



"Stephen" – Part Two"

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 7

DATE: May 15th, 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...

Last week we heard about how Stephen was charged with speaking against God's Temple and against God's Word. Stephen was a respected follower of Jesus with many gifts from God. He was brought before the highest Jewish court – the Sanhedrin – and was called on to answer the charges. Stephen went right to the Old Testament and demonstrated that God called Abraham when he was in a different country and was with him and his descendants in all their travels. God was not confined to a certain country, culture, or building. And God spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob while they traveled all over the Middle East.

Today we will continue to hear Stephen's defense. His message is two fold... First, wherever God is present – that his Holy Ground. And second, the Israelites have always resisted God's chosen leaders – finally, they resisted his very own Son.

The question we will have to ask our selves is, "What makes us think we are any different???"

Let's continue listening to Stephen's sermon... Acts 7:17-29, "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. ¹⁸ Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. ¹⁹ He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. ²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. AC 7:23 "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. ²⁴ He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. ²⁵ Moses thought that his own people

would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. ²⁶ The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?' AC 7:27 "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons."

Stephen continues to preach straight from the Torah – now he goes from Genesis to Exodus. He focus's on the life of Moses – but especially how God sent Moses as Israel's deliverer. This was a fact that none of the people would have argued with Stephen. Yet in verse 25 Stephen says, "Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not."

God sends a Saviour and the people don't realize it. God sends a rescuer and the people don't accept him.

God sends a deliverer and the people reject him.

And so Moses runs away at the age of 40 and spends another 40 years as a shepherd working for his father-in-law and starting a family. Then after 40 years, at the tender age of 80, even though the people had rejected him and he'd been long forgotten, God sent him back.

Stephen continues to tell the story... Acts 7: 30-36 AC 7: 30 "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. AC 7: 33 "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.' AC 7: 35 "This is the same Moses whom 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 did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

Stephen reveals something stunning... Moses was outside of the Holy Land – in Midian – near Mount Sinai – tending his father's sheep. God says to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing his holy ground.' There is holy ground outside the 'holy land'. Because, where ever God is present – that is holy ground.

Listen to what Stephen is revealing about God's people. The same Moses that they rejected was sent by God himself. The same Moses that they rejected

led them out of Egypt and did many miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and for 40 years in the desert.

After all these things they still rejected Moses as their leader. But he was their leader because God made him their leader. Their rejection did not negate God's plan or God's choice of Moses. God didn't stand back and say – 'Darn – they rejected my chosen leader – I'll have to go back and get someone else.' No – God's plan and chosen leader went ahead despite his people's rejection.

Stephen continues... "AC 7:37 "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'³⁸ He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. AC 7:39 "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.⁴⁰ They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt--we don't know what has happened to him!'⁴¹ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made.⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: " 'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? AC 7:43 You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.'

This section of Stephen's sermon is so filled with truth that it could not be refuted. The same Moses they rejected told the Israelites that God would send a prophet like him from their own people. Since then the Israelites had been looking for this prophet to come – one who would speak to God as Moses did – one who would do miraculous signs beyond all others as Moses did. And sadly, one who would be rejected by the people as Moses was. Only Jesus of Nazareth fit that description.

But let's look at the amazing truth Stephen draws from Exodus... First he speaks of how their Jewish ancestors rejected Moses and God's plan and wanted to return to Egypt. Again – this happened so many times in Exodus you almost lose count.

But it gets worse... They ask Aaron to make them other gods, rejecting God Himself. Even the prophets of the Old Testament spoke about this total rejection of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses... Acts 7: 42-43, 'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? AC 7:43 You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.' Stephen is reminding the Jewish leadership that their very own fore-fathers rejected God's chosen leader and also rejected God Himself and worshipped the planets, the sun, the moon, and the stars. There was no debate about this – it's all right from

the Old Testament – the same book they have accused Stephen of trying to change.

Stephen then begins to bring his sermon to a close revisiting the charge about destroying God's temple... Acts 7: 44-50

⁴⁴ "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built the house for him. AC 7: 48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: AC 7: 49 " ` 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? AC 7: 50 Has not my hand made all these things?"

One might have argued with Stephen that God was present in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle where the ark of the covenant was kept. The very same ark that was placed in the Holy of Holies of Solomon's temple. Yet both Solomon and Isaiah understood that man-made buildings could not contain the God of the universe. In 1 Kings 8:27 Solomon says, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"

Stephen now gives his final appeal to those leaders that had rejected God's chosen one – his very own Son Jesus Christ... Acts 7:51-53, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- ⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

As the prophets in the Old Testament spoke to God's people – now Stephen speaks to them. Yes he calls them names – stiff-necked – just like your fathers. Uncircumcised hearts and ears – just like your fathers. Always resisting the Holy Spirit – just like your fathers. Persecuting the prophets – just like your fathers. Finally betraying and murdering God's chosen Messiah! While you received God's Law – you have not obeyed it.

God's Saviour came and they did not receive him. Yet God's plan did not change and God's Saviour continued to fulfill God's plan. He went to the cross and paid for the sins of all humanity – including those who rejected him and nailed him to the cross.

The reaction of the leaders of one of pride – not humility... Acts 7:54-8:1, "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of

God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." AC 7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. AC 7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. 8:1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death."

Stephen's defense was no more or less convicting than the last two times we've heard Peter preaching in Acts. Yet when Peter preached thousands believed and were baptized. The result is much different after Stephen's sermon.

Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. He dies with his eyes on Jesus. He dies with his heart on Jesus as he prays for the forgiveness of those who stone him. He dies trusting God – commending his spirit into the hands of Jesus.

He also dies with the approval of a young Pharisee named Saul who was content to watch the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death.

The question we will have to ask our selves is, "What makes us think we are any different???" Are we not rebellious sinners? Do we not resist the Holy Spirit as he moves us to follow Jesus? I believe one of the biggest errors we could make in hearing this sermon of Stephens would be to think that we are different than those he spoke to.

As we see Stephen die for the sake of God's plan – let us humbly examine ourselves in the light of his message and with a spirit of deep repentance – let us seek Gods forgiveness in Jesus.