

Who's Listening?

Stephen Preaches His Final Sermon

The Empowered Church Series - Part 13

Acts 7:1-8:3

4/22/23-4/23/23

Introduction

- **Recap**
 - **A Great Man Arrested** – The last time we were together we talked about this extraordinary man in the church named Stephen. The Bible describes him as full of wisdom, power and the Holy Spirit. He did miracles, signs and wonders and had the face like an angel. He was a tremendous example of power and peace mixed together. At some point some traditional Jewish leaders began to argue with him about the gospel. When things didn't go well for them, they had him arrested on bogus charges and brought him before the Jewish Supreme Court.
 - **The Charges** – Since they couldn't charge him with what he was really saying, they charged Stephen with **4 false accusations**: 1.) Blasphemy against **Moses**; 2.) Blasphemy against **God**; 3.) speaking against the **Jewish Temple**; 4.) speaking against the **Mosaic Law**.
 - **It's His turn** – The bad team presented their arguments and now it's his turn to explain his side. Thankfully their judicial system allowed for him to present his case before judgment was rendered. They may not listen to him or take what he says into consideration but he was able to share it. So, now **he's on**.
 - **Intentional Witnesses** – We need to remember that Jesus told His followers that they would be arrested and brought before the highest officials for one specific purpose: They would be witnesses to who Jesus is and what He did. This is **a grand set up by God to tell the Jewish leaders...AGAIN...the truth of the Gospel**. At this point in the story we don't know what Stephen is going to say or how they are going to react, but it's go time. This is Stephen's assignment by God. How will he do?
 - **How would you do?** – Let's say that you were living abroad internationally in a middle eastern nation that was ardently and **RADICALLY Islamic**. Let's say that they heard you sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and found it a direct offense to their god Allah. They bring you in on charges of **blasphemy against Allah and speaking against Islam**. You are all alone in a dark prison and are brought out to their council. **There's no pastor with you**, no family, no friends, it's all on you. They want to know what you said, why you said it and whether or not you are truly against them or not. **The penalty of blasphemy against Allah is death, so this is your one shot. What are you going to say?** [leave room to consider].

Be READY for God's CALL

Lesson

- **Changing the Narrative**
 - **Stephen Brings His Rebuttal**

- **Ac 7:1–2a** - “And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me...”
 - **The high priest** – Caiphas.¹ The same guy who led the council against Jesus Christ and against the apostles.
 - **Are these things so?** – This is Stephen’s chance to tell his side of the story. Their accusations are pointed and they are waiting for him to defend himself. He’s on.
 - **Brothers and fathers** – This is a respectful way of saying...fellow Jews. Stephen is Jewish. Stephen grew up learning and knowing what they do. He’s not an outsider, he is one of them. He is kind enough to give them terms of honor. Brother would be his age or younger, and father would be those older than him and leaders.
 - **Uncommon Decency** – Pay close attention to HOW Stephen lays out the truth. He is very frank, very honest, even gets really intense at the end and direct. He calls it like it is. BUT **he is never UNNECESSARILY disrespectful or mean. He keeps it about the subject and not unnecessary personal attacks.**
 - **Changing the Narrative** – Stephen says, ‘hear me...’ – There had been a lot of opinions and noise in that room. There were lies and half-truths. There was passion and anger ruling the day. But now it’s his turn and **instead of matching their behavior and attitude, he changes the narrative from their perspective to his. And this is a key to how we need to operate in our world that is consistently presenting a non-Biblical worldview. We change the narrative.** Society tells us that we must choose **Black or Blue**. We love both. Society tells us that Christians must be **Republican or Democrat**, we listen to and love both. Society tells us that we **acceptance means affirmation**, but we peacefully love them while desiring the best for them and leading them to God’s heart. Society tells us that **we are scientific accidents of nature**. We politely disagree and tell them about the meaning and value that God has placed in us. **Yet, all the while our demeanor stays in the Jesus-pocket.**
 - **Stephen’s Main Focus²** – Stephen will simultaneously present a defense against the false accusations against him, and present the Truth of Jesus Christ as Messiah (a portion of the gospel). He is being a witness for Christ.
 - **Stephen’s Super Powers** – Spoiler Alert: Stephen is going to win the battle of truth in this story. For the last 2000 years his story has been told in the most popular book of all time (Bible). He is held up as one of the greatest witnesses ever. So, what makes him so effective? I see **three things that allowed him to be ready:**

¹ “The high priest was probably still Caiaphas, as at the trial of Jesus; he remained in office until A.D. 36. As president of the Sanhedrin by virtue of his office, he was chief judge in Israel. It was necessary in Jewish court procedure that the accused person should know what the charges against him were, and have an opportunity of replying to them.” New International Commentary of the New Testament (NICNT) – F.F. Bruce.

² “Stephen’s historical survey reviews the history of the nation from the call of Abraham to the building of Solomon’s temple. His outline of the patriarchal age (vv. 2–8) and of Israel in Egypt (vv. 9–19) provides an introduction to his central themes; his account of Moses’ early days (vv. 20–29), the call of Moses (vv. 30–34), and the wilderness wanderings (vv. 35–43) provides an indirect answer to the charge of speaking against Moses and a more direct answer to the charge of speaking against God; his contrast between the wilderness tent and the Jerusalem temple (vv. 44–50) replies particularly to the charge of speaking against the temple.” NICNT

1. **He knew his Bible** – We could say that he knew history but really he is staying very closely to the Biblical narrative. He didn't just know any history; he knew biblical history.³ He was able to connect the dots from one story to another and make grand arguments and points.⁴
 2. **He knew his Lord** – there was a settledness to how he spoke. He wasn't speaking out of insecurity, panic, or dysfunction. He knew who he served and what was important to Jesus Christ. He knew he was there for the Lord and not for himself.
 3. **He kept his cool** – he will get really passionate at the end and actually charge this group ferociously, but his heart never got out of sync. He was cool, calm and collected.
- **God's Genesis of the Jews**
 - **The Story of Abraham**
 - **Ac 7:2b–8** - *"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,³ and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans⁵ and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.⁷ 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.'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."*
 - **The Core of Abraham's Story** – The actual account of Abraham covers 14 chapters of Genesis.⁶ Stephen is going to tell the same story in 8 verses, so clearly he's only hitting the main points and trying to make a very specific point.

³ "Stephen has his reply ready. It takes the form of a historical retrospect—a form well established in Jewish tradition. "The protestation of faith is, in the Old Testament, often associated with a recital of the divine intervention in the life of Israel. 'God in history' was the underlying basis of Rabbinic optimism. The declaration at the bringing of the first-fruits (Deut. 26:5–10) is paralleled by Psalms 78 and 107.... Stephen's address in Acts 7 is thus in the true form. It is in the sequel that he differs from Hebrew models." NICNT

⁴ "A glance at any edition of the New Testament, Greek or English, in which Old Testament quotations or allusions are set in distinctive type, will show how far the very language of the Old Testament enters into the texture of Stephen's speech. (It is quoted regularly in the LXX form.) But the speech is no mere catena of quotations, studiously put together; the Old Testament wording is reproduced with a spontaneity which suggests that the author has the narrative at his fingertips and is able to use it with a striking freshness and freedom.¹⁶ Here, in verse 3, he quotes from Gen. 12:1 the words spoken by God to Abraham in Harran after the death of his father Terah, but gives them a setting before Abraham's departure for Harran on the first stage of his journey. When it is stated in Gen. 15:7 and Neh. 9:7 that God brought Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, it is probably implied that Abraham received a divine communication there as well as later, when he had settled in Harran. Philo and Josephus concur." NICNT

⁵ "Abraham accordingly left "the land of the Chaldaeans"—a term which is plainly synonymous here with "Mesopotamia" (v. 2)—and settled in Harran, in the upper Euphrates valley, at the intersection of important caravan trade routes, known to have been a flourishing city early in the second millennium B.C.²⁰ There he stayed until his father died; then, under divine direction, he continued his migration and arrived in Canaan. But even then Abraham was given no part of the land in actual possession: for the rest of his life he lived as a resident alien there. It was a promised land indeed to him—promised to him and his posterity before he had any children—but to him and his immediate posterity it remained no more than a promised land. Abraham had no tangible object in which to trust: he believed the bare word of God, and acted upon it." NICNT

⁶ Genesis 11:26-25:18

That means that there is a lot of goodness that's going to be left on the cutting room floor. But here's Stephen's highlights:

- **God was with Abraham** – in a trial that Stephen is being accused of dishonoring Jewish history and tradition, he begins by explaining that he absolutely honors his history and knows what he's talking about and that God was the one that set all of this up including creating the Jewish people. He explains that Abraham, before there was a law, before there was a temple, before Moses, was called by God and used by God. Those other things are beautiful but not absolutely necessary when it comes to God using people.
- **God said Go and Abraham went** – This is an argument for the power of faith. This is before the Law. Abraham had a personal relationship with God and was obedient completely. He followed God's voice no matter where it led. The same could not be said of the Jewish leaders holding this trial.
- **God promised land and offspring before he had either** – This is again an argument that God does stuff BEYOND the way that the leaders were seeing it in their tiny boxes. God promised Abraham things that he had to believe in faith because they were impossible at the time. Stephen's point seems to be that God isn't limited and we need to believe Him at His word and not just how we understand things. The Jewish leaders couldn't wrap their minds around God doing something radical outside of their paradigm.
- **God told him in advance that his lineage would be enslaved for 400 years** – Not sure why Stephen mentions this. Perhaps it was a set up to explain why they were in Egypt, which he's about to explain through Joseph's story, but here it demonstrates that God was prophetically calling His shots long before they happened. Everything was according to a plan that He had before any of it happened. Stephen's argument is that Jesus is coming after a long history of God's movement, all planned out, leading to that moment.
- **God prophesied the Exodus** – The people of God were going to be rescued. It's the nature of God to rescue His people. To say that Jesus Christ was a deliverer who came to rescue His people is not outside the scope of God's normal character.
- **God instituted the covenant of circumcision** – Later Stephen is going to explain that although the Jewish high council was circumcised in the physical manner of the Jews according to the Abrahamic covenant, they were not so in heart. They were externally faithful to God but internally unfaithful.
- **Abraham had Isaac, who had Jacob** – Jacob fathered 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel.
- **Stephen's Main Point about Abraham** – Faith and relationship is bigger than tiny religious boxes. The council was charging Stephen with not adhering to their assumptions and the way that it's always been done. Stephen argues that long before those things were in place, God was moving, and He is not limited by the things of mankind. This allows Stephen room to explain that this new faith in Jesus Christ is right in line with God's character and how He would reveal His

Messiah. It is also a bit of an argument of his innocence for speaking 'against' Jewish sacred cows.

- **Rejection and Purpose**

- **The Story of Joseph**

- **Ac 7:9–16** - *“And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food.¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh.^{7 14} And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers,¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”*

- **The Core of Joseph’s Story** – The actual account of Joseph also covers 14 chapters of Genesis.⁸ Stephen is going to tell the same story again, in 8 verses. Here are Stephen’s highlights:

- **Joseph was rejected by his family** – Those who should have welcomed him, listened to him, allowed him to bless them, taken care of him, honored him, instead rejected him and was sold into slavery. Jesus had a similar experience.
- **God was with him and blessed him** – Stephen’s consistent theme will be that despite how people view things, God has a bigger plan. Despite their rejection, God isn’t rejecting them, but actually using them in the most profound ways. Everyone would have been more blessed had they listened and not ignorantly or arrogantly rejected God’s people. That’s what the Jewish leaders did to Jesus, what they were doing to the apostles and what they were doing to him.
- **Joseph cared for his family during the famine** – Everything in Joseph’s story was done to provide for the future of Israel. That is the same thing with Jesus. He suffered to care for us. He suffered to protect us. He suffered and prepared for the worst situation and made a way that those who would come and receive, would be blessed and safe.
- **The Hebrews moved to Egypt** – What ultimately led to Moses’ exodus of the Hebrew people? They all moved to the safety of Joseph’s territory in Egypt.

⁷ *“On the second occasion when they went to Egypt to buy food, Joseph (whom they had not recognized on their former visit) revealed his identity to them, and they were forced to acknowledge him as their deliverer. (There may be a suggestion here that a greater than Joseph, who also was not recognized by his people when he came to them the first time, will be acknowledged by them as their divinely appointed deliverer when they see him the second time.)”* NICNT

⁸ Genesis 37-50

not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I 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?'—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ¹² ³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years."

- **The Core of Moses' Story** – The full story of Moses extends across 4 BOOKS. ¹³ Stephen is going to tell the same story again, in 20 verses. Here are Stephen's highlights:
 - **The Jews multiplied greatly in slavery to Egypt** – Under God's plan the Hebrews were contained in a small area so they multiplied like rabbits. There were a ton of them. God had told Abraham that his lineage would be numerous. They were now. They needed to be sufficiently sizeable to do the Promised Land campaign (and to wander in the desert for 40 years without getting completely wiped out).
 - **Slavery was brutal** – God hear the cries of His people. The terrible conditions were God's way of moving His people out of Egypt. Even after they got out when things got tough, they wished to go back to slavery. God needed it to be really, really bad or they would have stayed in their comfort zones and never walked into God's fullness (the Promised Land).
 - **God raised up Moses** – While God turned up the heat to want to leave, God provided a deliverer named Moses. Moses and Jesus have a lot of similarities in their stories. Both are deliverers, prophets, leaders.
 - **Moses was mighty in words, deeds and wisdom** – Despite what Moses claimed at the burning bush about not being good enough to be used by God, he was completely capable and the best man for the job. Just like Moses, Jesus was brilliant and mighty in words, deeds, and wisdom.
 - **At 40 Moses defended a Hebrew slave and was exposed and rejected** – Moses wanted to deliver the Hebrew people in his own strength (one by one if necessary). But God had another plan. It was going to be a large scale movement in the Lord's power. God didn't need them adhered to Moses as much as adhered to God.
 - **At 80 Moses saw the burning bush and received a call of God** – God built Moses' spirit in the desert as a shepherd and called him at 80 to go back and be the deliverer he always was going to be. Moses didn't want his assignment, so God laid into him and said it wasn't about him.

¹² "The very man whom his people had refused was the man chosen by God to be their ruler and redeemer. They had rejected him the first time (as Joseph's brothers had repudiated Joseph), but the second time he came to them they had no option but to accept him (as Joseph's brothers recognized him on the second occasion). The implied parallel with the recent refusal of Jesus is too plain to require elaboration. All the authority of the divine messenger whom he had seen at the burning bush lay behind Moses when he went back to Egypt to lead his people out, and lead them out he did, amid tokens of his heavenly commission that none could gainsay—"wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and at the Red Sea," not to speak of those which marked the following years of wandering in the wilderness." NICNT

¹³ Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

- **God used Moses, rejected by man, to redeem his people** – And here’s the key, the very man rejected as a leader, ended up being the deliverer. That’s the same with Jesus. He was rejected by the Jewish leaders, but IS the deliverer of all of us from our sins.
- **Moses led the miraculous exodus** – Moses did what God planned in advance for him to do. He didn’t like his job. He did His job faithfully and it led to the freedom of His people. Jesus had to go through betrayal and the Garden of Gethsemane experience on the way to a torturous cross to lead His people to freedom.
- **Stephen’s Main Point of Moses’ Story** – The Deliverer that God prepared for his people was rejected the first time that he came to them (at 40). It was not until the second coming (at 80) that they were forced to go with him out with the exodus to freedom. Just like Moses, God made Jesus a prophet and a leader who would share God’s will with His people. Just like Moses God used Jesus to reveal the ‘new law’. Just like Moses there was constant rejection of Jesus and it cost Israel dearly.
- **Moses Rejected for Selfishness**
 - **The Golden Calf Incident**
 - **Ac 7:37–43** - *“This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, [Dt 18:15] ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’³⁸ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel¹⁴ who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.⁴² But God turned away and gave them over¹⁵ to worship the host of heaven,¹⁶ as it is written in the book of the prophets [Amos 5:25-27]: “ ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan [planet Saturn],¹⁷ the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’¹⁸*
 - **A famous story of shame** – All the Jews knew the story of the golden calf. It was one of the great embarrassments in their history. This story is told in Genesis 32.

¹⁴ “The “angel of the presence” of God (lit., “the messenger of his face,” Heb. mal’ aḳ pānāw) is the angel who makes his presence real to human beings—in other words, the angel of Yahweh (see 50 above). No mention is made of this angel in the Exodus narrative of the giving of the law; compare, however, “the angel of God” in Ex. 14:19; also Ex. 33:14, “my presence [Heb. pānai, ‘my face,’ but LXX αὐτός, ‘I myself’] will go with you.” See also Isa. 63:9, with reference to the Exodus and its sequel, “the angel of his presence saved them” (LXX “he himself saved them”).” NICNT
¹⁵ “While Stephen asserts the principle here in relation to the Jewish nation, Paul asserts it in relation to the Gentile world in Rom. 1:24, 26, 28.” NICNT

¹⁶ “The full-blown worship of the “host of heaven,” the planetary powers, to which Jerusalem gave itself over in the later years of the monarchy, under Assyrian influence, was the fruition of that earlier idolatry in the wilderness.” NICNT

¹⁷ “Raiphān being a designation of the planet Saturn.” NICNT

¹⁸ “Stephen means that the worship of the planetary powers, for which the nation lost its liberty and suffered deportation, was the climax of that idolatrous process which began in the wilderness. In principle at least the worship of those powers had its inception in the wilderness: it was to them that sacrifices and offerings were brought even at that early date.” NICNT

- **A coming prophet (Dt 18:15)** – Moses told the Jewish people that in the future God would raise up a prophet-leader just like him, from the Jews, to speak on God’s behalf just like he did. Of course this was a Messianic prophecy and one that Stephen is tying to Jesus Christ.
 - **Moses received living oracles from God** – Moses spoke directly from God in a way that no one had before him, and few have done after him. That is what God did with Jesus Christ. He was unlike anyone else. He spoke directly from God in heaven.
 - **Moses was again rejected by the Jewish people** – no matter how much God anointed him and spoke through him, he was rejected by the people because they didn’t want to listen. They wanted the ‘works of their own hands’ more than the promises of God to be true. This is exactly what was happening with the Jewish leadership rejecting Jesus and wanting their old system (Egypt) and their old power structure (the work of their old hands), more than Jesus to be the Messiah that would lead the new.
 - **Israel was judged for their rejection** – God saw their rejection of Moses and His oracles and handed them over to their distorted ways. This is what is going to happen with their rejection of Jesus the Messiah.
- **Amazing but not an Idol**
 - **The Story of the Temple**
 - **Ac 7:44–50** - *“Our fathers had the tent of witness¹⁹ in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua²⁰ when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands,²¹ as the prophet says [Isa 66:1-2²²], “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?”*
 - **The Tent of Witness** – This is also known as the Tent of Meeting and later known as the Tabernacle. It was a mobile temple. It was initially the meeting place where God would meet with Moses and give him instructions on how to lead Israel. God’s glory would descend down in a cloud and they would talk like friends. This was a precursor to the Temple.

¹⁹ “It was called the tent of the testimony because it housed the tables of the law, known comprehensively as “the testimony.” The ark in which these tables were placed was accordingly called the “ark of the testimony”; the tent, which served as a shrine for the ark, was correspondingly called (among other things) the tent of the testimony. It was no ordinary tent: it was made by the direct command of God, and constructed in every detail according to the model that Moses had been shown on the holy mount.⁷⁷ The writer to the Hebrews lays special emphasis on this model, identifying it with the heavenly sanctuary, “set up not by man but by the Lord” (Heb. 8:2). But, whereas the writer to the Hebrews draws attention to the sacrifices offered in association with the wilderness sanctuary and to their typological significance, Stephen is significantly silent about them; the only wilderness sacrifices which he mentions are those offered to idols.” NICNT

²⁰ “Gk. Ἰησοῦς whence KJV “Jesus” (as in Heb. 4:8). There may be a tacit suggestion that it is not by accident that the leader who brought them into the earthly land of promise bore the same name as the one under whose leadership the people of God were to inherit better promises.” NICNT

²¹ 1 Kings 8:27

²² Cf. Ps 11:4

- **The Temple** – the tabernacle was the holy worship place all the way from Moses through King David (who wanted to build a temple, but God only gave him the instructions on how to do it but wouldn't let him build it). It was eventually built by King Solomon, David's son.
- **Brought in with Joshua** – interestingly the Greek version of Joshua is Jesus. Jesus/Joshua walked Israel into the Promised Land with the presence of God. That can't be an accident.
- **The Temple is amazing but still a building**²³ – Since they charged Stephen with speaking against the temple, he wanted to clarify that. He didn't dishonor the temple, but using Scripture, explained that although it was wonderful and served a beautiful purpose, it didn't need to be deified. God doesn't fully live there. It can't contain Him. We are allowed to honor something but not make it an idol. This was both a rebuke to them and an explanation.
- **Failure!**
 - **Stephen's Grand Conclusion**
 - **Ac 7:51–53** - *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears,²⁴ you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?²⁵ And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."*
 - **Stiff-Necked People** – Stiff-necked means stubborn and resistant, refusing to listen. God called Israel that same name 4x's in Exodus. They were notoriously stubborn and resistant. And this is the reason why we have this situation now with Stephen. The leaders refused to listen to God and receive Jesus Christ as their Messiah.
 - **God's Thoughts after the Golden Calf Incident** - Ex 32:9–10 – *"And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people."¹⁰ Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."*
 - **Uncircumcised in heart and ears** – Their willingness to receive through their ears (hear the truth) and their decisions (their hearts) was blocked. They were

²³ "A major theme of the speech is its insistence that the presence of God is not restricted to any one land or to any material building. God revealed himself to Abraham long before Abraham settled in the holy land; he was with Joseph in Egypt; he gave his law to the people of Israel through Moses when they were wanderers in a wilderness. The people of God similarly should not be restricted to any one locality; a movable tent such as they had in the wilderness and in the earlier years of their settlement in Canaan was a more fitting shrine for the divine presence in their midst than the fixed structure of stone that King Solomon built. The period that Israel spent as a pilgrim people—"the church in the wilderness"—is viewed as setting forth the divine order; in this respect (as in some others) Stephen echoes the teaching of the great Old Testament prophets—though even in the wilderness Israel fell short of the divine ideal." NICNT

²⁴ Dt 10:16

²⁵ "Many of the prophets of God in Old Testament times suffered persecution and sometimes death itself for their faithfulness to the divine commission. There is ample evidence of this in the canonical books, and Jewish tradition elaborated the theme, describing, for example, the martyrdom of Isaiah by sawing asunder in the reign of Manasseh⁹⁵ and of Jeremiah by stoning at the hands of the people who had forced him to go down to Egypt with them. Much of that opposition to the prophets was due to their attack on Israel's perverted notions of the true worship of God—an attack exemplified in the prophetic texts quoted in Stephen's speech. Stephen placed himself in the prophetic succession by attacking Israel's record on this very point; it is therefore especially relevant that Israel's traditional hostility to the prophets should be mentioned here." NICNT

blocked from God. Though they were adhering externally (circumcision of skin), they were rebellious in spirit.

- **You always resist the Holy Spirit** – This is a brutal comment. Perhaps the Jewish council didn't care, but I would. Stephen is telling them that this is not the only time that they have been stubborn and not listening to God, but that they have failed to be the receptive and discerning leaders that God desired of them. They were constantly resisting God, the very one they alleged they served.
 - **How do we not become these people?** – how do we freshly listen to the Holy Spirit while at the same time not being tossed to and fro with all the waves of opinion and alleged experiences that are bogus? The key is keeping a wise and soft heart. It's about constantly checking with God and not going off old information. It's about knowing the word of God and the nature of God. It's about testing and trying and discerning. It's about remaining moldable but solid.
- **Your fathers did the same thing** – this is not a new thing, to reject God and His leadership. It has been happening among Jewish leaders for Millennia. The forefathers went through multiple judgments, corrections and even deportations due to their rebellious natures.
- **Look at the history of murdered and rejected prophets** – Over and over the Jewish people would rid themselves of any prophets of God that told them something they didn't want to hear. They are doing the same thing now with Stephen, and did the same thing with the Apostles and Jesus.
- **Those prophets spoke about the coming Righteous One** – the Messiah was always the One the prophets ultimately focused on. He was the hope of the nation. He was the One sent from God to save His people. And that Messiah is who just walked among them and Stephen was proclaiming.
- **That Messiah is Jesus whom you betrayed and killed** – this is getting more and more personal. It's not even theoretical, this group had LITERALLY killed Jesus Christ. They were supposed to be the ones who recognized the Messiah and they didn't and they killed Him.
- **You were responsible to usher Him in²⁶** – you had the front line responsibility as Jewish leaders to usher in the Messiah. It was your job even more than ours. You received the Old Testament law that predicted it. You received the words of God, spoken by angels. But you didn't keep it. **You failed in your primary role.**

- **The First Christian Martyr**
 - **Stephen is Stoned and Persecution Intensifies**

²⁶ "Stephen's argument is thus concluded; all that remains is to drive it home to the conscience of his audience. He has answered the charges brought forward by the prosecution. As for the charge of subverting the Mosaic tradition, it is not he but the nation, and preeminently its leaders, that should plead guilty to this: their guilt is amply attested by their own sacred scriptures, back to Moses' own lifetime. As for the charge of blaspheming God by announcing the supersession of the temple by "this Jesus of Nazareth," he makes no attempt to deny it but justifies his position by the claim that it is the position occupied by the patriarchs and prophets, whereas the position of his opponents involves a point-blank denial of the consistent witness of the scriptures. "Stephen's speech thus resolves itself into a great defence of the doctrine of the Church Invisible, based on a broad survey of the history of the people of God." NICNT

- **Ac 7:54–8:3** - “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.⁵⁵ But he, 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 he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man²⁷ standing²⁸ at the right hand of God.”⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.²⁹ And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.³⁰ And as they were stoning³¹ Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the

²⁷ “This is the only New Testament occurrence of the phrase “the Son of Man” outside the Gospels. Apart from this instance, it is found only on the lips of Jesus. It has its Old Testament roots in Dan. 7:13–14, where a human figure (“one like a son of man,” in the literal rendering of the Aramaic) is seen coming to the enthroned Ancient of Days “with the clouds of heaven” to receive universal dominion from him. The un-Greek idiom “the Son of Man” (more literally “the son of the man”) means “the ‘one like a son of man’ ” who is to receive world dominion, but since it was not in current use as a technical term, Jesus could and did employ it freely of himself and fill it with whatever meaning he chose. The background in Dan. 7:13–27 links the “one like a son of man” closely with “the saints of the Most High,” whom the New Testament identifies with Jesus’ disciples and their converts.” NICNT

²⁸ “Jesus’ reply to the high priest’s question combines Daniel’s description of the “one like a son of man” coming with the clouds of heaven and the oracle of Ps. 110:1 in which the king of Israel is invited by Yahweh to sit at his right hand. This oracle underlies the description of Stephen’s present vision. But Stephen sees the Son of Man not sitting but standing at God’s right hand. Is there any significance in this change of verb? Some commentators have thought not; C. H. Dodd, for example, remarks that the verb to stand “has commonly the sense ‘to be situated’, without any necessary implication of an upright attitude.” But in allusions to the oracle of Ps. 110:1 the participle “sitting” is so constant that this exception calls for an explanation. Various explanations have been offered. “He had not yet taken definitely his seat,” says William Kelly, “but was still giving the Jews a final opportunity. Would they reject the testimony to Him gone on high indeed, but as a sign waiting if peradventure they might repent and He might be sent to bring in the times of refreshing here below?” But from Luke’s point of view this was no “final opportunity” for the Jews; they continue to receive further opportunities to the very end of his narrative.¹⁰⁹ More plausibly, Jesus has been pictured as rising up from the throne of God to greet his proto-martyr; J. A. Bengel, who takes this view, quotes to the same effect from the sixth-century Christian poet Arator. Others have understood Stephen to foresee the glory of Christ’s advent: “Christ rises in preparation for his Parousia,” says Huw Pari Owen.¹¹¹ A refinement of this interpretation is proposed by C. K. Barrett: Jesus is indeed standing because “he is about to come,” but Luke believed that “the death of each Christian would be marked by what we may term a private and personal parousia of the Son of man.” Most probably Stephen’s words should be taken closely along with Jesus’ promise: “everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8; in Matt. 10:33 “the Son of Man” is replaced by “I”). That is to say, Jesus stands up as witness or advocate in Stephen’s defense. Stephen appeals from the adverse judgment of the earthly court, and “in the heavenly court ... this member of the Son of Man community is already being vindicated by the head of that community—the Son of Man par excellence (C. F. D. Moule). If, at the moment when he was about to begin testifying before the Sanhedrin, Stephen had some foreview of this beatific vision, no wonder his face shone like an angel’s (6:15).” NICNT

²⁹ “The reference to the witnesses suggests strongly that Stephen’s stoning was carried out as a legal execution, as the penalty for blasphemy. The restriction of blasphemy to the actual pronouncing of the ineffable name was a later rabbinical refinement; there is no reason to think that the Sadducean authorities limited the offense in any such way. For Stephen to suggest that the crucified Jesus stood in a position of authority at the right hand of God must have ranked as blasphemy in the thinking of those who knew that a crucified man died under the divine curse... The charge which was found proved against Stephen—speaking against the temple—probably belonged to the category of offenses against the temple for which the Roman administration, as an exceptional concession, allowed the Jewish authorities to carry out the death sentence without reference to the governor.” NICNT

³⁰ “Saul was his family name as an Israelite; he is better known in history by his Roman cognomen Paullus (Paul). It may be regarded as an undesigned coincidence that while Luke alone informs us that his Jewish name was Saul, he himself claims to have belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. His parents thus gave him the name of the most illustrious member of that tribe in the nation’s history—the name of Israel’s first king, Saul.” NICNT

³¹ “The ancient law directing the witnesses to take the lead in the act of stoning was amplified in later times and is recorded thus in the Mishnah (late second century A.D.): “When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned.... When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, ‘Confess; for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and every one who confesses has a share in the age to come.’ ... Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped.¹²⁶ ... The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.” NICNT

<https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2021/04/falqs-execution-by-stoning-and-privacy-laws-related-to-sexual-crimes-in-iran-and-afghanistan/> ;
<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/08/how-does-stoning-work-in-iran.html>; <https://jesualive.cc/how-killed-by-stoning/>;

apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”

- **They were enraged and ground their teeth at him³²** – This is fury, hatred and contempt mixed together. It doesn't get any more intense than this emotionally. They absolutely hate Stephen and what he is saying. They are not listening anymore.
- **Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit saw heaven opened** – Stephen is so in tune with the Lord that in that moment of intensity, God shows him (a vision?) of heaven with Jesus standing there ready to receive him. It was as if God was saying, 'well done kiddo. We are waiting for you. It's all good. You did a wonderful job.'
- **Stephen tells them what he sees** – Stephen can't help but tell the group what he is looking at. He is stunned and amazed. He is encouraged and blessed. He is looking into the throne room of God and blurts out what he sees. The group can't see it. They probably can't see anything through their anger.
- **They yelled, blocked their ears, and rushed him** – This is a demonstration of completely ignoring everything in blind rage and wanting this man dead and gone at all costs.
- **They cast him out of the city and stoned him**
 - **Why out of the city?** It was a dishonor to be killed outside the city. It was akin to saying that your people rejected you and that you are so dirty in your sin that we can't even have you around us.
 - **What is stoning?** – simply put it's throwing rocks at someone until they die. But it's different depending on the location and the time in history. In the ancient world it was about pushing someone into a hole, or off something high and if they don't die, you throw rocks about the size of a small orange until they die. Stoning still occurs in some nations in the Middle East, although it's not extremely common. The modern way is to wrap someone up and stick them in a hole up to their chest and then throw rocks at them.
- **Young Saul of Tarsus watched their clothes while they stoned Stephen** – This is crazy. The first Christian martyr is being watched over by a man who would become one of Christianity's most famous, incredible evangelists. But he has a long way to get there. He is building his testimony.
- **Stephen's final words³³** – as Stephen was being killed he said two lines: 1.) Lord Jesus receive my spirit. 2.) Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Wow! This is so powerful. What do those sentences entail?

³² “And when he flung the charge of blasphemy, persistent opposition to God and his ways, back on themselves, their vexation and rage could no longer be restrained... “They were cut to the quick” (Gk. διεπρίοντο). For the same verb cf. 5:33. For the grinding of teeth as a gesture of rage cf. Job 16:9; Ps. 35 [LXX 34]:16). Elsewhere it is used of the fruitless anguish of despair; cf. Luke 13:28 (βρυγμὸς ὀδόντων, from βρύχω, the verb used here).” NICNT

³³ “There was yet another of our Lord's words from the cross echoed by Stephen. For, on his knees among the flying stones, he made his last appeal to the heavenly court—not this time for his own vindication but for mercy toward his executioners. Before he was finally battered into silence and death, he was heard to cry aloud, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (the “Lord” being again, presumably, the Lord Jesus). There is an Old Testament story of another messenger of God who for his faithfulness was stoned to death, not (like Stephen) outside the city but in the temple court itself, “between the altar and the sanctuary,” as our Lord said (Luke 11:51)—Zechariah the son of Jehoiada, priest and prophet. But

- **Lord Jesus receive my spirit** – This is surrender to the Lord and a gentle pleading to receive him.
- **Lord, do not hold this sin against them** – Just like Jesus said, ‘father, forgive them, they know not what they do’ while being nailed to the cross, so too did Stephen intercede for his murderers. Why? Because he knew how serious this was and how God’s justice would wreck these people who are ignorantly and arrogantly blinded. Stephen’s heart is not to destroy people but to rescue people even if they are the bad guys.
- **He fell asleep** – this means he died. But when you are a child of God, it’s nothing more than falling asleep and waking in the presence, protection, and care of God.
- **Saul of Tarsus approved of his execution** – this is going to be Paul the Apostle, but God has a lot of work to do to get him there.
- **Jerusalem Church persecution (Judea & Samaria)** – This incident launched a flood of persecution against the Christian church in Jerusalem. It scattered most of the leadership, all but the apostles, who felt called to stay there. The Christians scattered through other parts of Israel: Judea and Samaria. Those names should trigger a memory for you. Why? Because **Jesus said that His followers would be His witnesses first in Jerusalem (where they are), then to Judea (southern area around Jerusalem), then to Samaria (the rest of northern Israel), and to the ends of the earth** (still to come with Paul’s missionary journeys igniting it).
- **The Church buried and mourned Stephen** – they were super sad. He was a great man and it cost the Church dearly. But that was his assignment and he did it perfectly.
- **Saul ravaged the Christian Church** – again, this is going to be Paul the Apostle one of the greatest evangelists, missionaries, theologians, leaders of all time. But right now he’s a terrible man, thinking he’s doing the right thing for God, but is badly mistaken. He is destroying people, good people, God’s people, Christians. These are the very same families that he would later want to be accepted by. It’s a messy road.
- **Christian Hunting** – notice that it says he went from ‘**house to house**’. This is a personal manhunt. He is finding them, rooting them out, like rats. He is determined to destroy them all.
- **Men and Women** – this is significant. Usually women and children were left alone in most Middle Eastern attacks of any sort. It’s like they were off limits, for official measures. They could be harmed (many were raped and pillaged) but they wouldn’t be officially imprisoned, only men. So, why would Saul put women in prison? Because **they were such a part of the leadership of the early church they were being treated the same as the men**. This demonstrates, at least in my

as Zechariah was about to breathe his last, he prayed, “May Yahweh see and avenge!” (2 Chron. 24:22). The martyr-deaths were similar; the dying prayers were widely different. Stephen had learned his lesson in the school of him who, when he was being fixed to the cross, prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Having prayed thus, says Luke, Stephen “fell asleep”—an unexpectedly peaceful description for so brutal a death, but one which fits the spirit in which Stephen accepted his martyrdom.” NICNT

mind, combined with all the other evidence, that women were leaders in the early church on a similar level as the men.

- **Stephen's death wasn't an accident** – this murder was intentional. The blood of the martyr fueled thousands in the ministry. It scattered the witnesses around the world. The bad guys didn't win, they lost.

Conclusion

- **Are you ready to give a reason for the hope?** – Stephen nailed his assignment. Are we? Do we realize that our assignments from God are more important than anything on our agenda?