

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #17

Acts 7:1-60

Back in the late 1700s to mid 1800s there was a Presbyterian theologian whose name was Archibald Alexander. He preached Christ for 60 years and he was a professor who prepared men for ministry for forty years. When Princeton Theological Seminary was first established in 1812, Alexander became its first professor. He was responsible for training over 1800 men for ministry. It has been said that through his preaching and teaching and writing he wielded great “influence upon the church”. It is said that when Dr. Alexander was on his death bed, he said to a friend these words: “All my theology is reduced to this narrow compass - **Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.**”

What every person in this Grace Age needs to understand is that almost all religious people in the world believe that either the O.T. Law, their works, or their church can and will save them. Most people truly believe that if they do the best they can they will be so pleasing to God that God will let them go to His heaven. **As a result, most people refuse to believe that Jesus Christ is the only Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

When Stephen was selected to be one of the seven leaders of the church in Jerusalem, he was no trained professor. He was a man who went to church and soaked up apostolic instruction. I am certain he never dreamed God would give him a very unusual level to grasp the Grace of God. But, as Dr. Luke tells us, Stephen was “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8). Stephen’s grasp of the Grace of God doctrine was way beyond the norm. In fact, his grasp of the Grace of God is about to get him killed. But Stephen is about to show us how a Grace Age believer should live, should witness and should die.

Now we may remember that Stephen has been hauled into court for preaching grace. He has been charged with speaking out against the Temple (6:13) and speaking out against the Law of Moses (6:11, 13). **He had been unraveling the Grace Gospel, which says that any person who believes on Jesus Christ will have their sins forgiven and will have a relationship with God regardless of who they are or where they live.** As a result, huge numbers of people in Jerusalem were responding (6:7) and the leaders were jealous, so they haul Stephen into court. What we learn from this beginning of the Church Age is something that is still relevant today:

IF YOU TRULY GRASP AND PROCLAIM THE PURE GRACE GOSPEL IN A RELIGIOUS WORLD COMMITTED TO WORKS AND O.T. LAW, YOU WILL BE HATED, MISTREATED, FALSELY ACCUSED, AND PERHAPS EVEN KILLED.

This is the longest message or speech recorded in Acts. The message begins in **Acts 7:2** and ends at **Acts 7:53**. The fifty-one verses of the message, at a normal reading cadence take about 5 minutes to read. This text is an incredible display of Stephen’s grasp of the Old Testament. **The purpose of Stephen selecting the data is to show these religious leaders two key truths:**

- 1) The presence of God has never been restricted to one place like the Temple;**
- 2) Religious leaders have a history of rejecting God’s truth and those who communicate it.**

One question that has been raised is how did Luke get all of this information? Two ways:
1) He carefully tracked down witnesses because Stephen was the first martyr of the church;
2) He was a close associate of Paul and Paul never forgot this. We may carefully notice in this text that there was a young man standing in the shadows of Stephen whose name was Saul (**Acts 7:58**; 8:1-3). Even though this Saul did not accept what Stephen was saying here, he will eventually become the very apostle who will fully unlock the doctrine of the Grace of God.

These religious Jews put all of their salvific emphasis on the Temple and the Torah. They told people that to have any relationship with God they must go into the Temple because the presence of God was in the Temple. They also taught that the people needed to keep the O.T. Law. Stephen has been toppling their theology with the grace message. **He has been exalting the name of Jesus Christ above the land, the Law and the Temple.** Stephen is going to tell this court a story that will lead straight to **verse 51**, which points this theological truth straight at them. It is amazing to me that Stephen begins respectfully in **verse 2** calling these Jews brothers and refers to the elders as fathers. He could have said you are all a bunch of God mocking, Christ rejecting liars.

As we said, Stephen is responding to false allegations and the material he selects from the O.T. is designed to show: 1) God can work in any geographical location, not just in the Temple; 2) The religious Jews have a history of rejecting God's Word and any who communicate it. There are a total of six interactive responses in this massive section of Scripture:

RESPONSE #1 - Stephen presents convicting historical illustrations from the Old Testament.
7:2-50

There are four Scriptural illustrations Stephen presents that are designed to show that Israel has a history of rejecting God's servants and rejecting His Word.

Scriptural Illustration #1 - Historical illustration from the life of Abraham. **7:2-16**

Notice that Stephen jumps over creation, he jumps over the fall and the flood and he jumps right to Genesis 12 and the calling of Abraham. He is in Jerusalem and he is aiming this straight at the religious Jews. There are five Abrahamic facts he presents as he begins to weave together a message that will be so convicting that the hearers will rush him and kill him:

(Fact #1) - The original plan of God for Israel began with the selection of Abraham outside of the Promised Land with a promise that He would lead him to a specific Promised Land. **7:2-3**

Now why is it brought up that God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia? Because Stephen is proving that the God of Israel is not a God limited to their specific geographical spot in the Temple of Jerusalem, but He is a God of the whole world.

(Fact #2) - Abraham followed God by faith into the Promised Land. **7:4**

Abraham received a call of God in a different country and he was following God even when he settled in Haran before he ever arrived in the Promised Land.

(Fact #3) - Abraham did not receive any land inheritance but he did believe that God would fulfill His promise through his offspring. **7:5**

Abraham, who was the Father of the Jews, whom they could not deny had a special relationship with God, never did have any specific spot to live in. God's hand of blessing was on Abraham even though he didn't own any of the land and was just a pilgrim with no inheritance.

(Fact #4) - God promised that His nation would be enslaved for 400 years and then He would deliver them. **7:6-7** (Genesis 15:13-14)

Here were God's people not even living in the land and they were enslaved in a foreign nation until God would deliver them. Israel could not save themselves; God would save them, but they were still God's people even though they weren't even in the Land.

(Fact #5) - God entered into a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Jacob became the father of the twelve tribes. **7:8**

Abraham believed God and received the covenant of circumcision which led him to become the father of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes. The point of the Abrahamic illustration is:
1) Abraham, the father of the Jews, had a wonderful relationship with God by faith;
2) Abraham had a wonderful relationship with God outside of Jerusalem in various places.

It is interesting that these Jews put a big trust in their physical circumcision to make them right with God. But as Stephen will later say, what they need is a heart circumcision.

Scriptural Illustration #2 - Historical Illustration from the life of Joseph. **7:9-16**

Stephen brings up Joseph to show that all through Israel's history their track record has been to hate, reject, and mistreat any God raises up. Joseph was hated by his brothers because he received a revelatory dream from God and was the favorite of his father. Stephen is using this illustration because Jesus was hated, rejected, and mistreated by these religious leaders because He is the revelation of God and He is the only begotten Son of God. Eight facts brought out:

(Fact #1) - God was with Joseph. **7:9b**

(Fact #2) - God rescued Joseph and blessed Joseph. **7:10**

(Fact #3) - God caused a famine to hit and the Jews were running out of food. **7:11**

(Fact #4) - Jacob sent the patriarchs to Egypt to buy food. **7:12**

(Fact #5) - Joseph revealed himself to his brothers on their second visit. **7:13**

(Fact #6) - Joseph sent word to Jacob and all his seventy-five relatives came to live with him. **7:14**

(Fact #7) - Jacob went down to Egypt and died. **7:15**

(Fact #8) - Jacob was taken from Egypt back to Shechem to be buried. **7:16**

God was working outside of Israel. His hand was on Joseph outside of the Promised Land and the only land they had was a burial tomb. Joseph was hated by his family, just like Jesus. You cannot limit God's work with people to a temple because God saves people from all over the world; He did it with Israel when they were in Egypt.

Scriptural Illustration #3 - Historical Illustration from the life of Moses . **7:17-43**

Now Stephen has been charged with speaking against the O.T. Law, so he devotes the most verses to Moses. There are six facts brought out from the book of Exodus:

(Fact #1) - A new Egyptian king arose who did not know Joseph . **7:17-19**

Many believe that this king was Rameses II. If this is the one, then when he died Moses would have been next in line to be Pharaoh because Rameses did not have any sons of his own. **This sets the stage for God raising up a new leader.**

(Fact #2) - Moses was born and grew and defended Israel . **7:20-29**

Moses was born and was only in his Israeli home for three months (**7:20**). They exposed him in a basket to Pharaoh's daughter who took him and raised him as her own son (**7:21**). According to Josephus, her name was "Thermitis". Moses was educated in Egypt for forty years and he became a man of power in words and deeds (**7:21-22**). Moses never forgot that he was Jewish and he decided to visit his people and he saw one of the Jewish people being beaten by an Egyptian so Moses struck down the Egyptian and he assumed that the Israelites would realize that God was going to grant deliverance to the nation through Moses (**7:23-25**). He was Israel's deliverer, but the next day when he went to Israel, instead of accepting the deliverer they said "who made you our ruler and judge" (**7:26-28**), so Moses fled to Midian for the next forty years (**7:29**). **The reason Moses had to leave the area was because he was rejected by his own brothers.**

Jesus had left Israel and ascended back up into heaven and the reason why He left is because He was rejected by His own brothers; "He came unto His own and His own received Him not."

(Fact #3) - God appeared to Moses and selected Him to deliver Israel even though Israel had rejected Moses. **7:30-36**

God calls Moses to do his great work when he is 80 years old. God appears to Moses in a wilderness at Mt. Sinai in an area God called "holy ground" (**7:30-33**). Think of this. There is no tabernacle, there is no temple, but it is holy ground. Why? Because the presence of God is there. God saw the pathetic condition of His people and out of pure grace He decided to save them. He did the same with us.

The Grace of God Gospel clearly reestablishes this point. You do not have to be in the Temple of Jerusalem to be holy. You do not have to be in church to be holy. Your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore you are holy because you have the presence of God in you and the religious leaders did not like that.

In **verses 34-36**, Stephen said God sent Moses back to you in pure grace to deliver you. This was the one you disowned but Moses was God's chosen deliverer.

(Fact #4) - Moses told Israel God would raise up a prophet like him from Israel. **7:37-39**

Moses spoke of another Person, another Prophet, a Divine Person who would come to Israel. He would be Jewish, but He also would be a God/man Redeemer (**7:37-38**/ Deut. 18:15). He was there at Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Law, but when Moses told them this they rejected him and they rejected his message. They would rather go back to Egypt than have a relationship with the true God.

(Fact #5) - Moses delivered the Word of God to Israel who rejected grace. **7:40-41**

Notice they did not want to worship the God of Grace, they rejoiced in their own works. (**7:41**) False religion hates the Grace of God. It always has and always will. It loves works.

(Fact #6) - God turned away from Israel and gave them over to idolatry. **7:42-43**

Not only did they reject the truth, they turned to idol worship. Stephen is proving to Israel that they are not interested in a relationship with the true God; they are arrogant and rebellious. They made idols with their hands and worshipped them and God turned from them and gave them up.

Scriptural Illustration #4 - Historical Illustration of the Tabernacle versus the Temple.
7:44-50

In Moses' day Israel had the portable and movable tabernacle that had been designed to meet the specs God gave to Moses. Israel brought that tabernacle into the land when Joshua led Israel out of the wilderness into the Promised Land and it moved from place to place. The reason why Stephen brings this up is because in the history of O.T. worship, you cannot limit the work of God to one isolated spot like the Temple in Jerusalem. Israel's tabernacle history proves this point.

In fact, David, who is Israel's most honored King, found favor in God's sight and never did worship God in the Temple of Jerusalem (7:46). It was Solomon who ultimately built the Temple (**7:47**) and even then it took eleven years for him to build it (I Kings 6:1-38). **So you could not say that in order to have a wonderful relationship with God, you had to worship God only at the Temple.**

To make his point even stronger, Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2, (**7:49-50**). In that text in Isaiah God is rebuking Israel by saying, what do you think you could build that would please Me when you refuse to listen to Me and My Word? God says, do you think I care about your religious building when heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool? God does not live in houses made by men. Stephen is basically saying you cannot limit God or confine God to this geographical Temple.

RESPONSE #2 - Stephen directly applies these points to these religious leaders. **7:51-53**

Now Stephen is going to take the historical data he has just presented and aim it straight at these phony religious leaders. I love Stephen; he has boldness to him and a theological fire. He drives home five convicting points:

Convicting Point #1 - You men are stiff-necked. **7:51a**

This is a very rare Greek word (σκληροτραχηλος) which is only used here. The word literally means harsh or hard-neck. The point of the word is one is so hard that one will not turn to truth.

Convicting Point #2 - You men have uncircumcised hearts and ears. **7:51b**

God is not interested in buildings; he is interested in hearts, and Stephen says you may have been circumcised physically but your heart does not want Jesus Christ and your ears do not want to hear the truth of the Grace of God about Jesus Christ.

Convicting Point #3 - You men always resist the Holy Spirit. **7:51c**

There is a doctrine of theology called “irresistible grace”. You and I have the ability to resist grace every day and we have the nature that desires to do that. **The unsaved person always resists grace no matter how religious he may be.** What this doctrine actually means is until the Holy Spirit does His convicting work in the mind and heart of the person, that person will resist grace. Any person who is not a believer “always resists” the Holy Spirit. Unless God’s Spirit overtakes the person’s will and draws them to faith in Jesus Christ, the unsaved person is in a state of continual resistance. A good proof of this is Matthew 16:17 in which Jesus tells Peter, God the Father must reveal truth to someone and Luke 10:22 in which Jesus says no one knows the Son unless He decides to reveal it to a person.

Convicting Point #4 - You men are just like your O.T. fathers. **7:51d-52**

- 1) They persecuted all of the O.T. prophets. **7:52a**
- 2) They killed those who announced the coming of “the Righteous One”. **7:52b**
- 3) You have taken over now and are the betrayers and murderers. **7:52c**

Convicting Point #5 - You have the O.T. Law but you do not obey the Law. **7:53**

It is interesting that in **verse 38** Stephen says the Law is “living” because it shows that man is spiritually dead. The Law does to these religious Jews what it does to us; it shows us we have not measured up to the righteousness of God. It shows us there is none righteous, no not one (Romans 3:19-20). Even angels can testify of that reality of law violations.

I love an illustration Augustine used. He said you can take a pile of lime and put it in a field and it won’t do a thing until water hits it and then it starts burning and brings that pile to life. That is the way the O.T. Law works. A sinner is like a dead pile of lime and the Law of God is the living water that brings the smoldering sin to life and it shows we deserve to burn.

RESPONSE #3 - The religious leaders respond to Stephen . **7:54**

When the leaders heard this their hearts were cut in two and they began to “gnash their teeth”. Dr. Luke uses an interesting Greek word for “gnash” (Βρυχώ) which literally means to bite greedily or grind with your teeth (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 86). These are the respectable religious leaders and they go emotionally and satanically berserk.

RESPONSE #4 - Stephen responds to the religious leaders. **7:55-56**

Stephen looked up into heaven and he saw the Glory of God and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God. These leaders are claiming that the Glory of God only exists in the Temple and Stephen is looking into heaven seeing the Glory of God.

It is interesting that Stephen is the only person other than Jesus to use this title “Son of Man” in the New Testament. The only other place this title is used is in Revelation (1:13; 14:14). Jesus is in all of His glory in heaven, but He also appears in the form of a man. That is what Stephen sees and that is what we will see.

Now had Stephen kept quiet about what he saw, who knows what would have happened, but He doesn't. He told this frenzied religious crowd just exactly what he saw. He sees the Savior, Jesus in heaven. Their problem would be that when they would look up into heaven they wouldn't see anything. They aren't bound for heaven.

RESPONSE #5 - The religious leaders rush Stephen, take him and kill him. **7:57-58**

This is so hypocritical; they want him out of the city so they don't violate their religious codes. Look at this text - they are screaming, covering their ears, they rush Stephen as some lynch mob, and haul him out of the city, throw off their coats and start stoning him. As Kent Hughes said “Their action was illegal, brutal, immoral, but they did not care” (*Acts*, p. 107).

Notice in **verse 58**, there was a young man hearing and seeing this whose name was Saul. The word “young man” (νεανίου) means he was some sort of attendant (*Ibid*, p. 300). According to Kenneth Gangel this age classification started about age twenty-four and didn't go beyond the age of forty (*Acts*, p. 111). Now most scholars believe that Saul, at this point, is not just some coatrack or coat check boy. We do know he was a student or trainee of Gamaliel, and we also know that Saul was fully supportive of what they were doing to Stephen (8:1) even though Gamaliel had told them not to do this to the apostles (5:34-35). However, Stephen was not an apostle. What young Saul didn't know is that he has just been exposed to the teaching of grace and this young man will become the greatest grace theologian and promoter of truth the world will ever know.

RESPONSE #6 - Stephen prays, falls, and quietly dies. **7:59-60**

Now do not over look these final words because here is the first Christian death we get to see. Stephen is being stoned and he knows he is dying and “he calls upon the Lord” and simply says, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”.

Take note of that. He does not pray - Lord remember my works; Lord remember my preaching or witnessing; Lord remember I was one of only seven spiritual guys selected in the church.

Stephen is simply relying on God's Grace to save him as he dies. Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit; I rely totally on your grace to save me.

Praying that, he fell to his knees; he asked God to not hold this sin against them and he died. Now God will answer this prayer very quickly because one young man who was in agreement with everything will be stopped on a Damascus Road and saved. Saul will become Paul.

Now I want you to observe what Stephen saw just before he died. He saw Jesus "standing" (7:55). Now most glimpses we get of Jesus Christ indicate that He is seated at the right hand of God. We just completed an exposition of Hebrews and you may recall that Jesus is now "seated" at the right hand because His work is finished (Hebrews 10:12). But in this case He is standing. Why is that?

There are two possible reasons why Jesus Christ is standing. **First**, let me suggest that when you stand up for someone you honor them, and it would appear that Jesus Christ is standing to welcome and honor His first martyr home. **Second**, Jesus said that whoever would acknowledge Him before men, He would acknowledge before His Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32). Jesus may be standing to announce before His Father that here is Stephen and he is home.

I don't know how we will be called to die. It is probably unlikely, although not impossible that we will be martyred for our faith. It is possible that we will spend our final hours in some intensive care unit in a hospital. It is possible that we will spend our final days in some care facility or home. It is possible we will spend our final hours hooked to a machine. I don't know how any of us will die.

But here is what I do know; we need to defend the Grace of God until our moment of death. Stephen was just an average guy who went to church. He soaked up apostolic grace teaching and he defended it until the end of his life, and Jesus Christ welcomed him home. If we will do the same Jesus Christ will welcome us home, too.