

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The seventh chapter is the longest in the entire book and one of the most interesting and important. The whole council looked steadfastly upon that shining face, as if it had been the face of an angel. Thus we read in the closing verse of the previous chapter. How long they looked upon Stephen as he stood there we do not know. Perhaps after a few minutes of silence, an ominous silence, like the calm before a storm, the voice of the high priest is heard “**Are these things so?**”

Stephen then begins his great, God-given testimony. He is not permitted to finish it. They ran upon him with one accord and cast him out of the city and stoned him.

The chapter is therefore divided into two parts.

I. The address of Stephen (Verses 2-53).

II. The martyrdom of Stephen (Verses 54-60).

I. The address of Stephen.

We shall not quote the text of the entire testimony, which he delivered before the council, but request our readers to read his words carefully.

We notice at once a marked difference between the previous preaching by the Apostle Peter and the address of Stephen. The testimony of Peter was marked on the day of Pentecost and at the other occasions by great brevity. Stephen's address is the longest discourse reported in the New Testament. The name of Jesus is prominent in all the addresses of Peter. The fact that He was rejected by the people, crucified and that He rose from the dead and the call to repentance, were the leading features of Peter's preaching. Stephen does not mention the Name of Jesus at all, * though he has the person of Christ and His rejection as the theme of his testimony.

* The name Jesus occurs in verse 45; and as does Hebrews 4:8, refers to Joshua.

At the close of his address he speaks of the Just One of whom they had become betrayers and murderers.

Stephen had been accused of speaking against Moses and against God, also against the temple and the law. These accusations he is asked to answer. What he declared before the council shows plainly that the accusations are utterly false.

His speech is partly apologetic; but it is also teaching in that it shows certain truths from the historic events he cites. And before he finishes his testimony the accused becomes the accuser of the nation; the one to be judged becomes the judge. Indeed his whole testimony as he rapidly speaks of past history in his great and divinely arranged retrospect, is a most powerful testimony to the nation as well as against the nation.

Another striking fact is that he puts two persons into the foreground. These are Joseph and Moses.

Why they occupy such a prominent place in Stephen's address we shall see later.

Another matter we have to mention briefly before we touch upon some of the special features of the address. A careful reading of the statements made by Stephen and comparison with the Old Testament records show that there are certain things added by Stephen of which we do not read in the previous records; there are also other variations. These are often called discrepancies and are used as evidences against the inspirations of the Scriptures. However, they are far from being that. The Holy Spirit through Stephen adds some details to the already existing records. Stephen who was a Hellenist, a Greek speaking Jew, spoke most likely in the Greek language and then used the text of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which explains some of these alleged discrepancies. We shall not attempt to explain any of the others as that would lead us too far. We turn now to the address of Stephen to examine its different parts.

1. Abraham's History. Verses 2-8.

He begins with the great father of the nation, Abraham. Very significant is the beginning of the address. **"The God of Glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran."** The same expression is used in Psalm 29:3, **"The God of Glory thundereth."**

- In Ephesians 1:17 **"The Father of Glory."**
- In I Corinthians 2:8, where our Lord is called by the same title, **"The Lord of Glory"**
- And in I Peter 4:14, **"the Spirit of Glory."**

With this beautiful phrase Stephen begins and when his testimony is finished he beheld this very Glory of the Lord and he saw Him of whom he had borne witness, the One who had appeared unto Abraham and unto Moses in the burning bush. This beginning is significant for the greater Glory of the Lord and the light of the knowledge of the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is now soon to be made known through that chosen instrument to whom was committed the Gospel of the Glory of God, the Apostle Paul.

From Joshua 24:2 we find that the God of Glory had appeared unto Abraham when he was in the country of idolatry, himself an idolater.

God had graciously called him out of it and Abraham had gone forth in faith, not knowing where he Went; God brought him to the land of Canaan. Concerning the promise Stephen said, **“And He gave him none inheritance in it, not so much as to set his foot on; yet He promised that He would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child.”**

Abraham believed the promise and was justified by faith. All this manifested the Grace of God. It was unmerited favour. Abraham did nothing nor could do anything to earn all this. There was no temple then to boast of and no law to keep. The promise and the covenant were before the law. But they boasted in the law, which they did not keep and in the temple.

It was true of the council then as Paul wrote later **“they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth”** (Romans 10:3-4).

They had this righteousness and Grace offered unto them and they were rejecting it. The argument advanced here is similar to the one which Paul brings forth in Galatians 3. If the young Pharisee Saul of Tarsus heard Stephen, he heard for the first time, though still blinded, the great truth the Spirit of God unfolded through him after his conversion.

But Stephen also speaks of Israel’s sojourn in a strange land as revealed unto Abraham. For four hundred years they were entreated evil (Verses 6-7). This tells of the suffering of Israel before they came into the possession of the land, a hint, no doubt, of the great truth so clearly revealed in Israel’s history of the suffering of Christ and the Glory that should follow. Here the Spirit of God once more came to their consciences in this historical outline of their father Abraham. Alas! their hearts were closed.

2. Joseph and his brethren. Verses 9-16.

Stephen in his inspired testimony passes over the entire history of Isaac and Jacob, and Joseph instead is prominently mentioned.

The way the story of Joseph is given, the comprehensive style is really marvelous. The complete history of the suffering and glory, the humiliation and exaltation of Joseph, is pictured in a few sentences and that in a manner which greatly illuminates this interesting portion of God’s Word.

In bringing Joseph at once before their hearts, what was done to him and to what place God exalted him, the Holy Spirit reveals one of the finest and most perfect types of Christ contained in the Word of God.

The main issue of Stephen’s testimony is before us with Joseph’s history.

“The patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt.”

Their own brother, because they hated him without a cause, was sold by them into the hands of the Gentiles. The price was twenty pieces of silver. The meaning of this was so clear that the assembled council must have fully understood the application. The chief priests and elders had hated another one, who was, according to the flesh, their brother. And their hatred against him was on account of envy. Pilate even knew this. **“For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy”** (Mark 15:10).

This Jesus of Nazareth, the name they hated so much, had been sold for thirty pieces of silver. His Own had delivered Him into the hands of the Gentiles, as Joseph had been sold into Egypt.

Then we read the brief sentence, **“but God was with him.”**

The same phrase is used by Peter in reference to Jesus in preaching to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:38). The council knew perfectly that God was with the One, whom they had condemned. One of their own number, Nicodemus, had even come to the One, they despised and envied, with the declaration Upon his lips **“Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him”** (John 3:2).

A description of Joseph’s exaltation follows.

“And delivered him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.”

Then comes a brief account of the famine, which troubled the brethren of Joseph. They had to go and get bread from the brother they had rejected. The second time Joseph was made known to his brethren.

The typical meaning is obvious. God had also delivered Him, whom they had rejected and crucified. He had raised Him from the dead and made Him, as Peter preached, both Lord and Christ. Then there is a great dispensational foreshadowing.

The rejected One, like Joseph, is received by the Gentiles. Famine and tribulation awaits the nation who rejected Him who came to His own, they must suffer as Joseph’s brethren suffered. **“The second time Joseph was made known to his brethren,”** refers to the second coming of the Lord. Joseph was the salvation of his brethren.

3. Moses as Deliverer rejected. The rejected One a Ruler and Deliverer. Verses 17-38.

This is the largest section of Stephen’s address.

In Moses they boasted continually. They were proud of him as their law-giver, the mighty man who had led their fathers forth from the house of bondage, through whom the God of the Glory had performed His great miracles.

They called him, and orthodox Jews do so still, “Moses, our teacher.”

What was his experience? Was he at once received by their forefathers? Did they accept him when he came to deliver them? How was he treated? The Divine record is unrolled before their hearts and the history, so familiar to the council, speaks once more.

Moses foreshadows likewise Christ. His experience outlines the experience of Him, who is counted worthy of more glory than Moses (Hebrews 3:3-5).

Stephen says “**the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham**” (Verse 17).

God remembered His Word. The people were in bondage in Egypt and needed a deliverer. God provided the deliverer through whom the promise, because the time of the promise drew nigh, should be accomplished. All is pregnant with meaning. The time of the promise of the coming of the Redeemer had indeed drawn nigh. He had appeared, whom God had sent to deliver His people. Had He been received? The story of Moses’ rejection was repeated on a larger scale in the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

First we find a description of Moses.

He was born just in the time when the oppression was great; “**in which time Moses was born.**” Even so, “**when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth His son made of a woman, made under the law**” (Galatians 4:4). Moses was “**exceeding fair,**” That is “fair to God;” he was exceedingly lovely. But how much more was He, who came from the Glory, the only begotten of the Father.

- Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Verse 22); Christ is the Wisdom.
- Moses was mighty in works and in deeds, but Christ was far more than that and manifested His divine power and grace in the midst of His people.

*The next thing said of Moses is that “**he was cast out.**”*

The application of this to Christ we need not to follow in detail. When Moses was full grown, forty years, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel. He appeared for them as a deliverer out of the bondage and it is written “**He supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by His hand would deliver them; but they understood him not**” (Verse 25).

He was rejected by those he had come to deliver.

“**Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?**” was the sneering word cast at him. Moses had to flee into a strange land and be among strangers for forty years. And something similar had but recently been repeated in the very midst of the people.

The deliverer had appeared.

He had visited His people and made Himself known to them; **“God by His hand would deliver them.”** But His own had not received Him. They understood not; they cast Him out and denied Him. Like Joseph, Moses went to the Gentiles, rejected by his people.

The application to Christ is easily made and we do not follow it in its particulars.

But Moses returned and the once rejected deliverer whom they knew not was after all the one who delivered them and brought them forth.

“This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush. He brought them out, after that he had showed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness forty years” (Verses 35, 36).

The Holy Spirit pressed home these great foreshadowings. Must they not have been reminded of the words spoken before by Peter? **“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour”** (Chapter 5:30). **“This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner”** (Chapter 4:11).

These were familiar words to them carried to their consciences by the Holy Spirit and now through the historical record of Moses, the Moses of whom they boasted, the same truth is flashed before them once more. **“This Moses”** - the one who was rejected **“The same did God send”** meant “this Jesus, whom you crucified - the same whom God sent and made Prince and Saviour.”

Significant too is the event of the burning bush, the angel of the Lord had appeared there in His Glory to Moses and it was by the hand of that angel that Moses became the ruler and deliverer (Verse 35).

Wonders and signs were then accomplished through him. Of this uncreated angel the council believed that He was the Lord Himself, while their traditions well known and received at that time, spoke of Him as the Messiah. This same Lord had been in their midst and manifested His presence by wonders and signs.

The Holy Spirit witnesses also in this to the truth, so often revealed, that in the future, at the second Coming of Christ (corresponding to the second time in the history of Joseph), the nation will know and accept Him, whom they rejected before.

The history of Moses is the foreshadowing of the history of Christ.

In Moses they believed and boasted. The accusation was that Stephen spoke against Moses. His testimony proves that he believes in Moses. But did the council really believe in Moses?

The accused becomes the accuser.

They did not believe in Moses and in his words. “**This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren like unto me; him shall ye hear.**”

If they believed in this prediction as given by Moses they would have looked for that prophet, whose coming was promised by Moses. That it was fulfilled in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, Peter had stated in his second address (Acts 3:22-23). But they were unbelieving.

4. The Story of their Apostasy and Shame. Verses 39-53.

Even after the departure from Egypt and after witnessing the signs and wonders wrought, they did not obey Moses, they thrust him from them and their hearts turned back again to Egypt. So they had not obeyed Christ and had also thrust Him from them.

This is followed by a brief rehearsal of their shameful history. They rushed into idolatry. They worshipped the host of heaven and during the wilderness journey they brought sacrifices to Moloch and Remphan (Amos 5:25-27). Then their coming captivity had been announced. On account of the rejection of the One, who is greater than Moses, whose coming Moses had announced, greater apostasy and dispersion must follow.

Then he speaks of the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, made according to the fashion as seen by Moses and how they came under Joshua in possession of the Gentiles, who were driven out of the land (Verses 44-45).

David is briefly mentioned. He found favour before God and desired to build a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house. But the most High dwells not in places made with hands. Solomon himself had made this declaration (I Kings 8:27) and the Prophet Isaiah had expressed the same truth (Isaiah 66:1-2).

Furthermore, the Glory and the Lord of the Glory, who dwelt once in the temple had departed; Ichabod (the Glory is departed) was written there. But more than that the Lord who was present in the tabernacle and whose Glory had filled the house once had appeared in their midst and they had cast Him out and slain the Prince of Glory. Could then that temple be called any longer “**a holy place**” as they said in their accusation? The tale of the apostasy of the nation was thus told out from the records of the nation.

But now the summing up comes. Perhaps throughout the discourse evidences of displeasure from the sides of the council must have been in evidence. If it had been in their power they would have stopped him before. They were, however, constrained to listen. Another power compelled them to hear the arraignment of themselves and of the nation. The climax is reached. Most likely they began to grind their teeth already. Their dark sinister countenances showed the wrath and bitterness of Satan. They are cut in their consciences. Perhaps some arose and disorder was about to issue.

Stephen ceases his retrospect. The Holy Spirit now addresses them directly. The accused Stephen becomes the mouthpiece of the Judge who pronounces the sentence.

“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.”

Every word was true. The entire testimony was unimpeachable. Stiffnecked and uncircumcised, resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets who prophesied of Christ and the murderers of the Just One! This was their condition. With this the testimony of Stephen is ended; more than that the testimony to the nation is now to be closed. No longer is the offer to be made to Jerusalem.

II. The Martyrdom of Stephen.

“When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Verses 54-60).

And now the awful storm breaks.

The arrows of the truth of God carried by the power of God’s Spirit had cut to the heart and they gnashed on him with their teeth. In their madness they were dumb. They did not find words to give vent to their burning hatred which Satan had kindled in their stubborn, unbelieving hearts. All they could do in their frenzy was to gnash with their teeth.

It was not a sudden outburst but the tense rather shows that it was prolonged.

In the midst of this wicked crowd, no longer the council but a murderous mob, stood Stephen. If his face shone like that of an angel in the beginning of his testimony, what glory must have rested upon him now? The heavenly glory into which he was so soon to enter must have been wonderfully reflected upon his face.

Three things are said of him.

- He was full of the Holy Spirit;
- He looked steadfastly into heaven seeing there the Glory of God,
- He saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God.

The Holy Spirit in His fulness was upon him.

He had testified through him and now as they are gnashing their teeth, ready to seize him and to follow Satan, who is a murderer from the beginning, to the full extent of his power, Stephen stands in great calmness and peace.

The Holy Spirit who possessed him so fully directed his gaze away from the earth upward into Heaven. He looked steadfastly into heaven. This is one effect of the filling of the Spirit, the heart occupation with heavenly things.

But more than that he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.

The unspeakable Glory shone out of the depths of heaven and in that Glory he saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God. He of whom he had borne such a good witness, whose blessed name he had glorified in his life and by his words and whom he soon was to glorify in his triumphant death was seen by him.

While we read in the Epistles that the Lord sat down, on the right hand of God, the attitude which tells of His finished work, we read here that He was seen standing. This is not a contradiction. We do not think it was because He was still waiting for Israel's repentance, ready to come back. He was seen standing because He had arisen from His seat to welcome into His own presence the faithful martyr.

This is the first manifestation of the glorified Christ, which we have on record.

There are three of them only.

- He appeared here to Stephen.
- Then (oh! marvelous Grace!) He appeared unto Saul, who consented unto Stephen's death. Saul beheld Him in that Glory, brighter than the noon-day sun and heard His voice.
- The last time the glorified Christ manifested Himself was to John in the island of Patmos.

These three appearings of the glorified Christ present to our view the three aspects of His Second Coming.

- First He comes to welcome His own into His presence. He will arise and come into the air to meet His beloved co-heirs there. This is represented by the first appearing to Stephen, standing to receive him.
- Then Israel will behold Him, they who pierced Him will see Him, like Saul of Tarsus beheld the Lord.
- Then He will appear as John saw Him, the One who judges the earth in righteousness.

And now after this great and glorious vision, Stephen bears testimony to it.

“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.”

He speaks, of the Lord as **“Son of Man.”**

This is the only time outside of the Gospel records, that we find this title of the Lord (aside from the Old Testament references in Hebrews 2).

But were not these familiar words to the frenzied council? Had they not heard One saying similar words? But a few weeks ago they had gazed upon Him, whom they hated and envied. The vision of that meek and lowly One must surely have come up before their eyes that very moment. And He had said in the presence of this very council, “**From henceforth shall the Son of Man be seated at the right hand of the power of God**” (Luke 22:69). And here is the echo of that solemn word on account of which the Holy One was condemned. But it is more than an echo. It is the witness that the Son of Man is there at the right hand of God.

We do not read of an orderly trial which followed. All order was abandoned. Chaos and confusion reigned. They cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears and ran upon him with one accord. Stopping the ears is a frequent occurrence among orthodox Hebrews. We have talked with some of them and after pressing an argument about the Messiahship of Jesus, they would put their hands to their ears, as if to shut out any further argument.

The Sanhedrim had been changed into a wild, furious, demon-possessed mob, bent on the murder of God’s witness.

One thing they do which was according to the law. They rushed him out of the city. Like the Lord Jesus Christ he was to suffer “**without the gate.**”

The law required this (Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35). And there they stoned Stephen. In this act they were lawbreakers for their own witness had been to the Roman authorities, “**It is not lawful for us to put any man to death**” (John 18:31).

But they make a show of keeping the law.

In Deuteronomy 17:7, it is written: “**The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hands of all the people.**”

They had witnesses who began the awful work by casting stones upon him first. And that young Pharisee of Cilicia took a prominent part in this terrible scene. He was a prominent figure in it. Saul of Tarsus stands in the foreground. If he was a member of the council, which is more than probable, then he heard the whole testimony of Stephen and consented to his death. In Acts 22:20 we read that he said “**I was standing by.**” This may mean that he had charge over what occurred. One thing is certain, he was intimate with the witnesses. They took off their upper garments so as to be freed to strike hard, and deposited their garments at the feet of Saul.

And now the stoning began.

The first thing Stephen did was to pray. He called upon the Lord God.

His prayer was addressed to the Lord Jesus, into whose hands he committed his spirit.

Then he bowed his knees and with a loud voice he manifested the love of Christ by forgiving his murderers, “**Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.**”

This prayer was answered in the conversion of that young man, whose name was Saul, for the responsibility and guilt was upon him, inasmuch as he had consented unto his death (Chapter 8:1).

Then Stephen fell asleep.

The mighty witness closed his eyes on earth. But what a moment it must have been when his spirit was received by Him whose Glory and Person he beheld, and into whose hands he had committed his spirit.

God’s gracious offer and Christ had now been fully rejected by the nation. Stephen, who bore this last witness, is a striking evidence of the transforming power of Christ. How much like the Lord he was!

He was filled with the Spirit, full of faith and power, and like the Lord he did great wonders and miracles among the people. Like Christ, he was falsely accused of speaking against Moses, the law and the temple, and of being a blasphemer. They brought him before the same council and did what they did with the Lord, bringing false witnesses against him. He gave witness to the truth of the confession, the Lord had given before the council, that He was to sit at the right hand of God. He beheld Him there. The Lord Jesus committed His spirit in the Father’s hands, and Stephen prayed that the Lord Jesus receive his spirit; and like the Lord he prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies. May the same power transform us all into the same image.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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