

April 18, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Stephen's Sermon (part 4) - The Temple

Acts 7:44-53

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)
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Three and a half years ago at Rock Valley Bible Church, in October 2017, we celebrated, "Reformation Month." We celebrated because three and a half years ago, was the 500th anniversary of the key event that kicked off the Protestant Reformation. That key event, was the nailing of the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg castle in Germany on October 31, 1517 by Martin Luther, a German monk. And we dedicated that month to celebrating the Reformation, because it is an event to celebrate. It is because of the Protestant Reformation that we stand here today, as a Bible-believing church.

We stand this morning, trusting in the cries of the Reformation. Sola Scriptura We look to Scripture alone in determining what we believe and how we live. Sola Fide We come to God on the basis of faith alone, not by our works. Sola Gratia The only reason we come to God is the grace of God in our life, not anything in us. Solus Christus It is only through Christ alone that we come to God, not through priests or rituals in the church. Soli Deo Glory We live our lives only for the glory of God alone, not the praises of men.

But it wasn't as if everything was clear for those in the 1500's that October 31, 1517 was the crucial day that kicked off the Reformation. It's only in hindsight that we recognize that day, as the key moment in the Reformation. Because, that's the day that Martin Luther put his foot down, er, a nail in the door, signifying that we was willing to stand against the Roman Catholic Church, and argue for the truth of Scripture, over and against the corrupt traditions of the church.

There was another event that took place, that was just as crucial for the Reformation. That event took place on April 18, 1521. Exactly 500 years ago, today. On that day, April 18, 1521, Martin Luther stood before a counsel of Roman Catholic authorities at the Edict of Worms, to respond to the accusations against him. Laid out on the table before everyone were 25 books or articles that Martin Luther had written. And the authorities called him to recant his writings. With fear and trembling, Martin Luther stood before the counsel, and said, "The works are mine, but Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."

With those words, Martin Luther was declared a heretic, an enemy of the church of Rome. His works were ordered to be burned. And Martin Luther ran for his life. On his travels back to his home in Wittenberg, he was "kidnapped." Some armed horsemen fell upon his traveling party, they pulled Luther out of his wagon, and placed him on a horse, and rode away. Now, as it turned out, the kidnapers, were Luther's friends, who protected him from those who were searching to kill him. They brought him to the Wartburg castle, where he grew a beard and changed his name to "Junker George."^[1] It was there, in the castle, in his exile, that he translated the Scriptures from Latin into German, giving his fellow Germans the word of God in their own language, which helped greatly in the spread of Biblical truths.

I tell you that story of Martin Luther standing against the authorities of the church, because there are parallels to our text this morning. We are going to be looking at Acts 7:44-53. In Acts 7, we see Stephen, the preacher, the Reformer (if you will), holding to the gospel, being charged with heresy, standing before the counsel, and being asked to defend himself. When Stephen had finished his defense, he was murdered by the mob as a heretic! And thus, he became the first Christian martyr. Martin Luther escaped, but not Stephen.

Acts 7 tells the story of Stephen's sermon and his death. It all came about because of his boldness to be a witness for Jesus. His example is what the book of Acts is calling us to be and to do. Jesus says to us, "Be My Witnesses." And he calls us to do this with boldness, just like Martin Luther, just like Stephen.

Sometimes, being bold will cost you. There have been occasions with the gospel when I have been bold and have damaged relationships as a result. Not because I was so offensive, but because the truth of the gospel is. Do you know what I'm talking about? I remember having a good friend in college, I went to his wedding. He and his wife came to our house for dinner from out of town. The discussion about the church and the scriptures and the gospel became so contentious, that I have barely spoken with him since. Being a witness for Christ is costly. It can cost relationships. It can stir animosity.

I can think of others, with whom I have had a relationship, where the truth of the gospel became a thorn, and it has brought on a division that wasn't there before I opened my mouth. Do you know what I'm talking about? If you are truly seeking to live out the reality of the book of Acts, and being a witness for Jesus, then you will know the division that it causes. Sometimes, it might simply be a loss of a relationship. At other times, it may cause you to lose your job. For Martin Luther, being a witness for Jesus, meant his exile. For Stephen, being a witness for Jesus, meant his death.

So, let's dig into Stephen's sermon. My message this morning is entitled, "Stephen's Sermon (part 4). If you have been here for the past few weeks, you now that it is quite complex. The key to understanding Stephen's sermon is to understand the charges against him. They come in chapter 6 and verses 13 and 14.

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."

Stephen was accused of two things: speaking against the temple and speaking against the law. That is, he spoke against the religious traditions of the day, not so unlike Martin Luther.

The Jews held tightly to their religious traditions. Everything was about the externals. Worship must take place in the temple. You must bring your sacrifices to the priests. You must live according to the law of Moses, in every detail. And Stephen, with the preaching of the gospel was shattering these beliefs. Because Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Thus, there was no need, anymore for the temple and its sacrifices, or for the ceremonial laws.

This is not so different than what Martin Luther was confronting in his day. The Roman Catholic Church in his day, was focused on the externals. In Luther's day, the church was busy building the great cathedrals on the backs of the peasants worship. The religious elite said that worship must take place in their cathedrals when you come to the priest and he gives you the host, the sacrificed Jesus. Luther confronted some of these tenants.

Whenever you begin to attack the core elements of one's religion, sparks are sure to fly. When you begin to point out some unbiblical practices in others, the discussion ramps up. That's what happened in our text.

To catch you up to speed, I want to review Stephen's entire sermon. All of his thoughts are centered around two themes:

1. God's working is not confined to the temple.
2. The people of Israel have never kept the law that they hold so high.

Stephen began his sermon by mentioning ...

1. Abraham (verses 2-7) who was called when he lived in Mesopotamia. And though he came into the promised land, he never dwelt in Jerusalem, where the holy place would come to be. And he never received any inheritance in the land, not even a foot's length (verse 5). The mighty Abraham never experienced the holy place. But God was still working in his life. The same is true of the ...

2. Patriarchs (verses 8-16). They spent some time in the promised land, but never received any inheritance in the land. They never dwelt in Jerusalem. And they spent their days in Egypt. but God was working in their lives to get them to Egypt, to save them from the famine! And then comes Moses, the great savior of Israel.

3. Moses' birth (verses 17-22) was not in the promised land. He was born in Egypt. And God worked wonderfully in his life. As an infant, his life was spared. Remember when Pharaoh's daughter saw him in the reeds? She adopted him as her own son (verse 21). This was the salvation of Moses. He was sure to die otherwise. This all happened nowhere near the holy place in Jerusalem. And that's the point that Stephen is trying to drive home. Then, Stephen talks about ...

4. Moses' exile (verses 23-29). He was exiled into the land of Midian, far away from Jerusalem. And yet, it is there that God works in his life. blessing him with two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Then, Stephen mentions,

5. Moses' calling (verses 30-34). Do you remember this? The LORD appeared to him at the burning bush, telling him to take off his sandals, because that place, in Midian is "holy ground!" Again, Stephen's point is that this, too, is far from the holy place in Jerusalem. And then, last week, we looked at ...

6. Moses' rejection (verses 35-43). This one whom the Jews in Jesus' day help up so high! This is the one who gave them the law! And yet, he was thoroughly rejected by his contemporaries. "Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt" (Acts 7:39).

So, when Stephen is accused of speaking against the law, he simply says this: "You all have never kept the law!" In the days of Moses, our fathers turned away from the law. They turned to idols. They turned to the golden calf (verse 41). They turned to Moloch, the god requiring child sacrifice (verse 43). They turned to Rephan, the sun god.

And things had never changed. What was true in the days of Moses, was true in the days of the king David, was true in the days of the prophets (Amos 5:25-27), and was true in the days of Stephen. This is how Stephen ends his sermon: "As your fathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51). So, let's look at our text, beginning with verse 44. Stephen will talk about this "holy place."

Acts 7:44-50

Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to

the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?"

My first point this morning (which is Stephen's 7th point), is this:

7. The Tent (verses 44-45)

You can see right there in verse 44 that Stephen mentions this "tent."

Acts 7:44

Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen.

This is in contrast with the "tent of Moloch" in verse 43, where the people worshiped false gods. This tent in verse 44 is where Israel worshiped the true God during their days of wanderings in the wilderness. It is often called, "The Tabernacle."

God had told Moses how to build the tabernacle. And Moses saw fit to have it built exactly according to the pattern that God had instructed him on the mountain. You can read all about it in Exodus 25, 26, and 27. At the center of this tent was the holy of holies, a room that was 15 feet by 15 feet (and 15 feet tall) it's where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It's where the priest would enter once a year on the Day of Atonement to atone for the sins of Israel. Extending eastward from the holy of holies was another room, 15 feet by 30 feet. It was called, "the holy place." In this room was the lampstand, the table of showbread and the altar of incense. The priests would routinely go into this room to worship. Then, surrounding this structure was the outer courtyard, which measured 75 feet by 150 feet. It was all enclosed by a fence all around. In this courtyard was the bronze altar, where the sacrifices to the Lord were offered up and burned. This was the "tent" of meeting. Or the "tent of witness." It's where the people of Israel worshiped.

The tent was portable, because the people were "wandering" in the wilderness. They had no permanent place to worship. Rather, it was this tent that the Levites carried from place to place wherever God led them next. Stephen's point in his message is this: When the LORD instructed Moses as to the way in which the people should come and worship him, it wasn't in Jerusalem. In fact, it wasn't in anyplace. It was anywhere in the vast wilderness, where Israel wandered. When they finally Israel took the land, they took the tent with them.

Acts 7:45

Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David,

That is to say, this tent was crucial to the ways of worshiping the LORD. It wasn't some temporary structure, only to be used in the wilderness. No, when Israel came into the promised land, this tent was continued to be used. Albeit, when came into the promised land, the tent no longer roamed from place to place, because Israel was settled. Initially, the tent was in Gilgal (Joshua 4:19-24). But once the conquest of the promised land was complete, it was set up in Shiloh (Joshua 18:1). It remained there for almost 400 years (369 to be exact), until David had the idea of building a permanent structure for the LORD. We call this, "the temple." Which Stephen talks about in verse 46, which is my second point this morning (and Stephen's 8th point).

8. The Temple (verses 46-50)

Acts 7:46

[David] found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

Indeed, David was a man after God's own heart. God loved David, because he knew that he had a heart to follow after God, and that he would do all God's will (Acts 13:22). Well, one day, David is in his house, and he's doing a bit of thinking about his life and about God. He is talking with Nathan, the prophet. David says to him, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent" (2 Samuel 7:2).

The implication is this: we should build a permanent structure for God. It sounds like a great idea. Sure, we are now settled into our land. We have houses in which we live. Why not build a permanent place for God? Nathan replied,

2 Samuel 7:3-7

"Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you." But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"'

In other words, "My dwelling has been a tent, ever since I brought you up from Egypt, some four hundred years ago. And a tent, quite frankly, is good enough for me. I have never said, 'You need to build me a permanent place.' Because, I am just fine with the people of Israel coming to meet me in my tent."

There is a huge application here for us. God has blessed us with a building in which to worship. But we don't need a building in which to worship. In fact, for the first 10 years of our existence, Rock Valley Bible Church didn't have a building. We rented a building. We rented

Rockford Christian High School. We met there every Sunday morning for a decade. Sure, it was a lot of work, setting up every Saturday evening for our Sunday morning worship service. But God was surely pleased with our time in the rental facility.

The rental facility helped to create a culture at Rock Valley Bible Church that the church isn't a building. It is a people. The building isn't the focus, it is God. Further, it helped to press ministry into the homes of those who attended, because we didn't have a permanent building that we could simply open up for any gathering, like a funeral, a Good Friday service, or a Christmas Eve service. So, if there would be any fellowship outside of Sunday morning, it would be in homes. That culture has helped us. We aren't church-building centric. We are centered on our homes. That's why our small groups meet in homes. (At least, when we had small groups. I'm looking forward to beginning these again after COVID subsidies).

Yet, I would say that 10 years with a building, has, perhaps, reduced this a bit. There is so much more that happens here that used to happen in our homes. Youth group used to be in various homes. Bible training times used to be in my home office or in some other big room someplace. Any Sunday evening gatherings we might have used to be in homes, because we didn't have a place. But now, it's all at church. And I fear that, perhaps, we are drifting into a complacency. A church-building centric culture, where the building is central, and not the people.

This was exactly the error of those whom Stephen preached to. For them, worship was all about the temple. It had to take place there! in that spot, in Jerusalem! And there was no other place! So, when Stephen starts talking about the temple being destroyed, they brought him in for questioning. Now, it's not that God is opposed to a permanent place of worship. There is nothing wrong about having a church building. But when it becomes dominant, and necessary it is wrong.

We see this in 2 Samuel 7, when The LORD was speaking with David. David wanted to build a house for God. God told Nathan that "I never asked for a permanent place. But it is OK. But David isn't going to build it. His son, Solomon will build it." And that's the point of verse 47.

Acts 7:47

But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

David had a plan to build a house for God. but is Solomon, who actually built the temple. You can read all about it in 1 Kings 6-7. Solomon spared no expense. It was beautiful! It was covered with gold! It was stunning! When the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, and she saw everything that Solomon had built. She was so overwhelmed that "there was no more breath in her" (1 Kings 10:5). Then Stephen gets to his point,

Acts 7:48-50

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?"

It's a glorious Old Testament quote! It comes in the very last chapter of Isaiah, which speaks of the world as it will be. with all the world coming to worship the LORD (Isaiah 66:23). Verses 1 and 2 tell us that God's throne is in heaven, not on earth. In fact, the earth is merely God's footstool. It's where God has a place to put his feet.

God is so big that we cannot even hope to find a place for him to dwell. Israel knew this. At the prayer of dedication for the temple, listen to what Solomon prayed, "Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Israel knew this, but they had lost their way. They held that the holy place in Jerusalem was *the place* of worship.

Israel forgot the fact that for a thousand years, Israel had no central, established place of worship. Abraham lived around 2,000 B.C. David lived around 1,000 B.C. Yet, somehow the traditions of men in Israel, came to regard this place in Jerusalem as the place where God must be worshiped. Stephen is confronting them in his sermon. And his confrontation gets direct in the last three verses of his sermon. This is my third point this morning (Stephen's 9th point):

9. The Confrontation (verses 51-53)

Acts 7:51-53

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

In these verses, Stephen takes the bull by the horns, and directly speaks to the counsel about their stubborn unbelief. We have seen this already in the book of Acts. At the end of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, he says, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Peter was pointing right to his listeners and said, "You crucified this man!" This was straight-on confrontation.

We see another confrontation in Acts 4, when Peter was speaking to the religious authorities of his day. He says to them, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone" (Acts 4:11). Peter was directly confronting his hearers with the sin they committed in rejecting God's cornerstone. Later, Peter would confront the same authorities, "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30). You can easily imagine Peter's fingers pointing directly at them as those who were guilty. This is strong confrontation, just like Stephen did.

Stephen's confrontation of them struck several chords.

First of all, he hits their heart. He calls them "stiff-necked" This a common term used in the Old Testament to describe those who wouldn't bow their hearts to the LORD (Exodus 32:9; 33:5). When we think about stiff necks, we think about those collars that are placed around the neck to support it. They are called "C Collars" or "Cervical Collars." It's a good way to think about this term. One in a C Collar can't bow low to worship the LORD. Surely, this wasn't what they quite had in mind, but it is a close analogy.

Next, Stephen calls them "uncircumcised in heart and ears." "Circumcision" is a metaphor for "cleansing." Our hearts should be open and clear and clean. God tells us to worship the LORD with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). But they weren't. They were hard in their heart. They were hard in their ears, refusing to listen to the Lord's call upon their lives.

Whenever you begin to speak with others about their hard hearts, you will erupt strong emotions within them. I remember talking with a man one time about how I could see that his heart was hard against our church. He instantly fumed, "How can you judge my heart!!" I tried to defuse the situation by explaining how I was just reading what he was posting online and it's pretty clear what he was thinking about our church. He still took offense at me and was not happy. But when you confront someones heart like that, they will resist you strongly. This is because they are resisting the Holy Spirit (verse 51), who gives the fruit of a right response in love, joy, and peace (Galatians 5:22). Instead, they will exhibit the deeds of the flesh, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger (Galatians 5:20).

Those of a soft heart will be like those in Psalm 1, who delights in God's law and meditates upon it day and night. A soft heart will love the Lord and be open to his correction. Instead, these listeners to Stephens sermon were well described by Isaiah's prophecy, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (quoted in Matthew 15:8). These were religious people who prized the law and the temple. These were the ones whose heart was hard, whose heart was wrong, regardless of what their mouth was saying. Their heart was confronted.

Second, we see their history confronted. "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" (Acts 11:52). This is quiz time. Think about all of the prophets. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? The answer is, "Not a one." All of the prophets who came were persecuted.

This is exactly what Jesus said when he was weeping for Jerusalem. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Matthew 23:37). Jerusalem had this reputation of being the prophet killing city. Suppose a visitor came to Jerusalem from Arabia (or somewhere) and said, "Where is that prophet killing city again?" The Jew who lived someplace in Israel would easily be able to direct the visitor to Jerusalem. Earlier, Jesus had said, "Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar" (Matthew 23:34-35). From "A" to "Z" you have killed the prophets I sent to you. The killing of Jesus was mere confirmation that Jerusalem is a "prophet-killing" city.

But Jesus spoke even more than merely the "prophets." He also said, "I send you ... wise men and scribes" (Matthew 23:34). Not only did they kill the prophets. But they also killed the wise men. This was prophetic of Stephen, as he will lose his life before the end of the chapter.

In verse 52 we read, "They killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One." If even a mention was made of a righteous man who was coming as the Messiah to rescue Israel, the fathers killed those prophets. But these people of this generation betrayed and killed the Righteous One! Verse 52 contains the first sighting of Jesus in Stephen's sermon. Stephen said, "whom you have now betrayed and murdered." "You killed the Messiah! Not only is your heart bad, not only is your history bad, but your hearing is bad too."

Thirdly, Stephen confronts their hearing. We see this in verse 53, "You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Since they considered the law as delivered by angels, they were ready to keep the law. This was their disposition. They professed love for the law, but they didn't keep it. The problem here is a problem of hearing. They received the law, but they didn't listen to its counsel. Yes, the law went forth from their mouths and went into their minds, but they didn't hear it.

The most-repeated passage in all of Jewish religion is called "The Shema." It's Deuteronomy 6:4-9. It begins with these words, "Hear, O Israel!" "Shema" is the Hebrew, which we translate, "Hear." In essence, this oft-repeated passage of Scripture is an exhortation for Israel to "hear." Essentially, this exhortation is an exhortation to "obey." What you hear, you should heed. This is what James said, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22).

In pointing these things out, Stephen was martyred. Though there are few that have actually followed in the footsteps of Stephen, being martyred after preaching to a crowd, the reality still stands: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). We may not face martyrdom. But we will face some persecution if we stand up boldly for Christ Jesus. Martin Luther was sent into exile. Samuel Lamb (who we read about last week) was imprisoned for speaking out boldly with the gospel. Though we may not die for our faith, we will certainly be hated by the world if we stand firmly for Jesus (John 15:18-25).

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 18, 2021 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Here's a good summary of Martin Luther's life: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther. If you scan down a bit, you can see a portrait of him at "Junker George." During my message, I humorously commented that if I had a haircut like his, I would grow out my hair as well!