

April 11, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Stephen's Sermon (part 3) - Rejection

Acts 7:35-43

1. Abraham (verses 2-7)
2. Patriarchs (verses 8-16)
3. Moses' birth (verses 17-22)
4. Moses' exile (verses 23-29)
5. Moses' calling (verses 30-34)
6. Moses' rejection (verses 35-43)

I invite you to open in your Bibles to Acts, chapter 7. This chapter contains the sermon that Stephen preached before being stoned to death. Before Easter, we spent a number of weeks looking at this sermon.

I find it ironic (perhaps you do as well), that this sermon, that was preached on one occasion, is taking us several occasions to look at. I make no apologies for this. There are sermons by other preachers that have made such an impact upon me that I have listened to them multiple times. Stephen's sermon is an inspired sermon, recorded in Scripture! It is worthy of looking at on several occasions.

Further, because this sermon is more complex than most of the sermons in Acts, it has taken us several messages to understand it. Most sermons in Acts follow along the simple outline that mirrors the life of Christ: his life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation. But Stephen's sermon is not so. It has more subtleties than this. It is worthy of our careful attention.

Finally, we weren't there on the day when Stephen was preaching. We weren't a part of their culture. And so, it takes a bit of work for us to place ourselves in the original situation, to understand the perspective of the those who heard the sermon.

For instance, what is it that caused these Jews to hear Stephen preach this sermon and respond by trying to kill him! It's not often that this is the case, when a preacher dismounts his pulpit, only to be met by his listeners with an intent to kill him. I looked for an illustration in history to use this this morning where this was the case, but I couldn't find one. The closest I found was of those who have been arrested at their places of worship after the congregation disperses for their Christian activity. But even in these instances, but rarely are they killed on the spot at Stephen was. And rarely are they arrested by those who just heard them preach.

More often the case is that pastors in persecuted lands are simply taken away for years of imprisonment and hard labor. One such example of this is Pastor Samuel Lamb. He was a pastor in China, overseeing a prominent group of house churches in the 1950's. Through his influence, thousands were attending services through his web of house-churches. Pastor Lamb had refused to register the churches, which put them under the authority of the government. Instead, his house-churches gathered all around the city informally.

As his ministry was becoming more and more prominent, he knew that his time was coming when the authorities might well come and take him away. So much so that he kept a "small bag with clothes, shoes, and a toothbrush nears his front door, ... ready for police to arrest him for his Christian activities."^[1]

Sure enough, as the pressure mounted, it came to a head on the evening of September 14, 1955. His church had gathered that Wednesday evening in his home for Bible Study and prayer. After the service, they were hosting some friends for tea. When, at 10pm, "Without knocking, a group of people entered--several civilians and two policemen. ... The strangers began searching the living quarters and took note of Samuel's bundle of belongings. They chattered among themselves until two of them, leafing through a photo album, ... discovered a photograph of Samuel. ... The laymen leading the group, like another Judas in a subsequent Gethsemane, gestured to Samuel. ... Instantly, handcuffs appeared"^[2] And Samuel Lamb was taken away.

He would spend twenty years of hard labor, working in brutal coal mines, where his ministry simply continued to his fellow prisoners. And of that day when he was first arrested, he said, "It was an ugly experience. ... It was the ultimate in losing face for a Chinese. I often wore handcuffs in times following my initial arrest, but this first time lingers most in my mind. ... It hurt me deeply, being unable even to bid my dear wife good-bye."^[3]

Now, we know about Pastor Lamb because his case became known internationally. In fact, even Billy Graham came to preach at one of his house-churches. Furthermore, when he died, even World Magazine highlighted his case with an article about him. Pastor Lamb died at an old age, at the age of 88. Not so with Stephen in Acts, chapter 7. From best we can tell, he was a young man when he was martyred, right after his preaching this sermon. So what was it that so angered his listeners so much that they would take him out of the city and stone him shortly after he preached?

As we have been looking at in recent weeks, the key comes in Acts, chapter 6. In verses 13 and 14, we see the accusations that came upon Stephen. They accused him of speaking against the temple and against the law. Both of these things were held very highly in the minds of the Jews of Stephen's day.

The temple was the place of worship. It was the place where God dwelt! It was the place where Israel met with God and dealt with their sins through the sacrifices offered up to God. The law was their guide to life! It was given to them by Moses, their hero. It set forth their culture and the rules of organization for their entire society. So, any word against the temple or against the law was treasonous. That's the accusation that came upon Stephen.

Acts 6:13-14

"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

You can see the temple mentioned in verse 13. It's called, the "holy place," You can see the temple mentioned in verse 14. It's called "this place." That is, the place where they were standing. You can see the law mentioned in verse 13, "the law." You can see the law mentioned in verse 14. It's called, "the customs that Moses delivered."

Though these accusations were false, there was some truth in them. With the coming of Jesus, we no longer need to worship in the holy place. His sacrifice has abolished all sacrifices. With the coming of Jesus, the law has been changed. Jesus fulfilled the law for us.

In Stephen's response, he defends these things. He does so by looking back into the history of Israel, showing that God has often worked among his people away from the temple grounds, even in other lands and in other cultures. Further, Stephen looked at the history of Israel and pointed out how the Jews haven't always kept the law so well.

Well, as we have worked through the first half of his sermon to the Sanhedrin, he has primarily laid emphasis upon the point about the holy place. In the early days, when God was forming his nation, Israel, he worked among the Jews, not in Israel, not in Jerusalem, and not on the temple mount. We saw this in verses 2-7, with the call of ...

1. Abraham (verses 2-7)

Abraham was called when he was living in Mesopotamia, far from Jerusalem. And when he traveled to the promised land, he never dwelt in Jerusalem. His places of dwelling were Shechem and Bethel and Ai. Then, we saw the ...

2. Patriarchs (verses 8-16)

They traveled down into Egypt. In fact, Egypt was their salvation! God saved them there, not in Jerusalem. Then, we saw God working in the life of Moses, the great redeemer and law-giver.

3. Moses' birth (verses 17-22)

... was in Egypt.

4. Moses' exile (verses 23-29)

... was in Midian. Again, this was far from Jerusalem. In fact, that's where God called him.

5. Moses' calling (verses 30-34)

... was at the burning bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai!

Here's the point of all of this: God worked in the lives of our people when they were far from Jerusalem and far from the holy place that they held so dear. In effect, Stephen was saying, "So, you Jews, who hold a special bond to this holy place and refuse to believe in Jesus because he says that worship isn't bound to the temple, please realize that God has often worked in foreign lands!" He isn't bound by the temple.

Well, this morning, we are continuing on to look at Moses. We see him rejected by the people. This is the 6th point of Stephen's sermon.

6. Moses' rejection (verses 35-43)

Let me read this portion of verses for you.

Acts 7:35-43

"This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.' This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

“Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?
You took up the tent of Moloch
and the star of your god Rephan,
the images that you made to worship;
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.”

We see Stephen mention the rejection of Moses right there in verse 35.

Acts 7:35

“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

Moses was God’s man! The angel appeared to him in the burning bush (as recorded in Exodus 3). We talked about this last week, because Stephen brought it up in verse 30. It was at the burning bush that the Lord told Moses his plan for his life. He would be the one who would deliver Israel, out from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. The following passage tells the story:

Exodus 3:7-10

Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”

This was God’s call on the life of Moses! He would redeem Israel from their slavery! But the people of Israel rejected him!

Acts 7:35

“This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

And Stephen continues with the wonderful ministry of Moses.

Acts 7:36

This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

This is a wonderful summary of the life of Moses. He is the one who led them out of slavery! In the process performed “wonders and signs **in Egypt**.” This is a reference to the ten plagues that came upon the Egyptians. He turned the Nile water into blood. He brought frogs, gnats and insects upon the land. He predicted the pestilence of the livestock and the boils that would come upon the Egyptians. He foretold of the hail and locusts that would destroy the Egyptian crops. He described the pitch darkness that fell upon every place, except in Goshen where the Jewish people lived. Finally, he predicted the death of the firstborn throughout all the land of Egypt, providing Israel with the way to save their firstborn sons. All of these things were clearly the “strong hand” of the LORD (Exodus 13:3). Yet, Moses was the human instrument of these “wonders and signs in Egypt.”

Moses was a powerful leader of the Jewish people. This was demonstrated **at the Red Sea**. When the Jews had been delivered out of Egypt, the Egyptians had a change of heart and pursued after them. Israel was trapped, like on a cul-de-sac, between the Egyptians army on one side and the Red Sea on the other. But this was no problem for the strong hand of the LORD. Moses told the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (Exodus 14:13-14). Moses lifted up his staff. He stretched out his hand. And the sea divided, so Israel walked through on dry ground. But when the Egyptians followed after them, their chariots and horsemen were caught in the mud and were unable to move. So Moses again lifted up his staff. He stretched out his hand and the sea came back upon the Egyptians, drowning the Egyptians in the Red Sea. Such was the power of Moses.

But that wasn’t all, for forty years **in the wilderness**, Moses worked his signs and wonders. Moses made the bitter water at Marah sweet to drink. Moses told the Israelites how bread would come from heaven, and how to gather it up. The Manna came for forty years. Moses brought water out of the Rock on several occasions. Moses did all of this, yet the people rejected him (verse 35). This is the point of Stephen’s sermon at this point.

However, Moses was more than a miracle-worker. He was also a prophet,

Acts 7:37

This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’

Stephen is referring to Deuteronomy, when giving his final messages to the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses told of another prophet that would rise up in Israel to lead them. This is a reference to Jesus. Moses was predicting the coming of Jesus. And the command in Deuteronomy is that you should listen to him: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—.” (Deuteronomy 18:15). Then the LORD said, “I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” (Deuteronomy 18:18-19).

This is the very issue that is before the Sanhedrin that Stephen is addressing. Moses, their hero, prophesied of another prophet to come.

Moses commanded the people to listen to him and to obey him! But this is the very thing that they were refusing to do. They were refusing to listen to Jesus, just as they were refusing to listen to Stephen, his spokesmen. This is one of the most terrifying things that you can do: refuse to listen to Jesus. Because, Jesus has the words of life! To refuse him is to refuse life and face a certain death!

This was Peter's point in Acts 3, when he preached to the same Sanhedrin. He quoted from this same passage in Deuteronomy 18. He said, "It shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet [i.e. Jesus] shall be destroyed from the people" (Acts 3:23). Peter was telling the counsel that they deserved to die, if, in fact, they were to obey the words of Moses. The only way to life, is through Jesus. He is "the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:15).

Last week, we considered the resurrection! And the resurrection is still true this morning. Jesus has risen again, so that those who trust in him will rise again with him to life! As I quoted last week from John 11:25, where Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." But to refuse the call of Jesus and to refuse to trust in his sacrifice, will mean your death. So, church family, believe in Jesus! Trust in this prophet that Moses told about!

But it wasn't only the prophecy that Moses told about. He gave Israel the word of God! Stephen called them, "living oracles" in verse 38, ...

Acts 7:38

This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

I believe that these "living oracles" have reference to the law, the living words of God. But they also have reference to all the words that the LORD spoke to Moses to guide them in the wilderness. Moses had an incredible opportunity to commune with the LORD. He would talk with him so much that his face would glow. When coming down from the mountain, where he talked with God, the skin of his face shone so much so that the people were afraid to come near him (Exodus 34:30). So, Moses would often veil his face in speaking with Israel of the things that the LORD had told him. Such was the power of these living oracles. Yet, with all of this opportunity, Israel rebelled against Moses, and they rebelled against the LORD. We see this in verse 39, ...

Acts 7:39

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,

They turned to Egypt when things were bad. When they were hungry, they said, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3). And God provided them Manna. When they were thirsty, they said to Moses, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:3). And God provided them with water from the rock. When they were tired of the Manna, they longed for the days in Egypt, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Numbers 11:4-6). So, God provided them all the quail that they wanted to eat (Numbers 11:31-35).

Moses was an amazing prophet! But the people "refused to obey him." Instead, their hearts were drawn to Egypt (Acts 7:39). This is nowhere better seen than in the episode of the golden calf. This is found in verses 40 and 41. Moses was upon the mountain, receiving the law of God. However, but because he delayed, and was gone for 40 days, the people down below grew impatient. They said to Aaron, ...

Acts 7:40-41

"Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

This was disastrous! When Moses came down from the mountain, tablets in hand, he threw them to the ground! They shattered them before the people! We value the signatures of people. Moses had the signature of God. But it didn't matter because of the depth of sin that was before his eyes.

Moses simply could not believe the extent of their rebellion! After all that they had seen, the wonders in Egypt, the repeated plagues against the Egyptians, the splitting of the Red Sea, the continual provision of food and drink in the barren wilderness. And all it took was forty days, and they were in rebellion against Moses and against the LORD, by making and worshiping an idol.

This was contrary that all that God had commanded them to do. Hear the second commandment.

Exodus 20:4-5

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God and a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.

When this was first read to Israel, they rejoiced and answered in one voice, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (Exodus 24:3, 7). And yet, a mere forty days after Moses ascended the mountain, they had failed at the most basic level. God's response comes in verses 42 and 43.

Acts 7:42-43

But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

"Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?"

You took up the tent of Moloch
and the star of your god Rephan,
the images that you made to worship;
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.”

C. S. Lewis wrote, “There are two types of people in this world. Those who say to God, ‘Your will be done!’ And those to whom God says, ‘Your will be done.’” This is demonstrated in these verses. God turned away from Israel. God gave them over to their own desires. So they pursued after other gods.

Lest we think that we are immune to such things, take it to heart, church family. It took the nation of Israel less than forty days to have their hearts filled with unbelief. We are flesh and blood like they are. There is nothing in us that would keep us from the same, but God’s merciful keeping of us. This morning in our worship, we sang, “He will hold me fast!” That’s the reality of our faith. We trust that God will carry us through.

When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast;
When the tempter would prevail, He will hold me fast.
I could never keep my hold through life’s fearful path;
For my love is often cold; He must hold me fast.

He will hold me fast, He will hold me fast;
For my Saviour loves me so, He will hold me fast.

Those He saves are His delight, Christ will hold me fast;
Precious in his holy sight, He will hold me fast.
He’ll not let my soul be lost; His promises shall last;
Bought by Him at such a cost, He will hold me fast.

For my life He bled and died, Christ will hold me fast;
Justice has been satisfied; He will hold me fast.
Raised with Him to endless life, He will hold me fast
‘Till our faith is turned to sight, When He comes at last!^[4]

Stephen’s quote in verses 42 and 43 comes from Amos 5:25-27, which summarizes the life of Israel. Yes, they went through the forms of worship, offering up their sacrifices to the LORD. (verse 42). Yet they also pursued other gods. They worshiped Moloch, the God of the Ammonites, who required child sacrifice. They worshiped Rephan, the god of Saturn. They made idols to worship. These were moves away from the LORD. And so the LORD would move Israel away from him, deep into exile.

This was the Israel to whom Stephen was preaching! They lifted high the law of God. And yet, they never really kept the law.

I believe that they had this romantic view of Moses, that all was wonderful with him. But, the people of Israel really rejected Moses. And they rejected the law. This is what Stephen is trying to show them. They who uphold the law, never really kept the law! In fact, next week, this is how we will see Stephen finishing up his sermon to them.

Acts 7:53

“You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Are you the same? Do you hold up the Bible, professing to believe it, while, in actuality, denying it with your life. Church family, it is easy to do this. It is easy to claim to hold tightly to the Bible, yet, in actuality be living a hypocritical life.

May we not be like Stephen’s audience.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 11, 2021 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] World Magazine (, August 24, 2013.

[2] Ken Anderson, Bold as a Lamb (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 44-45.

[3] Ibid., 45.

[4] Keith & Kristyn Getty. See <https://www.gettymusic.com> for more details.