

“STEPHEN’S SPEECH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 7:1-53

Introduction.

Please take out your pew Bibles and turn to chapter 7 of Acts, page 1146. Since I am not going to read the chapter I want to guide us through the chapter by pointing out some of the key verses.

Last week we heard about the powerful ministry of Stephen, one of the seven men set apart as a deacon. Some of the Jews charged him with speaking blasphemously against Moses and God.

Acts 6:13-14 They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak 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 will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”

Stephen has been charged with two very serious charges of blasphemy, blasphemy the law and the Temple, the most sacred things in the mind of any Jew.

At the beginning of chapter 7 the high priest asks Stephen one question, “Are these charges true?” What follows is Stephen’s defense. He gave his answer knowing full well his life depended on what he said.

I am reminded of another time in history when a man’s life was on the line depending on the answer he gave.

Hugh Latimer, the great preacher of the English Reformation one Sunday preached to King Henry VIII in such a way that it offended him. The next Sunday he was commanded by Henry to preach again and make an apology. Hugh addressed himself as he began to preach:

“Hugh Latimer, dost thou know before whom thou art this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king’s most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life if thou offendest; therefore, take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease; but then consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence thou comest; upon whose message thou art sent? Even by the great and mighty God! who is all-present, and who beholdeth all thy ways, and who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully.”

He then gave Henry the same sermon he had preached the week before – only with more energy!

The history of God’s dealings with His people.

Stephen answers by telling a story, a shortened version of the history of Israel. He picks four defining moments in redemptive history, taking these PhDs back to Sunday School.

Abraham and the patriarchs, vss. 2-8.

Joseph and the Egyptian exile, vss. 9-19.

Moses and the exodus and wilderness wanderings, vss. 20-44.

David and Solomon and the monarchy, vss. 45-50.

Vs. 1 God revealed Himself to **Abraham** in the Ur of the Chaldeans long before he ever set foot in Palestine. God established His holy people long before there ever was a holy place.

Vs. 9 God raised up **Joseph**, but his brothers hated him though he was God’s appointed deliverer. They were resisting God. But God wasn’t just in Mesopotamia, God was in with Joseph in Egypt. God established Joseph in Egypt and brought Jacob and all his family to Egypt. Stephen mentions Egypt six times to drive home God was at work outside of their own land. God was there, and God was with them.

Vs. 20 This starts the longest section of his sermon, he devotes the most time to **Moses**, who they accused him of blaspheming. Stephen spends the most time on

Moses to show his knowledge of Moses and his respect for Moses and the Law God gave to Moses.

God raised up Moses born in Egypt but when he took the first step to help his people he also was rejected by his people as their ruler and judge.

Vs. 30 God appeared to Moses in the wilderness in Midian and called the ground holy ground. This is a very key part of his defense, there was holy ground that was not in the Holy Land or in a holy Temple. Where God is that is holy.

Vs. 35-39 This same Moses ...

Acts 7:35-39 (NIV) “This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

37 “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ 38 He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

39 “But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”

God gave His law to Moses while he was in the wilderness, not Israel, and again God’s people rejected Moses and they refused the Law given him by God.

Oh, and lest we forget, it was this Moses who foretold of the coming of a Messiah, a prophet like himself (vs. 37).

Vs. 44 Then, in verse 44 Stephen finally brings up the movable tent called the *tabernacle*. God gave Moses instructions how to make it. But it was a replica, a shadow, a copy of what was in heaven.

Solomon built a Temple even though God made it clear, the Most High doesn't dwell in houses made by hands. "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool."

The God of glory is the living God on the move all through history, He is a pilgrim God not confined or restricted or limited to one place, one time, one building, or even one people.

He appeared to a heathen in Mesopotamia; to Joseph while a slave in Egypt; to Moses in the desert of Midian; and to the people in a tent as his dwelling and in the Temple in Israel.

And God's people have always resisted Him and sinned against Him and His servants. They resisted Joseph, Moses, and all the prophets. They have resisted and rejected every deliverer God sent them. And they have disobeyed the Law God gave them.

God is acting just like He always has in the past and they are acting just like they have always acted in the past.

It's possible to hear the whole history of God's plan of redemption for the Jewish people and the world as giving in the OT and miss the point. It went right over their heads, or should I say hearts.

One writer accused Stephen of delivering a boring sermon talking about things everyone already knew. But that misses the point. Sure, Stephen's audience knew the facts of their own history, but they missed the significance of that history.

This thought rebuked me a bit. I came away from the Reformation evening service thinking the preacher, Dr. Lyle Bierma, hadn't said anything I didn't know already, it was just a history lesson on the Synod of Dort. But his real message was how the grace of God to us in the Gospel is outlined in the Canons of Dort, we are all sinners, but God in Christ saves us from our sin, and our response to that grace is gratitude and service. To call it boring is to be bored with the Gospel and a simple reminder and call back to the Gospel.

Stephen's point was to show that the entire purpose of every detail of the OT was the coming of Jesus Christ into the world as Messiah and Savior. They knew Moses, but they missed who Moses was pointing to, Moses' Christ.

As for the charge of subverting Mosaic tradition, he uses their own Scriptures to prove it is not he who is guilty, but they who are guilty. They are the ones who have a history of disrespecting Moses and his Law, they are the ones who rejected him and disobeyed him.

As for the charge of blaspheming God by proclaiming an end to the temple by Jesus of Nazareth, it's true, but it's a truth held by the patriarchs and prophets. The people are in denial of the truth of Scripture. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Temple.

Stephen's application of his sermon.

This is an application to end all applications. Yikes.

Acts 7:51-53 "You stiff-necked people, 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 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."

This is both barrels. Why did Stephen end this strongly? Stephen is preaching with a point, to reach the consciences of the people. Sometimes a declaration of the truth calls for deliberate provocation. It was time to tell the truth and tell them what they need to hear. Their souls are in mortal and eternal danger.

Stephen uses language straight out of the Bible, language both God and the prophets used. They are stiff-necked, stubborn, obstinate. And their hearts and ears are uncircumcised. They may be Jews outwardly, but it didn't get to hearts and necks.

Then the final sword thrust. They were guilty of resisting and sinning against the Holy Spirit and of betraying and murdering the Righteous One of God, and of not keeping the Law.

Stephen completely flips the tables and points their charges back on them. Everything he said came straight from the OT and is nothing new. These same words were used against the people of God repeatedly by the prophets.

What Stephen ends up doing, rather than defending himself, is defending the Gospel. He stands up for Jesus at the risk of his own life. And therein is another lesson for all of us to take away. May we be as fearless and courageous in our love for Jesus and His Gospel.

Matthew 16:25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Our application of Stephen's sermon.

The Jews put their faith in their Holy Land, in their Holy Law and in their Holy Temple. They thought their special privileges were enough. They based their relationship and right standing with God entirely on external things,

We can be in danger of thinking we live in a privileged nation, in a "Christian" nation, in a land with so many blessings that we forget the giver of the blessings and even use the blessings against Him.

We can carry our Bibles to our places of worship and think that is enough, without putting God's Word in our hearts and obeying it, and with worshipping God with our lips but not our hearts. Let us guard against just going through the motions or trusting outward forms of godliness.

We are not saved by our Dutch history or heritage, by our Reformed traditions or liturgies, by our denominations, by our music preferences, by our buildings, or anything else made by human hands. Do we derive significance from the works of our own hands? Paul reminds us, our flesh and our works count for nothing, rubbish compared to Christ and His righteousness.

Let us not be like them. Let us humble ourselves under the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

This will be important for all of us to remember in a couple of weeks at our congregational meeting. We will receive a budget for what we hope God enables us to do in the next year and we will receive reports of some plans for future building.

We must guard our hearts in all of this from pride, from thinking in the wrong ways. We must only do what can be done to the glory of God and not man, only what can be done to further the Gospel.

We must pray that whatever we do here or out there, we do to the glory of God and in humble reliance on Him, never taking for ourselves any of the credit that is due His name.

Jesus came to tear down religion that is grounded in what we do and what we can make. He came to demolish pride and self-righteousness and boot strap; old college try religion. Jesus came to destroy whatever looks like a golden calf in our lives and hearts.

Our security and assurance is in Christ alone by faith alone through grace alone as revealed in Scripture alone. “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”

Their history is our history. God has always been at work and we have long resisted His Holy Spirit and sinned against His Holy Word. In a crowd this size there is at least one person here who is resisting the promptings of the Holy Spirit, someone who’s neck is stiff, and heart is hard.

How many messengers from God have we received? How many messages from God have we heard? What have we done with them and most especially with the Righteous One, the Christ, sent by the God of glory? Have we obeyed His Word? Have we resisted the Holy Spirit? Do we know the facts but miss the point? Has the truth penetrated to our hearts?

This lesson from history comes with a warning and with hope.

The *warning* is in 7:42. At some point God's patience runs out and He hands us over to our sin. Let us not harden our hearts to God's grace as the Jews did. The *hope* is God is merciful and abundantly gracious to us sinners, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6-7).

The God of glory has revealed Himself. This is God's story redemption and deliverance, of His persistent pursuit of us with His redeeming grace.

Abraham waited a 100 years for a child and God was faithful.

Joseph languishing in prison and God was with him.

Moses wandered in wilderness for 40 years and God appeared to him and used him.

And God was with Stephen.

Have you lost hope, or do you have hope in what good God has for you? No matter how rough our past has been or how many twists and turns, God is in control of our history and our future and He is the Savior and deliverer to the humble, broken hearted, contrite.

Psalms 51:16-17 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Isaiah 66:1-2 Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool;

what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?

2 All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.