

Last Chance

Acts 7:1—53

False charges have been brought against Stephen to the Sanhedrin, an assembly of the religious leaders of Israel, similar to our Supreme Court. The false witnesses were claiming they heard Stephen speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God and against the Law and the temple. Stephen is speaking before the Sanhedrin in defense of these false charges, giving them a historical and godly perspective of the actions of the religious leaders. Historically, Israel had her roots in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, Israel did not become a nation until they left Egypt. This is when God gathered them together and began to travel to the place promised originally to Abraham. The godly perspective Stephen is giving them is Israel from God's point of view. God had spoken to Israel many times through many different prophets through the years, but Israel never listened.

National rejection

As these leaders turn to Stephen to allow him to address these false accusations, they see his face as if it were the face of an angel. Most likely they saw his face glow (Matthew 2:3; Luke 24:4; Revelation 10:1). With the glory of God upon him, Stephen begins to speak of the glory of God appearing to Abraham in Mesopotamia. Stephen, through the Holy Spirit, put these leaders on notice that it was God speaking to them just as God had spoken to Abraham. There is a parallel with God telling Abram to leave the place he was dwelling to go to the place God would show him. The Apostles have been telling these religious leaders something similar—leave your religious system and join the Little Flock of believers (Hebrews 13:13). The promises given to Abram were about to be fulfilled with the coming of the Millennial Kingdom.

Stephen continues with the stories of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Joseph as a type of Christ was rejected by his brothers the first time, but then on their second visit Joseph made himself known (Acts 7:13), just as Jesus Christ will be fully revealed at His Second Coming. This rejection and revelation can also be seen in Moses's life when he was rejected by his kinsmen when he killed an Egyptian, and then accepted as he led them to the Promised Land.

Stephen finishes his sermon by speaking of Kings David and his son, Solomon. David was a warrior who made it possible for Israel to settle peacefully in the Promised Land. Solomon had a glorious kingdom and lived in peace. David is a picture of Christ bringing Israel through the seven-year Tribulation, while Solomon is a picture of Christ ruling on the throne during the Millennial Kingdom. Knowing this about David helps us understand that the Psalms are often about Israel being protected by God during the Tribulation.

Stephen shows how Israel turned away from God from the very beginning. He gives many examples of how they rejected God to follow their own desires. This started right after they became a nation. As Moses was receiving the Law from God on Mount Sinai, Israel was building a pagan altar. All through their history, Israel rejected the word of God, as spoken through the prophets, and served other gods. Stephen is showing them that this pattern of resisting God is continuing as they are now rejecting the testimony of the Holy Spirit through Stephen. Just as Israel killed the prophets of old, they were now responsible for killing the Just One, the Messiah, and for rejecting His call for them to believe in Him.

This history lesson was given not only to the Sanhedrin, but to other Israelites in attendance, presumably at a public gathering in which the leaders hoped they would discredit Stephen (Acts 7:2). It actually turned out to be a public condemnation of the Jewish leaders, much like Jesus did with the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the leaders in order to warn the people not to

follow what they were doing. It's at the end of Matthew 23 where Jesus states that He will send them prophets, wise men and scribes and that they will kill some and scourge and persecute others (Matthew 23:34). Jesus was referring to Peter and the 11, who were flogged and imprisoned, and to Stephen, who was put to death. This was the culmination of Israel's sins in past generations. Jesus goes back to the prophet Zechariah condemning Israel for not paying heed to what he had to say, and for killing the prophets who were sent to Israel with God's word.

2 Chronicles 24:19, 21 ¹⁹ Yet he sent prophets to them, to bring them again unto the Lord; and they testified against them: but they would not give ear. ²¹ And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord.

Uncircumcised

Not only did Stephen condemn them for ignoring the word of God, and of persecuting and killing God's messengers, now he accuses them of being uncircumcised. This would be akin to calling them Gentile dogs. The religious leaders thought they were holy men of God because they were physically circumcised, yet they utterly rejected Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It was important that they were circumcised of the heart, which is done by the Lord (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25). Israel was to be circumcised because they had faith in God, faith in God was not to be obtained through circumcision. They were worst than any uncircumcised Gentile because not only were they rejecting God, they were actively bringing others with them (Matthew 23:13, 15; 11:21—22).

Today, circumcision is not important because we are not under the covenants given to Israel (Romans 6:14). In fact, Israel is also not under a covenant relationship with God in this Dispensation of Grace. When they rejected the testimony of the Holy Spirit through Stephen, God put them aside and began a new work among the Gentiles headed by the Apostle Paul. Notice what the Apostle Paul says about circumcision:

Galatians 5:6 For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.

Galatians 6:15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

1 Corinthians 7:19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.

Many misinterpret 1 Corinthians 7:19 (above) to be saying that we need to obey the Mosaic Law. However, circumcision and the Mosaic Law are intertwined. It is not possible to have one without the other because both are tied exclusively and inextricably to Israel (John 7:23; Acts 15:5; Galatians 5:3). Paul is exhorting us to keep the commandments (teachings) as he has given them to us. This same word was also used when Paul tells Timothy to keep the commandment of following after righteousness (1 Timothy 6:11—14). The commandments of God for the Church, the Body of Christ, are the teachings that have come to us through Paul by way of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11—12). We need to follow Paul as he followed Him (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Stephen used strong words, not only to get their attention, but to warn the people of the danger of following in the footsteps of the religious leaders. Getting these leaders to understand that Jesus Christ was their Messiah was a critical step for Israel's future, because a nation is always pulled in the direction of its leaders. There would be no hope for the nation to go into the Millennial Kingdom if the leaders rejected the call. The next lesson will highlight Israel's response to Stephen's sermon.

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