



"Stephen" – Part One"

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the Third Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 6:8-7:

DATE: May 8th, 2011

IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

We are traveling through the book of Acts – the book of the Bible that records what happened to the Church after Jesus rose from the dead. We have seen how the Risen Lord Jesus continues to direct his church, meeting with his disciples and teaching them after he rose from the dead. He then sends the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter preaches about Jesus' death and resurrection, and 3000 people are baptized and become followers of Jesus. The church meets together, studies the apostle's teachings, prays, celebrates Holy Communion and cares for each other in a very generous manner. God does great miracles through Peter and John in the name of Jesus and Peter is able to tell about Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead. The church continues to grow but Peter and John are put in prison by the Jewish

leadership and then are commanded not to speak or preach in Jesus' name any longer.

A couple weeks ago we heard how the Jewish authorities continued to persecute the followers of Jesus, and how the church responded by praising God for the honour of suffering for Jesus. Last week we heard how the ministry of the Word and prayer was set apart from the ministry of caring for the poor. The congregation decided to assign seven men to run the deaconate ministry – a ministry that cared for the needy. This allowed the Apostles to give their full attention to preaching and teaching God's Word. And the church grew as a result of this decision. We try to imitate this model today as Pastor's have the full time preaching and teaching ministry and the congregation – voter's assembly – church council – handles all the other ministries and administration.

Before we talk about Acts chapter six I want you to think back to the first chapter of Acts when Jesus rises from the dead and gives instructions to his apostles... Acts 1:8, Jesus says "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They did receive power – the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. But, thus far, they had only been witnesses in Jerusalem, not in all Judea, certainly not in Samaria, and well – no where near the ends of the earth.

All that is about to change... Acts 6:8-11 reads, "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."

We met Stephen before. He's one of the seven men chosen by the church to run the social ministry and care for the poor. Yet God was also using him in many other ways – He was doing miraculous signs among the people and witnessing to others about Jesus. Stephen's God given wisdom and the Holy Spirit's gifts were too much for those who opposed him. They had to resort to false testimony against Stephen so that the authorities would quiet him.

Acts 6: 12-14 gives the details of their plan to quiet Stephen... "So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Two charges against Stephen were made... One: He speaks against God's Temple. Two: HE speaks against God's Word – the Torah – the first 5 books

of the Old Testament. More specifically, Stephen is accused of teaching that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the Word of God.

There were no charges a Jewish person could face that were more serious than these... one of them alone was enough to get you the death penalty! For the Jews of that day, the temple was where God was present. God had promised to Solomon that his Glory would dwell in the temple and that he would hear the repentant prayers of his people when they prayed in the temple. Even though the original temple Solomon built had been destroyed and the temple that was standing in the first century AD was the 3rd rebuild – the Jews still took God's promises seriously. The temple was a sort of guarantee of God's presence and deliverance.

The Torah – or the Law – the first 5 books of the Old Testament were the undisputed Word of God for the Jews. While the Temple was the promise of God's saving presence, the Torah held these promises. The Torah was where they could be certain God would speak to them and where they could be certain they were following his ways. Once again – Stephen was falsely charged with speaking against both God's Temple and God's Word in the Torah.

The following verses tell us how Stephen began his defense. Acts 6:15-7:3, "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?" To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. `Leave your country and your people,' God said, `and go to the land I will show you.'" So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: `Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, `and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs."

Stephen reaches back into the Torah and begins to talk about the Torah speaks of God relating to Abraham. God appeared to Abraham, was with Abraham, and spoke to Abraham hundreds of years before the Temple was built by Solomon or the Torah was written by Moses. Stephen's point... neither Abraham nor Moses ever imagined God as being stuck in a building. God's presence was never limited to any particular place or people or country for that matter. These are facts right from the Torah itself.

Furthermore, Abraham was called by God while he was still in Mesopotamia! Even there – in the midst of people who worshipped many different gods –

The LORD God called Abraham. God spoke to Abraham and told him his plans for the future. God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision and was with Isaac and Jacob his son and grandson – speaking to them as he spoke to Abraham.

This is the testimony found all through the Torah and the Old Testament. Stephen continues his defense... Acts 7: 9-19 "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace." "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money." Stephen continues preaching from the Torah referring to the case of Joseph – once again God is with him when he is sold as a slave and brought to Egypt.

And God rescued him and prospered him in Egypt and saved many people through Joseph's ministry. God brought Joseph's family – Jacob and his sons - to Egypt and they died there. God was with them through this entire time. God was never confined to a country or a temple.

All this information that Stephen is giving is from the very first book of the Torah – Genesis. What is the lesson so far? Abraham's God is the Lord God of all the earth. He is not only the God of the Jews. He is not confined to a temple. His actions are not limited to certain times or areas of the earth. He can communicate wherever and whenever he pleases and with whomever he pleases – be they believers or non-believers. Do you need to change your thinking about God in this manner?

1 John 2:2 reads, "He (Jesus) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." Jesus' death on the cross was for all people of all time because Jesus is the one true God of all people of all time. All human kind came from Adam – and the God who created all humanity – loves all humanity and has redeemed us through the crucifixion and resurrection of His Son. And God is not confined to certain cultures, countries, cities, or buildings. He is however, most clearly revealed in his precious Son. We'll hear more about Stephen next week.