

## Acts 7 - John Karmelich

1. The best title I have for Acts Chapter 7 is "Who's on trial here anyway?"
  - i) (Credit for that title goes to Chuck Missler.)
  - b) In this chapter, Stephen, is on trial in front of the Jewish High Council for the charges of blaspheming the name of God, the temple and Judaism. Chapter 7 is his defense.
  - c) As you read it, you're not sure if Stephen is on the defense or the prosecuting attorney! Stephen spends most of the speech reciting various parts of Old Testament history, pointing out the failure of the Israelites to obey what God has commanded them do.
    - i) Much of the Old Testament is a history of failure. It is about the Israelites trying to please God through their own efforts, and the amazing number of times they turn their focus on themselves, away from God and get into trouble.
    - ii) One of the big-picture lessons of the Old Testament is our failure to please God through our own efforts!
  - d) In defense of these charges, Stephen never denies them. Instead, Stephen gives a history lesson. Why?
    - i) Stephen's goal is to point the Sanhedrin toward Jesus. That should be the purpose of *any* sermon.
    - ii) Stephen gives an Old Testament History lesson, mainly to show that the rejection of God's plan has been a historical pattern.
2. One of the interesting things to point out about Stephen is that he was a young Christian.
  - a) Stephen did not spend 3 years with Jesus like the 12 apostles.
  - b) Stephen was not even trained to be a rabbi like Paul in higher education.
  - c) Stephen was a new convert with 1-2 years-Christian experience, tops.
    - i) Grant it, he probably had the "standard-Jewish "Sunday school" education that most Jewish boys had, but *that* can't explain the beauty, details, and arguments presented by Stephen *under pressure* in this Speech.
    - ii) Only the presence of the Holy Spirit, guiding Stephen could explain this!
    - iii) It is also interesting to see Stephen's ability to quote Old Testament Scripture *under pressure* without having it in front of him.
      - a) There is an application for us to learn the Bible. We never know when we are going to be used by God and have a need to recite it!
3. Stephen's speech is going to get a lot into prophecy. There is a special category of prophecy called "types" or "patterns". For example:
  - i) You can study Abraham as a "type" of Christ
  - ii) Or David, or Joseph as a "type" of Christ.
  - iii) This is taught in Judaism as well as Christianity.
    - a) Prophecy is not just predictions, its *patterns*.
    - b) One looks for *patterns* in the Bible to foretell future events.
  - b) Every aspect of Jesus life, ministry, his mission, his resurrection, his first and second coming can be found somewhere in the Old Testament.
    - i) Sometimes it is written as predictions of a "coming one",
  - c) Jesus himself believed *all* of the Old Testament spoke of his coming. Since much of the Old Testament is stories that have nothing to do with a coming Messiah, the prophecy *must* be by "types" or "patterns".
    - i) "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Revelation 19:10b)
    - ii) Jesus talking to the Pharisee's said: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, (John 5:39 NIV)

4. The neat thing to get out of studying Stephen's speech is that it gives lessons on *how* to study, and apply the Old Testament Scriptures.
  - a) One of my favorite Bible-teaching expressions is
  - b) "The *pictures* in the Old Testament are the *principals* in the New Testament.
  - c) The Old Testament is full of history lessons and word-pictures. Even though they are actual events, they are written for *our benefit* so that we may learn from them.
    - i) For everything that was written in the past (Old Testament) was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4 NIV)
  
5. Back to the story in Acts. In the end of Acts Chapter 6, Stephen was on trial in front of the high-Jewish council. Stephen had become a successful witness for Jesus. He was successful in debating against the Jewish rabbi's, and people were becoming Christians because of Stephen's testimony. Chapter 6 even mentioned that some of the Jewish priests were converting to Christianity. Because the Chief Rabbi's were losing the verbal-battle, they "played dirty". They brought in false-witnesses to testify against Stephen.
  - a) The basic charges were:
    - i) Blasphemy against the Law
    - ii) Blasphemy against the Temple and the Land.
  - b) These charges were the basis of the Jewish religion at that time. They looked at the Temple as the central place where God met the people. They were hoping that the Messiah would set up the millennial kingdom *there at that time*.
    - i) Little did they know that about 30-40 years later, the Roman army would destroy the temple, down to the ground, as Jesus had predicted (Matt. 24:2).
  
6. When you read Chapter 7, it sounds initially like Stephen reciting Jewish history, and then he goes into a rant because the Jewish Council rejected Jesus as the Messiah.
  - a) Stephen's response is never "These charges aren't true". He responds by citing the *evidence*. He gives a history-lesson as proof that the rebellion against God has been a historical pattern for the Jewish people.
  - b) Once you read the arguments more carefully, you will realize how brilliant Stephen's speech actually is, and how it contradicts the charges made against him in Chapter 6.
  - c) The big-themes to see in Stephen's speech is that:
    - i) The rejection of Jesus as Messiah is part of a pattern.
    - ii) Stephen even points out the failures of some of the most venerated men in Jewish history and their rebellion, as well as the general rebellion of the people.
    - iii) The Jewish leaders were looking at the Temple, and their style of Temple Worship as *the, and the only way* to worship God. One of the things that Stephen points out is that the history of the Israeli people worshipping God did not necessarily involve the Temple, or even, worshipping from the land of Israel. God moved in their lives in other locations as well.
    - iv) What's the general application to you & me of Stephen's speech?
      - a) There is *always* a danger to trust in our "system", just as the High Council of Israel trusted in their "system". That could be our church buildings, our denominational way of worship, the way we dress. The history of the church is not much better than the history of Israel.
      - b) While there have been many great things done in the name of Christ, there have been many embarrassing and horrendous things as well.
      - c) Our goodness does *not* come from the things we do in Christ's name, it comes from God working *through* us when we are obedient to what God calls to us to do.

- d) Oh boy, 2 pages down, and there is 59 verses in this chapter, I'd better get started! ☺
7. Chapter 6 ended with a summary of the charges leveled against Stephen. Chapter 7 begins with the high priest turning to Stephen for his response.
8. Chapter 7, Verse 1: Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?" <sup>2</sup> To this he (Stephen) 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. <sup>3</sup> 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'
- a) Remember that one of the basic charges is that Stephen is accused of being "anti-Jewish" and teaching contrary to their religion.
- i) Stephen opens with "brothers and fathers", as if to say "I'm one of you"
- ii) Stephen further starts the history lesson with the first "Jew", Abraham.
- a) Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish nation as God called him to go form the nation.
- b) The 12 tribes of Israel started from his 12 great-grandsons.
- b) Part of the "theme" that Stephen is going to work on is that God does work *outside* of the Land of Israel as well as *inside*.
- i) The Jewish leaders saw the land of Israel as somehow, "more holy".
- a) Remember that one of the charges leveled against Stephen in Chapter 6 was: "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law." (Acts 6:13 NIV).
- ii) "This Holy Place" refers to either the Temple and/or "The Land"
- iii) Stephen's defense is to show that God first called Abraham in a different country to come to this land.
- iv) Stephen's point is God *does* also work outside of the land of Israel.
9. Verse 4, continuing with Abraham: "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.
- a) Verse 2 mentions that God called Abraham when he was living in Mesopotamia, "before he lived in Haran". What is that all about?
- i) Mesopotamia, today is part of Iraq.
- ii) Haran is part of modern Syria.
- iii) Haran is *not* the Promised Land (i.e. Israel). That's the point!
- b) God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land. Instead Abraham "compromised" and only went "half-way" to Haran. He hung out there with his father. After his father died, *then* Abraham fully obeyed God and went to see the Promised Land.
- i) If one does the calculations correctly, there is about a 25-year gap where Abraham "hung out" in Haran.
- a) Why did Abraham wait until the death of his father to move to the land of Israel?
- b) Maybe that's as far as his father was willing to sojourn.
- c) Although Abraham was a grown man, he still felt a loyalty to his father, and "compromised" with God in his travels.
- ii) Stephen's point is simply that although Abraham will always be remembered as "the Father of Faith" and is honored by the Jewish, Christian and even Muslim faith, there are areas where Abraham himself failed to be obedient to God.
- c) The application to us as Christians is "Has God called you the same way God called Abraham? Are you compromising with what God called you to do?"
- i) God will often compromise with us. Because God loves us, he will only take us to a level of faith that *we* are willing to go. God often has greater plans for us than *we* are willing to accept by faith.

10. Back to Abraham, Verse 5: He (God) gave him (Abraham) 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.' <sup>8</sup> 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.
- a) Well, here's a summary of most of Genesis in one paragraph.
    - i) One can do a detailed study of these verses and their applications.
    - ii) The main point is what does this paragraph have to do with Stephen's defense?
  - b) I believe the main point Stephen is trying to tell is that Abraham himself received relatively little blessing during his lifetime. Near the end of his life is when he received the son he always wanted. The great promises made to Abraham about a great nation would not come until centuries later.
    - i) "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1 NIV)
    - ii) The Jewish Council put their trust in what they *saw*: (the temple, the land).
    - iii) Stephen's point is that he is putting his trust in God and not the visible signs like the Temple.
      - a) "Abraham didn't need the temple to be close to God." David Guzik
  - c) One bit of trivia: A lot of Bible critics like to point out that they were actually in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40), not 400 years as stated by Stephen.
    - i) The reconciliation is quite easy. The Pharaoh-over-Joseph was "pro-Israel". Therefore, the first 30 years were not part of the slavery. God told Abraham in Genesis 15:13 that they would be *enslaved* 400 years, not 430 years.
    - ii) The point is when you see a possible contradiction in the Scriptures, study the facts, often it is not true and there is an explanation.
11. Verse 9: Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him <sup>10</sup> 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.
- a) Now the focus shifts from Abraham, to his great grandson Joseph. Joseph was one of the 12 sons of Jacob that formed the 12 tribes of Israel.
  - b) What's Stephen's point here? Again, the rebellion against God's plan.
  - c) The emphasis is on how Joseph's' brothers sold him into slavery out of jealousy.
  - d) I am sure that the brothers were *very* aware of the promises made to Abraham of how God was going to do a great work through *all 12*. The fact that they sold Joseph into slavery is an act of rebellion against God's plan, and that's Stephen's point.
  - e) It's amazing to think about how God worked through Joseph. In the history of civilization, how often has a slave-boy, who then was falsely accused and put in prison and *then* becomes the 2nd most powerful man on earth. (Egypt was at its height of power.) There have been some political prisoners made into kings/presidents, but I never heard of a "regular" prisoner elevated that way. It is another sign of God at work.
  - f) Did God know Joseph's brothers would rebel as such? Of course, God knows all things. Did God hold them accountable for their actions? Yes, you can read of their guilt through many chapters of Genesis. Even though God used Joseph in a mighty way, the brothers are still accountable for their actions.

- g) The same applies to Jesus. Was God aware of the crucifixion? Of course, God knows all things. It still means the Sanhedrin was guilty of condemning Jesus to death, even though God used that for our benefit. We are still held accountable.
12. Verse 11: "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. <sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. <sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. <sup>16</sup> 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.
- a) One of the patterns you'll see in Stephen's speech is his emphasis on "second time".
- i) Abraham went into the Promised Land after God spoke to Him a second time after his father died.
  - ii) Joseph revealed who he was to his brothers after the second time they visited.
  - iii) Next we'll read about Moses.
    - a) He was only accepted as their leader the *second time*.
- b) What's the point?
- i) The point is the *pattern* of rejection. In my introduction I talked about a style of prophecy called *type or patterns*.
  - ii) The point by Stephen is that often in Jewish history, their leaders only obeyed after missing the point the first time.
  - iii) This is the case with Jesus. They *missed* their opportunity for the Messiah on Jesus 1st coming.
  - iv) On Jesus *second* coming, Jesus *himself* will reveal who he is to the Israelites.
  - v) This was prophesized by Zechariah, (Chapter 12, Verse 10, NIV)
    - a) "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."
    - b) For further study on this point, also see Matthew 23, Verses 37-39, especially the last verse.
- c) More "contradiction" debate:
- i) The Book of Genesis states the descendants of Jacob were 70 in all, not including Joseph's family (Genesis 46:27). Here Stephen says there are 75 people in all that were a part of Jacob's family. It sounds like a contradiction.
    - a) The explanation is that Joseph had children and grandchildren by the time everybody came to Egypt, and the number *now* totaled 75.
  - ii) Another "contradiction" debate is that commentators point out that Stephen got "his tombs mixed up". Joseph's' father *also* bought a tomb as well as Abraham, and Stephen may have been referring to the gravesite Jacob bought.
    - a) One of the commentators I listed (Chuck Missler) had a *lengthy* explanation that reconciled this passage. It's too long to be included here, but there *is* an explanation that reconciles this difference.
  - iii) Don't assume an *apparent* contradiction *is* a contradiction. Further study will often reveal otherwise!

13. Verse 17: "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. <sup>18</sup> Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. <sup>19</sup> He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.
- a) The Pharaoh in charge when the 12 tribes of Israel first came to Egypt was "Pro-Jewish". That was the first 30 years as stated. Now here comes the 400 years of slavery".
  - b) The king, or Pharaoh, that Stephen is talking about here is the "last" Pharaoh that was around at the time of Moses.
  - c) I suspect, but can't prove, this Pharaoh heard of the 400-year prediction and knew the time was almost up. Pharaoh, or the demonic forces behind Pharaoh, was responsible for the killing of Hebrew children to prevent a "redeemer" from entering the world.
  - d) Again notice the "prophecy by parallelism" between Jesus' birth and this incident. Remember Herod was the king at the time of Jesus' birth. Both Pharaoh and Herod tried to prevent a great leader from being born, by killing all the babies. In both cases, God miraculously preserved them from this persecution.
    - i) I always feel sorrow thinking about the innocent Jewish families whose babies were killed, all because of the evil intentions of Satan trying to thwart God's game plan. The only comfort to get out of both situations is to remember that those children are in heaven, God has punished the evil doers, and God allowed this situation for a greater good.
  - e) Back to Stephen's speech, why is he bringing this up?
    - i) Remember that Stephen was accused of being "Anti-Moses". Here is Stephen reciting, with great accuracy, the situation where Moses was born.
    - ii) I suspect another point is that God works *through* situations of oppression to bring in a redeemer. At the time of Stephen's speech, Israel going through a time of difficult oppression from the Romans. They didn't see that God was using this time to bring in *the* Redeemer.
14. Verse 20: "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. <sup>21</sup> When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.
- a) Here Stephen continues his knowledge of Moses as a defense in front of the council.
    - i) Stephen's point is that he was acknowledging Moses was raised to be a redeemer of his people.
  - b) It becomes obvious from studying the text that Moses was being raised as the redeemer. During a time when the babies were being killed, one of them "miraculously" survives, and not only survives, is raised by Pharaoh's daughter. This Pharaoh did not have any sons, so this "adopted" baby-Moses was set to be next in line to be Pharaoh.
    - i) If *that* isn't God working in the affairs of mankind, I don't know what is! ☺
  - c) To be educated in all the wisdom of Egypt was no minor thing.
    - i) Egypt was the greatest civilization of that day. Their knowledge of science, the arts, construction, beauty, preservation, marvels much of *our* technology and knowledge. To this day it is still unknown how they accomplished some of the things they did.
    - ii) To be raised "in all the wisdom of Egypt" also included military skills, ranging from "hand to hand combat" up to army offense/defense strategy. Remember that Egypt *ruled* the whole world, and that meant a strong army.

- d) In Verse 22 it states that Moses "was powerful in speech and action".
    - i) Remember when Moses saw the burning bush, he complained that he couldn't do the job because he was "slow of speech", possibly implying stuttering.
      - a) This may show that Moses was either lying to God, or after 40 years in the dessert, lost his confidence in his speaking ability!
  - e) This verse also contains another "hint" that Luke was *definitely* the author of Acts. Verse 21, in the Greek, uses a medical term for raising a baby, best translated "nurtured". Luke was a physician. This word is only one a doctor would use.
15. Verse 23: "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. <sup>24</sup> He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. <sup>26</sup> 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?' <sup>27</sup> 'But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' <sup>29</sup> When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.
- a) What is Stephen's main point here? Rejection! The people initially *rejected* Moses!
    - i) It is part of Stephen's theme that it is only the *second* time the Israelites will accept their redeemer.
  - b) When you study Exodus, where all of this takes place, there is a 40-year gap between the time Moses was rejected the first time and when God called Moses through the burning bush.
    - i) There is an implication here that *since* the people rejected Moses at age 40, there is a "40 year punishment of more slavery" before they get their second chance of allowing Moses to be their redeemer.
  - c) In Exodus, the implication is that Moses acted "in the flesh" when he killed the Egyptian, and that God wasn't ready to use him yet. Moses had *all* man's education he needed to be a leader, but he did not have the humility before God. Does that contradict Stephen's point of "rejection" by the Israelites?
    - i) My argument is "no". Both are true. This falls in the "free-will versus predestiny" debate. God knows all things. He was *aware* that the Israelites were going to reject Moses the first time, and thus, fulfilling prophecy-by-example. God also *used* that situation to humble Moses and build him up as a leader after he lost his self-confidence after the 40 years of the initial rejection.
16. Skipping ahead to 40 years later in the history lesson, Verse 30, "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. <sup>31</sup> When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: <sup>32</sup> 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> 'Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> 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.'
- a) Stephen's point is he's "Pro-Moses" and is continuing to accurately recite their history, with the intention of pointing out the Israelites' rebellion against God. Stephen will make that clear again in Verse 35. This is a "re-cap" of the famous "burning bush" passage.

- b) Another of Stephen's general-themes is that God *also* works outside of the land of Israel. Here is a good summary comment of this theme:
- i) "He (Stephen) argues that God's significant activity has usually taken place outside the confines of Palestine (Israel), that wherever God meets his people can be called "holy ground," that God is the God who calls his own to move forward in their religious experience, and that therefore dwelling in the land of promise requires a pilgrim lifestyle in which the land may be appreciated but never venerated." Expositor's Bible Encyclopedia.
17. Here comes the emphasis on their rejection, Verse 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.
- a) Stephen "set up" his audience by first pointing out God's plan, and then, their failure to act upon it. God's plan was to redeem Israel in a mighty and dramatic fashion, as so it would be obvious to the reader and observer that this whole action was from the hand of God. Stephen's emphasis is how God did a mighty work through a man they (corporately) rejected.
- b) Stop and think about the whole Exodus of out of Egypt. Imagine several million slaves that were part of a great Empire. Being outnumbered, slaves, with no weapons to speak of, through a series of plagues, the Pharaoh *agrees* to let these people leave. Pharaoh's army gets drowned in the Red Sea after changing his mind about them leaving. These same millions survive 40 years in one of the worst dessert climates on earth to eventually settle in Israel. There *is* no explanation other than the hand of God. Their existence today, along with archeological finds, supports the accuracy of this story.
18. Verse 37: "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'<sup>38</sup> 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.
- a) Near the end of Moses life, Moses gathers all the people in a large canyon, so they could all here him. This speech is (for the most part) The Book of Deuteronomy. He recites much of the law that God has already stated in the previous books of the Bible. Verse 37, (above) is a quote of Deuteronomy 18:15.
- b) In Peter's sermon in Acts 3, Verse 22, Peter also quotes this verse.
- c) What's the point?
- i) First of all, that God will raise *another* prophet "like me". What does "like me" mean? A redeemer! One who will redeem his people. Only Moses redeemed the people from slavery. Jesus, the fulfillment of this prophecy, redeemed the people from the slavery of sin.
- ii) Second, remember the accusations thrown at Stephen. He was accused of violating "the law". What Stephen is emphasizing here is that a redeemer will come *outside of the law* that was given by Moses. *Not* that this redeemer will put down the law, but that this next redeemer will fulfill it.
- a) "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Mathew 5:17 NIV)
- b) "Stephen's point is that in Deut.18:15. Moses pointed beyond himself and beyond the instruction that came through him to another whom God would raise up in the future and to whom Israel must give heed and that, therefore, Israel cannot limit divine revelation and redemption to the confines of the Mosaic law." Expositor's Bible Encyclopedia.



19. Verse 39: "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. <sup>40</sup> 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!' <sup>41</sup> 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.
- a) Here Stephen continues his emphasis on the *rejection* of God's plan.
  - b) One of the most difficult things to comprehend in the Bible was this "golden calf" incident as summarized here by Stephen. The Israelites saw the 10 plagues, the parting the of Red Sea, the manna falling from the sky every night, etc, Moses going up to Mt. Sinai as it is covered in smoke, yet despite *all this visible signs, they still turned their back on God*. It's hard to imagine someone seeing all that evidence and still rejecting God.
    - i) One of the most important things to learn about this incident is that *signs and miracles are not enough to convince people to change their life and turn toward God*.
    - ii) We as Christians, often make the same mistakes. We have all the evidence of history, the Bible, visible miracles in our lives, and we still can turn our back on God at times. Our only hope of keeping from sin is to *continually* be in prayer, the Word, and time with other believers.
      - a) "All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; (Isaiah 53:6a NKJV)
20. Verse 42: But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies.
- a) There is an implication in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testament, that if you *continually* turn your back to God, God will eventually say "OK, you want to commit such-and-such type of sin, fine, I'll *really* give you a desire for *that* sin." It is a form of love on God's part. God wants to show us just how *bad* sin is. By giving us a greater desire for *that* particular sin, it will eventually show others and us through the sin's consequences what a horrible effect it will have on our lives.
    - i) That is what this verse is saying. In effect God is saying "You want to worship idols, great, I *really* give you a desire to worship idols so you're realize how bad this is for your life."
      - a) "So it was that when they gave God up and would not even acknowledge him, God gave them up to doing everything their evil minds could think of." (Romans 1:28 The Living Bible)
21. Stephen continues, Verse 39: 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? <sup>43</sup> 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.
- a) This is a quote from the Book of Amos, Chapter 5, Verses 25-27. It may not read exactly the same in your Old Testament translation because Stephen was quoting from the Greek translation of the Hebrew.
  - b) It is one thing to say to *the* head-group of Jewish rulers and Rabbi's: *your* fathers disobeyed Moses all those 40 years in the dessert. Stephen uses the prophet Amos (The Old Testament Book of Amos) as supporting evidence for his claim.
    - i) Again, I'm impressed with Stephen's ability to quote the Bible off the top of his head. This is *not* a planned sermon. Stephen was dragged into this hearing!

22. Verse 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.<sup>45</sup> 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,<sup>46</sup> who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.<sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built the house for him.<sup>48</sup>" However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:<sup>49</sup> " `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?<sup>50</sup> Has not my hand made all these things?"
- a) During the time the Israelites were in the dessert, God gave Moses the instructions on how to build a portable tabernacle. That tabernacle stayed with them through the 40 years, through the time they entered the Promised Land, and it was used for another 400 years (more or less) until Solomon built a permanent temple.
    - i) "Stephen's point is that the presence of the temple did not keep them from rejecting God and His special messengers" David Guzik.
  - b) King David asked to build the temple, but God said in 2nd Samuel, Chapter 7 that "his seed after him" will build a temple for me. The interesting thing is that it never mentions Solomon (David's son) by name. The verse is meant as a prophecy that Jesus will be that son (decedent) that builds a temple.
    - i) Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." (John 2:19 NIV)
    - ii) I also believe that one of the reasons God did not allow David himself to build a temple was that "his hands were bloody". (1 Chronicles 28:3). God did not want a temple associated with military success. Outsiders will think that this Temple of God will exist due to those successful military campaigns.
  - c) What you don't *get* from reading 2nd Samuel, Chapter 7 was that the building of the permanent-structure-Temple, as opposed to a portable-structure tabernacle *was a compromise on God's part*.
    - i) Stephen supports his argument in Verses 49-50 by quoting from Isaiah 66:1
    - ii) Remember that one of the accusations against Stephen is that he blasphemed the "Temple". Stephen's point is the Temple itself is a compromise with God!
    - iii) Although Jesus himself acknowledge the Temple as "My House" (Matthew 21:13, et.al., thus declaring himself to be God!) the point is that God did not *desire* a permanent structure as a place of worship!
    - iv) The negative point of the Temple is people trusted in *it* more than God. The thought was "This is God's place, we are safe here, God will never destroy *this place*." It is the danger in trusting in a building more than God himself. I take the view that one of the reasons the temple was destroyed *twice* (Once by the Babylonians, and again centuries later by the Romans) is to prove that point.
23. At this point, Stephen, does not feel it is necessary to give more of a history lesson. He could have continued with the stories told in 1st and 2nd Kings about all the rebellion of the kings and the people against God. The main reason God let both the Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom into captivity is because their idolatry got to a point of no return.
24. Verse 51. Stephen let's them have it:<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!<sup>52</sup> 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--<sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."
- a) The Bible and other historians have recorded that most, if not all of the Old Testament prophets were killed as the people did not want to hear the message of repentance.

- b) Jesus himself hinted at this fact: "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar." (Matthew 23:35 NIV)
    - i) Chronologically, Zechariah was one of the last Old Testament Prophets.
  - c) Stephen got frustrated at this point. He probably didn't see a need to go further on with a history lesson. Stephen's point is that this Jewish council was acting *exactly* like their forefathers were.
    - i) "The essential message is, "as Israel was, so are you now; you have now become the betrayers and murderers"" David Guzik.
  - d) Calling the Israelites "stiff necked" and uncircumcised hearts" were both Old Testament terms that God himself used to describe the Israelites
    - i) (Examples of each, Exodus 32:9, Jeremiah 9:26)
25. As I stated in my introduction, "truth" has a way of hitting you hard. Either the Sanhedrin could repent, and accept Stephen's statements, or their frustrations of these accusations could lead them to violence. Verse 54: When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."
- a) "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." (F.F. Bruce)
  - b) This same group of Jewish leaders heard almost the *exact* same speech from Jesus himself when he was on trial prior to the crucifixion.
    - i) Jesus said, "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."
  - c) The only difference between Stephen's vision and Jesus comment is that Stephen said he saw Jesus (i.e. "Son of Man) *standing*, Jesus said he will be *seating*.
    - i) Some commentators (Ray Stedman, among others) see this as Jesus greeting Stephen as he comes into heaven. Stedman's personal view is that is what *each* of us will see at the moment of our entering heaven.
    - ii) I also like other commentators (Missler, et. al.) who see Jesus *standing* as part of his role as our "High Priest", interceding on our behalf before God. In the tabernacle and Temple, there were no places to seat. The function of the High Priest was to stand and intercede on our behalf.
  - d) I find it interesting that Luke says they "gnashed their teeth". That's how Jesus describes hell: "They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."
    - i) Remember that hell is *not* a place for being "a bad person". Hell is designed for those who reject Jesus. Here is a *literal* fulfillment.
26. At this point, the rage was building in the council. Verse 57: At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> 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.
- a) Here we have a brief introduction to Saul, who later became Paul.
    - i) I personally take the view that other than Jesus himself, no single person had a greater influence on civilization than Paul. We'll save that for another lesson.
    - ii) Luke mentions this as a starting point in the transformation of Paul's life.

27. Last 2 verses (we made it! ☺) <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> 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.
- a) That's the true power of grace at work. Despite Stephen's anger at the Sanhedrin council, despite their rejection of Stephen's message and defense, despite the fact that they were trying to kill Stephen, Stephen was asking for forgiveness for them. Why?
    - i) You, like Stephen, need to have the "eternal perspective". For God *not* to forgive them is to sentence them to hell, forever. Our job, like Stephen, is to *be* a witness for Jesus as to help them realize they are doomed *forever* if they don't turn accept Jesus' message of salvation.
    - ii) In a sense, part of our function as a Christian is a "rescue mission at the gates of hell". Through prayer for missionaries, prayer for our pastors and leaders, prayer for the ministries we support, direct witnessing and confrontation, and financial support we are doing what Stephen is doing, and that is asking God to forgive people of their sins *just as He forgave ours*.
  - b) Last bit, and I'll close. You'll never read of a Christian "dying" in the Bible. The word used is "sleep". I believe that is intentional as people think of dying as being consciously dead forever. Therefore, a different word is needed other than dying. Some Christians argue that all souls "sleep" until Jesus' second coming. I don't hold that view, but I'm running long and I'll save that debate for another day!
28. Let's pray: Heavenly Father we thank you for the lessons we have learned through Stephen's life and death. Stephen reminds us that God can use *anybody* at any stage of their Christian life for your glory. Help us to keep our focus on you, and not reject the plan you have for *our* lives, that we may live a live worthy of your name. For we ask this in Jesus name, Amen.