

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

A Historical Perspective

Acts 7:1-60

Intro: We are looking at Stephen, the most prominent of the early deacons, and have considered the first part of his two-fold testimony – what he did. His ministry as a deacon went well beyond the daily ministrations of funds for the widows of the church. He did that, yes; but he did so much more than that too. He was out in the community sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, performing wonders and signs among the people and defending his faith in the face of staunch opposition. His was a life that was sold out to the cause of Jesus Christ, and he was none the poorer for it!

Now we have come to the second part of his testimony – what he said, and we find that Stephen was a man who had a lot to say. Ch7 contains the longest address recorded in the Book of Acts and it is also one of the most important. Stephen is standing before the religious and political leaders of Israel; men who represented the entire nation, and he is about to expose the tenuous nature of their standing before the God they claim to love and serve. He is going to give them yet another opportunity to recognize their sin, repent of it and turn to Jesus Christ for salvation, if they will only see the truth and respond to it honestly and humbly.

Stephen's address contains quite a bit of important information but it's also important to consider what's not in it. 1st, this is not a defense! Stephen does not directly deal with the scurrilous accusations made against him. They have accused him of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God and against the temple and the Law. He will indirectly answer a couple of these accusations as he goes along but it is clear to any perceptive observer that this speech was not constructed or delivered for the purpose of securing an acquittal from the Sanhedrin. Stephen is not trying to remove himself from this dangerous situation; he sees it as a divine opportunity to present pure Christianity as God's appointed and only acceptable way of true worship.

2nd, this speech is not a sermon like Peter's at Pentecost. There, Peter quoted a passage and then explained it. Stephen doesn't do this but that doesn't mean his speech is not biblical. It's completely biblical because he's

retelling the OT. Also, Peter preached about Jesus throughout his sermon, he preached the resurrection. Stephen only mentions Jesus at the end of his speech and not even by name. He doesn't mention the resurrection at all. What is he doing? Let's be clear, Stephen is not presuming to instruct the Sanhedrin on points of Jewish history that they were ignorant of. No, he is merely emphasizing things in Jewish history they may not have considered.

It's one of the more incredible flaws of human nature that after centuries of possessing the clear word of God, it was still possible for individuals to only see what they wanted to see in the Scriptures. After hundreds of years of study and commentary and research, these men had settled on an interpretation of the Word that suited their fleshly world view quite comfortably and Stephen is about to mess that up with some clear, simple reasoning from their own Scriptures. That's all Jesus did to expose the fallacy of one of the long held doctrines of the Sadducees. They didn't believe in the resurrection so they gave Him a ridiculous hypothetical situation to prove their point. He responded with a simple observation from God's Word (I Am the God of Abraham...): God is the God of the living not the dead. Did the Sadducees see the logic in Jesus' answer? No, they hated Him even more for proving them wrong. Stephen is about to receive the same response from this august body of religious leaders, bastions of spiritual knowledge.

1-8 – The High Priest grants Stephen an opportunity to defend himself against these serious accusations but little does he know that Stephen is about to reveal to the entire court, from their own Scriptures, that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those they had accused him of committing. The first sin on the list is their gross misunderstanding of their own spiritual roots. Stephen begins with Abraham and could have said a lot more about him but he's very selective and the things he emphasizes from Abraham's life allude to the point he's making.

There are 3 things to consider: 1) God appeared to Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia. Why's that matter? God is not a God of 1 limited geographical place only (Israel) but of the whole world. 2) God appeared to Abraham Himself. The Jews equated the glory of God to places like the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle or temple but Stephen reminds them that God's glory was seen by Abraham and he wasn't in the temple! 3) Abraham

was a pilgrim even in Canaan. Even though God had given him the land, as far as Abraham was concerned, he was only passing through.

Abraham was the founder of the Hebrew people and his relationship with God was one of grace and faith. Abraham was saved by grace through faith, not because he was circumcised, obeyed the Law or worshipped in a temple. All those things came later. He believed the promises of God and it was this faith that saved him. This truth was lost on the Jews of Stephen's day. They prided themselves on being Abraham's "children," confusing physical descent with spiritual experience and relying on national heritage rather than personal faith. They were blind to the simple faith of Abraham, cluttering it up with man-made traditions that made salvation a matter of good works, not faith.

These leaders were "settled" in their positions; they were too much at home in the land. They had forgotten that they were only to be pilgrims in it. Without this eternal view, they lacked the spiritual depth of Abraham. They had stopped looking forward to what God had in store because they were content with looking back. They were taking the things of this world and the blessings of the world to be permanent. They had allowed God's temporal blessings to over-shadow the sense of God's presence in their lives.

9-16 – Another sin Israel was guilty of is they had a bad habit of rejecting their God-sent deliverers. Joseph was hated by his brothers and was mistreated by them. They sold him into slavery and Stephen emphasizes yet again that even though Joseph was in Egypt, God was still constantly with him. His brothers (patriarchs) rejected Joseph but later, he became a savior to them, the only possible savior for them. This isn't the only time this happened. Stephen's point is that all through their history, Israel persecuted and killed the prophets God sent to them, just as Joseph's brothers persecuted him. That's exactly what these men had done to Jesus. They had killed Him.

17-43 – Stephen now shifts his focus to Moses and he will make similar points but he deals with the story of Moses at greater length because Moses was the one the Sanhedrin was mainly concerned about. Moses was the one God had given the law through and these leaders had built their whole lives around keeping the law of Moses. Stephen's opponents had accused him of speaking against the Law of Moses but the history of Israel reveals

that the nation as a whole had repeatedly broken that Law. Stephen makes 3 convicting, if not convincing, points.

1st) Moses was rejected by the Jewish people. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's house but when Moses realized that his heart was with his own people and he wanted to be identified with them, they rejected him. He thought they'd see that God had appointed him as their deliverer and that they would follow him. They didn't follow him, they rejected him. When news of his activities got out, Moses had to flee. He ran to Midian where he spent the next 40 yrs.

2nd) God appeared to Moses in Midian. 1st, Stephen emphasized that God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia – in Gentile territory. Now he reminds them that God also appeared to Moses in Midian. God even went so far as to call it “holy ground.” But, this “holy place” was not in Jerusalem. It was on a mountain in Gentile territory. Yet God was there, and because God was there, the ground was holy.

We should be catching Stephen's drift by now. I'm sure the Sanhedrin was. Stephen was showing them that their concept of God, how He is the God of the Jews only and not the Gentiles, is a corrupt thing, and it had corrupted them. If they were faithful to their traditions, if they were guided by what their Scriptures told them; they would know that God is the God of all people and that they had the enormous responsibility of being a witness to them. Stephen was teaching that God is everywhere and that in every nation He has those who seek Him.

3rd) Moses was rejected again, even after the Exodus. The rejection Moses experienced when he killed the Egyptian was followed by an even more substantial rejection after he had led the people out of Egypt. While he was on the mountain, receiving God's law—the very law the Sanhedrin prided itself in and were accusing Stephen of breaking—the people were down in the valley breaking it. God had brought them out of Egypt. He had revealed Himself to be the true God. The first of the 10 Commandments said, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex 20:3). Yet that is exactly what the people were doing. At the very moment the law was being given, the people were making idols for themselves, just like the idols of Egypt. They were committing adultery and no doubt breaking each of the other laws as well. In rejecting God's Law they were rejecting God and they were also rejecting Moses.

Here, Stephen brings in the first of his direct quotations. This one is from [Amos 5:25-27](#). It was originally written as a warning to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel but Stephen is addressing the descendents of the southern kingdom of Judah and so adjusts the quotation accordingly. These verses describe the judgment of God when He takes His hands off and permits sinners to have their own way. In quoting Amos, Stephen was revealing what the Jews had actually been doing all those years: outwardly they were worshipping Jehovah; but in their hearts they were worshipping foreign gods!

The Law was given to the Jews to protect them from the pagan influence that surrounded them and to enable them to enjoy the blessings of the land God had given them. It was the Law that made them a holy people, different from other nations. When Israel broke down the wall of distinction by breaking God's Law, they rightly forfeited the blessing of God and had to be disciplined.

The point Stephen is making is that the attitude of Joseph's brothers and the people who came out of Egypt has been characteristic of Jewish people throughout their history. The Sanhedrin was part of that history. They were descendants of those who returned to Canaan from Babylon, and the same idolatrous spirit that took their ancestors to Babylon was still in them. They had been breaking the law of Moses all their lives and because they were rejecting Moses, they naturally rejected the truth about Jesus too.

44-50 – The false witnesses had accused Stephen of seeking to destroy the temple but the truth is, that's what the Jewish nation had done. Moses built the tabernacle and God's glory graciously dwelt in the holy of holies. Solomon built the temple and again, God glory came in. But, over the years, the worship at the temple degenerated into mere religious formality and eventually, they put idols in the temple. In Stephen's day, there were no idols allowed in the temple but it didn't matter – the Jews turned the temple itself into an idol! The religious leaders loved the temple and could not see beyond it. But, Solomon recognized that God didn't live in buildings. Man can make nothing for God because everything comes from Him. The Jewish defense of their temple was both illogical and unscriptural.

The truth is the day of the temple was passing. It had been a blessing to

Israel; it had served an important purpose but its necessity was now passing away simply because Jesus Christ had come. He was the real temple. Those who believe on Him become temples of the Holy Spirit as the living God comes to dwell in them. Instead of refuting the accusations made against him, Stephen indirectly admits that they are true. “This is what I am saying: that God is not the God of the Jews only but of the Gentiles too; and it’s to the Gentiles that the Gospel will now go.

This speech has prominence in Acts because it marks the closing of the exclusive Jewish mission and indicates the opening of the Gospel to Gentile communities. God will use it to show that there is no theological reason to prevent the Gospel from going out to the Gentiles. The whole idea behind a permanent, stationary temple is “you come to Me.” This is why Israel, though they were supposed to be a light to the world, mainly thought in terms of the world coming to them for salvation. Through the church, God was going to reveal a different heart – “I will come to you.” And that included the Gentiles as well.

51-53 – Application: instead of laying it out like a NT deacon, Stephen drops the bomb on them like an OT prophet! In his closing remarks; Stephen made 3 accusations against the religious leaders: 1) they were resisting the Holy Spirit, as they had always done; 2) they were persecuting and killing the prophets, as they had always done; 3) they were breaking the Law of Moses, as they had always done. 20 times in the OT God called Israel stiff-necked. These religious leaders were acting exactly like their forefathers had acted. In fact, their rejection of God makes them no better than the Gentiles.

54-60 – Stephen’s message was true and accurate and convicting but instead of responding with humility and repentance, this esteemed gathering of spiritual giants blew their collective tops and attacked Stephen. Like children, they covered their ears, rushed him outside and stoned him themselves. It’s difficult not to contrast the demeanor of Stephen against that of the council. The source of his courage, wisdom and power in preaching was the fact that he was full of the Holy Spirit. The murderous of the Sanhedrin to the truth shows they weren’t affected by the Holy Spirit. The “ran” in v57 is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea in **Mk 5:13**. This accurately reveals the kind of spirit that was directing and empowering these men. Their reaction is typical of

those who reject God and are lost in spiritual insanity.

Here we see Stephen's final ministerial role – that of a Christian martyr. The word comes from the Greek martyrs: a witness; one who bears a testimony. A martyr is a person who dies for their beliefs. A Christian martyr is a person who is killed for their witness of Jesus Christ. Stephen was the first Christian martyr but he will certainly not be the last. He was an outstanding witness for Jesus and it led to his death but as we can see, Stephen valued the opportunity to speak the truth more than he did his life.

Stephen's death meant different things to different people. For him, it meant a coronation. He would receive his victor's crown and Jesus was standing up to receive him. For Israel, it meant condemnation. This was their 3rd murder: they permitted John the Baptist to be killed; they asked for Jesus to be killed and they killed Stephen themselves. Judgment finally came in AD70 when Titus and the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

For the church, it meant liberation. They had been witnessing to the Jews since Pentecost but now they will begin to fan out all over the Empire and carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. For 1 person, it meant salvation. A young man named Saul was there and it seems Stephen's message, prayer and glorious death were used by the Holy Spirit to prepare Saul's heart for his own meeting with the Lord. God never wastes the blood of the saints. One day Saul would see the same glory Stephen saw and would meet the Son of God and hear Him speak!

God...gave them up (42). The worst form of punishment God can mete out is allowing the sinner to remain in their sin, without deterrence, without distraction, without conviction. You might think, "Well, that's exactly what sinners want!" True, but to what end? Total destruction. Sin unabated will quickly wreak havoc and utter destruction on those who are unfortunate enough to be consigned to that judgment. The Apostle Paul built on this idea of God giving man over to his sinful desires in [Rom 1](#) and it's not a pretty picture. But, I don't need to tell you that – you can see it for yourselves on the news daily. We are witnessing the ever-increasing collapse of our society and it is the direct consequence of sin undeterred and unconvicted.

The question each person needs to consider is: if we reject Jesus, what will we be given up to? 😊