

# Acts Series Part 17

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[ 0 : 00 ] Turn with me to the chapter that we've read in the book of Acts and chapter 7. It has been said that the only thing that history teaches us is that history teaches us nothing.

It's a rather cynical viewpoint that maybe does have to its merit that it highlights man's highly developed capacity to repeat the mistakes and indeed the horrors of the past. However, Stephen would certainly not agree with such a viewpoint as to the limited value of history. As he stands accused of very serious charges, indeed for himself, life-threatening charges. His line of defense, and we might call it not only a line of defense, but indeed of attack also, is to give his audience, the Sanhedrin, a history lesson covering no less than two millennia, give or take a century.

Now, this line of defense that Stephen adopts and that we have read in its entirety, or at least that part of it that's recorded for us in the book of Acts, this line of defense has drawn a fair measure of criticism, born perhaps largely out of a misunderstanding or ignorance as to what Stephen is actually doing.

[ 1 : 39 ] One critic, a surprising critic, surprising that he would even be interested in Stephen's defense, is George Bernard Shaw. And he describes this speech that we have read.

And I trust you don't warm to his description. You've also heard it read out in its entirety this evening. And he describes it in this way, a tedious sketch of the history of Israel with which they, that is the Sanhedrin, were presumably as well acquainted as he.

Basically, he says Stephen here bores the Sanhedrin, telling them things that they already know and that really his speech serves no useful purpose at all.

Now, it is true, I think, that at first sight, it's difficult to understand what the purpose of the discourse is. Why does Stephen, in answer to the question that he is presented with by the high priest, are these charges true?

This is the opportunity he has been given. He has been accused of serious offenses, religious offenses, of blasphemy against Moses, against God, of speaking against the temple and against the law.

[ 3 : 00 ] These are serious charges, charges that would lead very soon to his death. And he has given the opportunity to respond to them. Why is it that he responds in this way?

Why does he simply recount for the Sanhedrin briefly, and you might call it an executive summary of the history of Israel up to that point?

Why doesn't he, for example, specifically deal with the charges that have been made and show them to be false? We've already been told by Luke that the witnesses that were produced testified falsely against him.

Presumably Stephen could have gone through the accusations one by one and say, well, you've accused me of this, but this is not true for these reasons. And you've accused me of this, but this is not true for these reasons.

But he chooses not to adopt that approach. Or in any case, if he felt that the court he was in and those who were to make the decision had already decided his fate and that whatever he said really would have little consequence, little possibility of sparing him his eventual death, if that was maybe his thought and it would have been reasonable for him to think in this way, why doesn't he in any case take the opportunity to present clearly and passionately an account of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus?

[ 4 : 40 ] You see, in this very extensive speech, there is very little reference to Jesus at all. It is only in the final accusation when he turns the tables from being the accused to being the accuser.

Does he mention Jesus explicitly as the one who had been killed by his accusers? Why doesn't he rather take advantage of this opportunity with this captive audience to tell them of Jesus?

And if he is to die, well, he will die heroically having declared the good news of the gospel. Well, Stephen knows exactly what he is doing.

And even if we have difficulty in having total clarity or even a measure of clarity as to exactly where he is coming from, I hope that in what we share this evening we will have some insight into why Stephen adopts this approach.

But even if what we come to isn't an exhaustive or a final explanation, what we can be sure of is that Stephen did know exactly what he was doing.

[ 5 : 56 ] And we can go further. Was it not precisely for an occasion such as this, an occasion that Stephen finds himself in, accused by hostile enemies, was it not for such an occasion that Jesus had promised that words would be given to his followers?

It was Luke himself who quotes for us this promise of Jesus. In Luke chapter 12 and verses 11 and 12, what did Jesus say to his disciples?

When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourself or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.

And it's entirely reasonable to conclude and to state categorically that this promise will have been fulfilled on this occasion.

Here is Stephen accused of these terrible blasphemies. He is in precisely the situation that Jesus had envisaged and Jesus had promised, I will give you words and we can be sure that Stephen was given words.

[ 7 : 10 ] He was given these words to defend himself and to respond as the high priest directs him this question, are these charges true?

So as I say, even though we may have difficulty in coming to an entirely clear conclusion as to what is going on here, we can be sure that the words he spoke were the right words, words indeed given to him by the Holy Spirit of God himself.

Well, what is Stephen then, enabled by the Holy Spirit doing as he retells the history of Israel to the Sanhedrin? Stephen realizes that the fundamental problem afflicting his accusers is that they are failing to see the big picture.

They don't understand where he's coming from and more importantly, they don't understand where Jesus is coming from. And Stephen wants to demonstrate that the message, his message, is not some novel, newfangled heresy, but is rooted in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, rooted in the very history of Israel and God's dealings with His people in history.

He wants to show them, his accusers, that the mistakes they are making with regard to the law and the temple and indeed their rejection of Jesus are nothing new.

[ 8 : 42 ] It has always been so in the history of Israel. We'll become clear in this account that Stephen gives of the history of Israel.

And the speech covers four significant epochs in the history of Israel revolving around four significant characters in that history.

First of all, Abraham. He begins with Abraham. He then moves on to speak of Joseph and the Egyptian captivity. Then, the most significant or at least the most extensive portion of his speech concerns Moses and the giving of the law and how the people received and responded to the law that they were given.

And then finally, David, or more accurately, David and Solomon as a package deal as it were. The two of them, that epoch in the history of Israel, of the monarchy, of the golden age, of the monarchy and specifically and importantly the building of the temple.

So these are the four elements of the speech and in presenting each in turn, Stephen has perhaps a number of purposes and no doubt there are purposes that Stephen has that we haven't been able to identify but among perhaps a number of purposes there are two in particular that should be highlighted.

[ 10 : 11 ] And the first one is this that repeats itself in the historical illustrations as it were. The first one is this, the fundamental truth that God is not restricted to a building or even a nation.

See, this was the great problem that the religious authorities had as Stephen questioned the place of the temple in the worship of God and this was the most heinous thing for them and Stephen will

illustrate in the very history of Israel how God has never been tied to a temple however magnificent it might be.

So that's one truth that he seeks to illustrate in different ways as he presents his defense. But another truth or another theme that repeats itself through the speech and through this history of Israel is that a constant in the history of Israel was the rejection by the people of Israel of a God raised up deliverer.

That this has always been the great error of the people of God that God would raise up a deliverer for them yet he would be rejected.

They would not recognize him for who he is and they would reject him and cast him aside. And clearly in demonstrating that this is a constant the implication is clear that this has happened again in the person of Jesus.

[ 11 : 47 ] So let's consider each section in turn and recognizing that we also want to try and see the big picture and so we will not it would be utter folly to attempt an exhaustive study of the whole discourse.

What we'll do is focus in on snapshots within the whole that I hope illustrate what Stephen is doing. Notice first how Stephen begins his defense in reply to the question the high priest levels at him. In verse 2 to this he replied brothers and fathers listen to me the God of glory. I said he begins with Abraham but of course he doesn't begin with Abraham he begins with the God of Abraham. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham. And while the concept of God as being a God of glory is a familiar concept in the scriptures the actual title per se this title the God of glory is actually very unusual only found as far as I can tell in Psalm 29 and verse 3.

And there might even be here at the very beginning by Stephen a deliberate highlighting of this aspect of God's identity that he is the God of glory the God of all glory and consequently so much greater than the most majestic of temples that the religious authorities hold so dear and also consequently not capable of being tied or imprisoned in temples made by human hands.

[ 13 : 35 ] He is the God of glory and so even in the title Stephen already begins to make clear to his accusers the error of their way of thinking.

But then what of Abraham? Why mention Abraham? The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham. Well in a sense the answer to the question why mention Abraham is almost blindingly obvious in that if you're going to tell a story well it's best to begin at the beginning and with Abraham you have the beginning of the story of how God is going to put right the problem of human sin and rebellion as it affects not only Israel but all of humankind.

The first chapters of Genesis describe for us the problem that has arisen as a result of man rejecting God of man rebelling against God and we see how that problem is evidenced in a number of ways and as God enters into covenant with Abraham he begins as it were to fix the problem and so Stephen begins there.

But this Abraham and this maybe is the point we want to focus in on as I say one or two snapshots of each section this Abraham so revered by Israel where did God speak to him?

Well this is how Stephen begins by identifying the geographic location of where God spoke to him. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia.

[ 15 : 15 ] Mesopotamia covers a very wide geographic region but it includes certainly what we would know today as modern day Iraq or of the Chaldees.

And Stephen highlights the location of where God speaks to Abraham. And in doing so it's a somewhat controversial geographic reference point that he highlights.

And I say that because the actual words that he quotes from Genesis that God spoke to Abraham as they're recorded for us there in verse 3 leave your country and your people and go to the land I will show you.

These words we find in Genesis chapter 12 and verse 1. And we can just notice there these words. They're the same words but if we turn to Genesis chapter 12 or verse 1 or in any case listen to what I say concerning them.

These words leave your country your people and go to the land I will show you. In the account in Genesis they are directed to Abraham not in Mesopotamia but in Hera. He had already left Ur of the Chaldees.

[ 16 : 27 ] He had come to a location very close to the promised land. He's not way out in the depths of paganism.

He's in here and he's very close to the promised land. And in Genesis we're told that it is there that God spoke to him. These very words that Stephen quotes in verse 3. And yet Stephen says that God said this to Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia.

Now why is this significant? Is it significant at all? And does Stephen get confused? Did he make a mistake? We're all human. He made a mistake. Well I don't think that is the explanation.

Rather it seems entirely reasonable to presume even though we're not explicitly told it other than here and here would be enough that God spoke to Abraham in both Ur in Mesopotamia and in Hera.

So when he was in Ur he speaks to him with these very words and then in here and he repeats the same words as he reminds him of this calling that he is under. But why does Stephen focus in particularly on Mesopotamia?

[17:37] Well is it not to say to his accusers you who would cling on to the God of Israel in Jerusalem, you who would restrict him to a temple in this city of Jerusalem, don't you realize that even Abraham the one you revere so much, he was spoken to by God, the God of the universe, not in Israel, not in Jerusalem, but in Mesopotamia, in a pagan far away land.

See this God you want to limit, this God you want to domesticate, this God you want to control will not be domesticated by you. The God of glory speaks wherever he chooses.

He reveals himself to whoever he chooses. He is a God on the move. He is a God who does not settle down and get comfortable in temples made by human hands.

The Sanhedrin would condemn Stephen for his claim. We presume it was his claim. We're not actually told what Stephen had said prior to this that led to the accusations, but we presume his claim that God was not to be found in Herod's temple.

Certainly not to be limited to Herod's temple. And so he is condemned for this pretension or this claim. And yet in condemning Stephen, the accusers who prided themselves on being the defenders of the heritage, the religious heritage of Israel, they are ignoring the experience of none less than Father Abraham.

[19:12] Abraham. And so Stephen begins with Abraham and highlights particularly this element. Now, he says so much more, but we have to move on.

As I say, simply taking snapshots of each section of the account. Moving on to Joseph. Now, in making reference to Joseph, we are again faced with a sobering truth for the Sanhedrin.

God makes His abode with His people wherever they are. In this case, in pagan Egypt. He has spoken to Abraham in Mesopotamia.

But now, we come to Joseph. And what are we told concerning Joseph there in verse 9? The patriarchs were jealous of Joseph. They sold him as a slave into Egypt.

But, God was with him there. God was with him in Egypt. God was particularly present, and his presence was evident, not in the promised land, not with the patriarchs, but with Joseph, the one who had been rejected in Egypt, in pagan Egypt.

[20:23] Now, also with Joseph, we have not only the theme of God being present, whatever he chooses, beyond the confines of a city, or a temple, or indeed a nation, but we also have the motif of a deliverer raised up by God, and yet rejected by Israel.

In this case, Israel represented by his brothers. Joseph raised up to redeem, to rescue Israel, and yet he is rejected. His calling is not recognized, and he is cast aside, but in turn, and in due course, vindicated by God.

We might even say of Joseph that he was dead and buried to all intents and purposes, but then he was raised up in victory by God who vindicated him.

And I wonder if the more careful hearers among his accusers on this occasion will begin at this point to appreciate where Stephen is going with this.

And Stephen is saying, you accuse me, and yet you are the ones who, like the brothers of Joseph of old, have rejected the Redeemer raised up by God.

[21:37] You are the ones who have failed to recognize the one whom God has raised up to redeem Israel. You are following in the line of those who have gone before you, which is precisely what Stephen says in his concluding accusation.

You're just like your fathers. And so Joseph is presented to them as a further evidence of God's international scope of his presence in all places and particularly where his faithful people are present, but also presented as a type, a motif of a deliverer rejected by Israel.

So the men who are condemning Stephen are guilty of the very sin the brothers of Joseph were guilty of, rejecting the one God had called and raised up.

So we have Abraham, we have Joseph, but then we have Moses presented to us by Stephen in this discourse in verse 20.

Of course, this runs almost seamlessly from the Egyptian captivity. In verse 20, he moves on to speak of Moses at that time. Moses was born and he was no ordinary child, we read.

[ 23 : 00 ] And it is to Moses that Stephen dedicates most of his time and argument. It's not surprising because he has been accused textually, as we are told in the previous chapter, of blasphemy against Moses.

There in verse 11 of chapter 6. And so having been accused of blasphemy against Moses, it's not surprising that Stephen would now turn to Moses and rather demonstrate by the account that he gives his high regard for Moses.

Now, what he says concerning Moses, or of what he says concerning Moses, we can maybe highlight the following elements that are relevant to our purposes of seeing what it is Stephen is doing here.

The first thing we can say about Moses is that Moses is the man raised up by God as a deliverer for Israel. And yet, what is the attitude of those for whom he has been raised up?

Well, we read the account of the two Israelites and how Moses seeks to reconcile them and what is their response? Who made you ruler and judge over us?

[ 24 : 10 ] There in verse 27. Who are you? He is rejected by the Israelites. He's not recognized as the God raised up deliverer.

It's also perhaps significant the change in vocabulary employed by Stephen in verse 35 as he recounts this occasion when Moses was addressed with these words.

In fact, rejected with these words. And notice what we read there in verse 35. This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, Who made you ruler and judge?

This is effectively what the Israelite had said. One individual, but I think presented in representation of others. And then Stephen continues and now he's giving his commentary on it and he says he was sent, Moses, he was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself.

And there's a change of vocabulary, not ruler and judge, which is what the Israelite had said, but Stephen introduces more accurately as it were, or more importantly this element concerning Moses, that he was called by God, raised up by God to be their ruler and deliverer or literally redeemer.

[ 25 : 30 ] This is the redeemer that God had raised up, but who was rejected by Israel. And of course this is precisely what Stephen's accusers are doing.

They are rejecting the redeemer raised up by God. We're told also of Moses, and this is perhaps significant in terms of the Jews rejecting Jesus.

We're also told of Moses that he was the one through whom God would reveal himself in a new way. We read in verse 38 how it was through Moses that the people of Israel received living words, or rather he received living words to pass on to us.

The living words of the living and true God were brought to the people through Moses. But the people rejected him. So too with Jesus, the one who brought living words for the people, but rejected by the religious authorities.

Moses also in this account is presented as the one who speaks prophetically of a prophet to be raised up by God. Moses is told of, or is presented as the one who had prophesied that there would indeed be a prophet raised up there in verse 37.

[ 26 : 51 ] This is that Moses who told the Israelites, God will send you a prophet like me from your own people. We know that here Moses is prophesying and speaking concerning the prophet Jesus.

And yet the implication is clear. He too would also be rejected. Moses also, and there are just two further things to say about Moses. Moses also serves to introduce a sobering truth, and it is this, the inability of the people from the very beginning to obey God and His law.

Stephen is being accused of speaking, of preaching against the law. And by presenting Moses and Moses' experience, Stephen says, well you accused me of rejecting the law, but from the very beginning when God gave the law as a wonderful gift for His people, from the very beginning, Israel has been guilty of rejecting the law, of not obeying the law.

Even in the desert, when the outward externals were as prescribed, you know, when Moses took great care that there, and the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle that had been produced for that

purpose, and there was great care taken by Moses that all would be done as God had directed, and yet even though that was so, we have presented here by Stephen as he quotes the prophet Amos, we have a damning indictment, a damning judgment on the people of Israel from the very beginning, that they were guilty of idolatry.

There in verse 42, in the quote from the prophet Amos, did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for 40 years in the desert, O house of Israel? Well, the externals were in great measure as they were meant to be.

[ 28 : 40 ] And yet, what does the prophet Amos say, and Stephen quotes approvingly, you have lifted up the shrine of Moloch and the star of your god, Raphan, the idols you made to worship.

Therefore, I will send you into exile beyond Babylon. From the very beginning, there was a rejection of the law that God had given through Moses.

And so again, the implication is clear. The accusers of Stephen, with their legalistic observance of the law and their offering of sacrifices in the temple are in the same line as the people who Moses had sought to guide in the way that God had directed.

Perhaps one final thing we could say concerning Moses that serves Stephen's purposes, and it is this, that Moses serves to highlight once again what we have already seen with Abraham, with Joseph, this fundamental truth regarding the presence of God not being limited to so-called holy places.

Stephen reminds his audience of how the Lord had appeared to Moses as it's related for us in verse 33. Then the Lord said to him, take off your sandals, the place where you are standing is holy ground.

[ 30 : 01 ] It didn't need to be Jerusalem. It didn't need to be within the promised land. It didn't matter where it was, where God revealed himself to his servant. There is holy ground.

Where God is, is holy ground. Whatever that may be. And the question could have been asked, and maybe Stephen was asking that very question.

Maybe provoking them with this very claim. Or this question, where was God revealing himself in Jerusalem at this time? Where was God making himself known and present in Jerusalem?

Was it in the temple? Or was it among this band of followers of Jesus? Where was God making himself known? Where was God showing himself to be the God who is active to save?

It wasn't in the temple. It was among these despised disciples of Jesus. But in so doing, he was doing what he had ever done.

[ 31 : 01 ] as he had done even with this great hero of the nation, Moses. And then finally, we have in this speech, in this defense by Stephen, a reference to David and Solomon.

And of much that is said concerning David and Solomon, perhaps the key reference is to the words of the prophet Isaiah concerning this magnificent temple that Solomon had built.

Or at least relevant to the temple that Solomon had built. And these words of the prophet are quoted by Stephen in verse 49.

Having recounted how David had wished to build the temple, but it had been Solomon who had done so, he then concludes by quoting the prophet Isaiah. And we have that there in verse 49 where God, through the prophet, speaks, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things? Of course, that language that we find God speaking through the prophet Isaiah is very similar to the language of Solomon himself having concluded the construction of the temple.

[ 32 : 24 ] And we can read that in 2 Chronicles in chapter 2. We won't do so right now for reasons of time. But where Solomon recognizes that though he has built the temple and he has done so because God himself had instructed him to do so, he recognizes that the God for whom he has built this temple is not limited by temples built by the hands of men.

So, Stephen's discourse concerning a God at work outside of the temple, of God present and active amongst the followers of Jesus, far from being a heinous heresy that his accusers claim that it is, is simply in line with the message of the very prophets so revered by the Jews and by the members of the Sanhedrin.

Well, that, his intention, and we have simply identified a few snapshots from the whole mass of content that we have in this chapter, that the intention of Stephen has been to provide a historical backdrop to his stinging accusation with which he concludes his speech from verse 51 and

onwards, that that has been his intention is made clear with the dramatic finale to his speech. Having given this, or having presented this historical summary and highlighting deliberately certain aspects that were relevant, he then concludes, you stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, you are just like your fathers, just like your fathers, just as we've been seeing in this history that you wouldn't dispute.

You see, none of what Stephen has said would have been disputed as being accurate by his accusers. None of them could have said, oh no, but that's not the way it was, or no, it wasn't like that, the story is different. No, everything as he has said, they would have said, well, yes, that's true. [ 34 : 31 ] Yes, we agree with that. And he says, well, if you agree with it, why are you doing what they have always done? Why are you too rejecting the one raised up by God? Why are you trying to limit God and domesticate God and imprison God in your temple and in your legalistic observance of the law?

You are doing what your fathers have always done. You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts. Of course, as he made this accusation, a legitimate accusation, an accusation built on solid evidence, he was signing, of course, his death sentence, and no doubt he was very aware of that. But he had a greater agenda and certainly a greater hope that was not going to be cast down by the prospect of imminent death.

And so he accuses them and displays to them their sin in all its foolishness and ugliness, as the ones who had resisted the Holy Spirit, as the ones who had murdered the righteous one.

And the ones who, having received this law through Moses, had broken that very law in killing the righteous one. This very law that they claimed to revere and accuse Stephen of rejecting.

[ 35 : 56 ] So then, I hope this helps, perhaps in a measure, and there is no doubt, there's so much more that could be said. And there is maybe much more that Stephen intends in this discourse that we haven't mentioned or even identified.

But I hope that in a measure it helps us to understand what is going on here. Fundamentally, this purpose of Stephen to take a step back and present to his accusers the big picture, that they would be able to see in that context what is going on, even though they stubbornly refuse to do so, and rather proceed to kill him.

But finally, and very briefly just for ourselves, of what help is this for us, other than of historical interest and perhaps helping us in a small way, maybe understand something that wasn't all that clear to us concerning this chapter and the purpose that Stephen had in addressing the Sanhedrin in this way.

That in itself is good and useful. But what more can we take from it by way of application? Well, is it not true that we too, though we would quite, I think, legitimately recoil from maybe the accusations that were presented to the accusers of Stephen and perhaps quite legitimately declare ourselves not guilty of these accusations and their gravity and intensity.

Nonetheless, is it not a siren call, as it were, or a wake-up call that we too would examine our traditions in the light of the big picture.

[ 37 : 45 ] That we too would recognize that we can be guilty of seeking to domesticate God, of seeking to limit His presence and the way He works to those ways that we are familiar with and that we are comfortable with.

That we too can be guilty of not recognizing when God is looking to do a new thing in our lives and in our congregation. Guilty of having received the law, indeed of having received the gospel, and yet not obeying nor living that which we have received.

And so I think that even for us, and perhaps especially for us, there is pause for thought that we would examine ourselves lest we too be guilty like the accusers of Stephen of old, of thinking they were in the right, of thinking that they were honoring God, of thinking that they were defending God, and yet rather guilty of the most heinous crimes against God.

Let us pray.