, they do not understand (25). When urged to live at peace, they refuse to listen (27). When given a God-sent deliverer, they reject him (39). When rescued from an evil situation, they prefer useless idols to the merciful God (41). Such is human nature—rebellious, ungrateful, foolish. God is the same. The God who spoke to Moses was the same God who had spoken to his ancestors (32). This God hears when people are troubled (34). He comes to deliver (34). He leads His people from death to life (36). He surrenders to their own desires those who willfully reject Him (42). Such is our great God—merciful, powerful, holy. He is always the same, whatever happens (Mal_3:6). For Stephen's hearers it was a warning not to trifle with God. It is also an assurance that every promise of God stands firm forever. - McGee

Act 7:44-46 "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, 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, who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.

Stephen had been charged with speaking against the temple. He replies by going back to the days when Israel had the tabernacle (tent) of witness in the wilderness. It was during this same time that the people were also worshiping the host of heaven. When Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan, and the heathen inhabitants were expelled, the tabernacle was brought into the land and continued until the days of David. The fathers had asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob and had thus found favor before God. – McGee

Act 7:47-50 But Solomon built Him a house. "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: '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? HAS MY HAND NOT MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

David's desire to build the temple was not granted, but Solomon built Him a house.

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Although the temple was the dwelling place of God among His people, God was not confined to that building. Solomon stated this clearly when the temple was dedicated (1Ki_8:27). Also Isaiah had warned the people that buildings are not what really count with God but rather the moral and spiritual condition of men's lives (Isa_66:1-2). He looks for a broken and contrite heart, for a man who trembles at His word.
– McGee

Act 7:51-53 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 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, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

The Jewish leaders had charged Stephen with speaking against the law. He now answers the accusation with a brief, finely worded denunciation.

It was they who were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. "He rebukes them, not as the Israel of God, but as stubborn and uncircumcised Gentiles in heart and ears." They were sons of their fathers in habitually resisting the Holy Spirit. Their fathers had persecuted the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ. Now they had betrayed and murdered this Just One. They were the people who had failed to keep the law—the very people to whom it was given by the direction of angels.

Nothing more needed to be said! Indeed, nothing more could be said! They had sought to put Stephen on the defensive. But he became the prosecutor and they the guilty defendants. His message was one of God's final words to the Jewish nation before the gospel started moving out to the Gentiles. – McGee

Act 7:54-60 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 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, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 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. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 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.

As soon as Stephen bore public testimony to seeing the heavens opened, the mob refused to listen to him further; they cried fiercely, charged upon him, dragged him outside the city walls and stoned him.

As if incidentally, the Spirit records the name of a young man who stood guard over the clothes of the perspiring executioners. The name was Saul. It is as if the Spirit would say to us, "Remember that name. You will hear it again!"

Stephen's death resembled that of our Lord:

1. He prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59). Jesus had prayed, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luk_23:46).
2. He prayed, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (v. 60). Jesus had prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luk_23:34).

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Does it not suggest that through occupation with the Lord, Stephen had been “transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2Co_3:18)?

Then, having prayed, he fell asleep. When the word “sleep” is used in connection with death in the NT, it refers to the body, not the soul. The believer's soul goes to be with Christ at the time of death (2Co_5:8); the body is pictured as sleeping.

Ordinarily the Jews were not allowed to carry out the death penalty; this was reserved for their Roman overlords (Joh_18:31 b). But the Romans seem to have made an exception when the temple was threatened. Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple, and though the charge was unfounded, he was executed by the Jews. The Lord Jesus had been accused of threatening to destroy the temple (Mar_14:58), but the testimony of the witnesses conflicted. - McGee