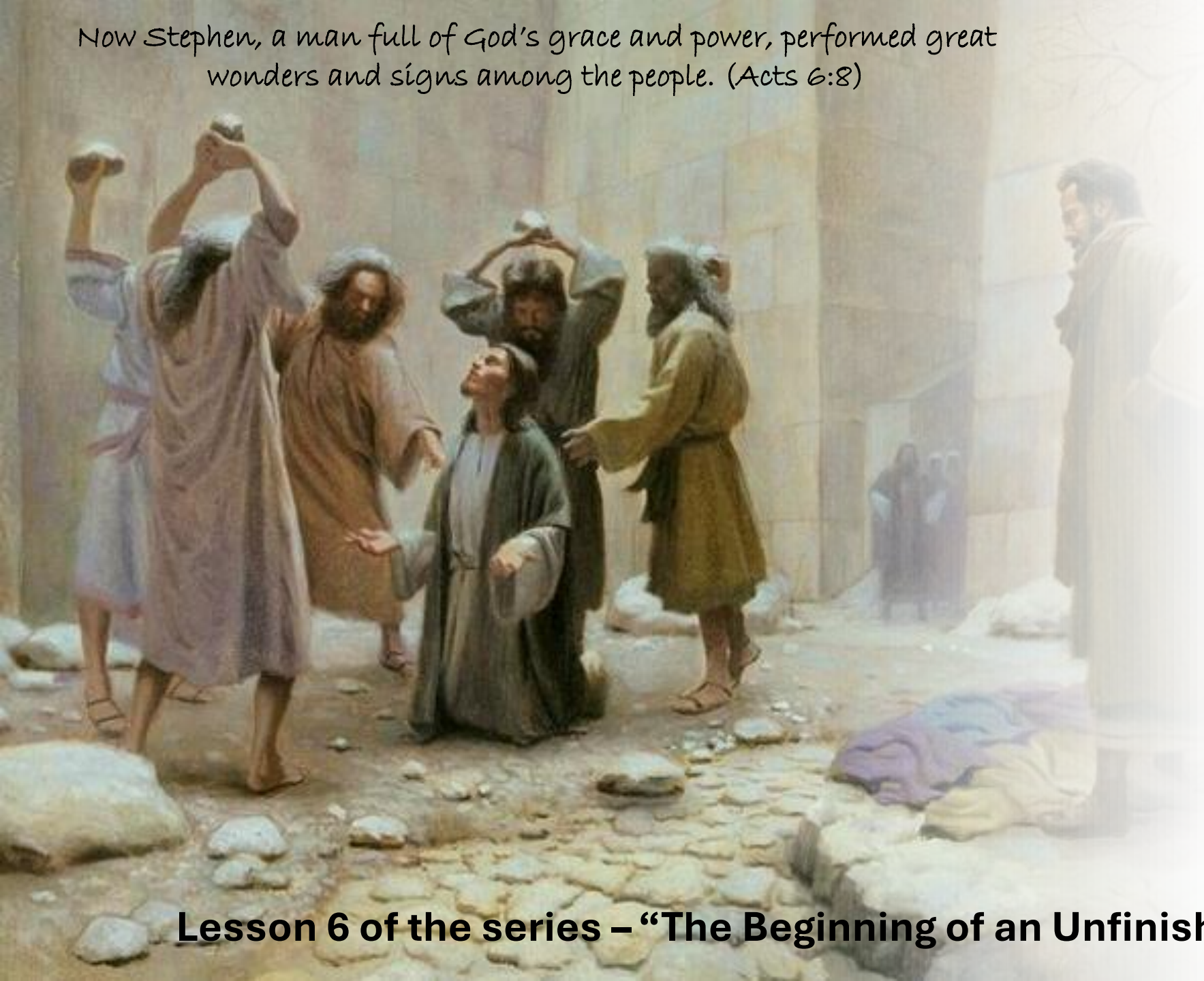


Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)



The Church and Its First Martyr

Acts 6 & 7

Lesson 6 of the series – “The Beginning of an Unfinished Work“ (Acts 6-7)

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.” (Acts 6:1)

- ✓ Luke’s reference “In those days” is probably best understood to be the period that encompasses the growth of the early church – probably sometime:
 - After Pentecost (Approximately 30 AD) – Acts 1-2
 - After the events surrounding the healing of the crippled man and when Peter and John appear before the Sanhedrin the first time (Acts 3-4)
 - After the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira and the short imprisonment of Peter, John and the other apostles.
- ✓ The events recorded in Acts 6 & 7 could have occurred anywhere between 30-33 AD
- ✓ The church was continuing to increase but no specific number was given as to how many additional Christ followers were added since Acts 4:4

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the **Hellenistic Jews** among them **complained** against the **Hebraic Jews** because **their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.**” (Acts 6:1)

- ✓ Two groups of people are identified here in Acts 6:1 and both groups were considered disciples (Christ followers or followers of the apostles)
 - **Hellenistic Jews** – “Greek speaking” Jewish converts (Christ followers, or those who were of “the Way”, Acts 9:2) to what will later be called Christianity (Acts 11:26). These were Jews who returned to Jerusalem who had fled early Roman occupation.
 - **Hebraic Jews** – non-Greek speaking Jewish converts (Christ followers, or those who were of “the Way”, Acts 9:2) to what will later be called Christianity (Acts 11:26). Their primary language was Aramaic, and they were rooted in Judean culture.
- ✓ A problem had arisen where during the daily food distribution, the widows of the Greek speaking Jews (also sometimes referred to as Hellenists) were being overlooked, while the widows of the Hebraic Jews were receiving food and care

“So, **the Twelve gathered all the disciples together** and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:2-4)

- ✓ There was an apparent need for further organization to meet a specific need (distribution of food and care for the widows) within the church that had developed
- ✓ There was already a standard for the caring of widows set forth in Scripture

“At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and **the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied**, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” Deuteronomy 14:28-29)

- ✓ What we don’t know is whether the neglect was deliberate or not. Whatever the case this apparent strain that existed between Palestinian Jews and the Hellenistic Jews was now brought into the church and they had to deal with it. **So, the 12 apostles gathered all the disciples together to discuss a plan of action and avoid the first church split.**

“So, the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “**It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.** Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:2-4)

- ✓ The Apostles themselves recognized their primary duty was their devotion to prayer and the ministry of the Word
- ✓ The immediate issue they faced was how to care for widows who were being neglected, but there may have been other underlying issues that also needed attention and it was clear to the Apostles that their primary ministry focus would suffer if they allowed themselves to be distracted from that mission
- ✓ The church in Jerusalem had probably grown in numbers exceeding 20,000 people so the specific distribution of food and resources (referenced as “waiting on tables”) to this group of widows could easily be assigned or delegated to others.

“So, the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. **Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.** We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:2-4)

✓ They (all the disciples which included men and women) were instructed to choose seven men from among them who were:

➤ **Known to be full of the Spirit** which would mean they were believers

“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.” (Ephesians 1:13-14)

➤ **They were to be men of wisdom** – recognized for their mature discernment, spiritual insight, and of good reputation

✓ In this case it was men that were chosen for this leadership task, but it doesn’t diminish the value/role of women in ministry for women throughout the New Testament have served in the church. (i.e., Dorcas, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and even Phillip’s daughters)

“So, the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. **We will turn this responsibility over to them** and will **give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.**” (Acts 6:2-4)

- ✓ They then delegated to seven chosen men the administrative task of daily distributing food and other resources to the widows in need.
- ✓ The apostles were able to remain true to their primary calling which was to pray and preach/teach the word.
- ✓ There is nothing to indicate one function was any less important than the other, but through wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they recognized where their gifts and talents rested and remained focused on that.

“**So Christ himself gave the apostles**, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **to equip his people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-13)

“This proposal pleased the whole group. **They chose Stephen**, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also, **Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas**, and **Nicolas from Antioch**, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.” (Acts 6:5-6)

- ✓ The decision pleased the whole group which (though not defined here) was probably a combination of the apostles and other disciples of the Jerusalem congregation
- ✓ These seven men listed here are sometimes referred to as the first church deacons
 - **Stephen** – described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit who will later be accused of blasphemy against God and subsequently stoned to death becoming the first martyr.
 - **Phillip** (not the apostle) will preach to the Ethiopian eunuch in Samaria (Acts 8) and is recognized as Phillip the Evangelist in Acts 21:8)
 - **Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas** – very limited information about them in scripture but church tradition and other historical writings mention them
 - **Nicolas** was a Gentile convert to Judaism before becoming a Christ follower

“This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. **They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.**” (Acts 6:5-6)

- ✓ The laying of hands over someone became the common method of accepting a person into ministry or sending them out to do ministry

“Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So, **after they had fasted and prayed,** they **placed their hands on them and sent them off.**” (Acts 13:1-3)

“For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, **which is in you through the laying on of my hands.** For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” (II Timothy 1:6-7)

- ✓ Ultimately this was seen as a formal, public recognition of the men's appointment to a new, specific ministry of service within the church, along with a gesture of unity. It may also have symbolized the transfer of responsibility from the apostles to these seven deacons to oversee the care of the Hellenistic widows and prevent further division

“So, the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7)

- ✓ One of the more significant results was the Apostles primary roles (prayer and administering the Word) was not compromised, and further problems of discontent were avoided by such a wise solution which resulted in:
 - The word of God (the gospel) to spread even more rapidly
 - More people in Jerusalem came to believe, trust and follow Jesus
 - Even a large number of priests also came to believe, trust and follow Jesus
- ✓ *“The church today needs organization for the same reasons as the first fellowship. Pastors must be free to focus on the preaching of the Word and prayer. Better organization can help meet the needs of all members and thus avoid conflict. And a unified well-taught church will be a powerful witness to the lost world.” (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts page 185)*

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.” (Acts 6:8-10)

- ✓ Some consider Stephen as a forerunner to the Apostle Paul in that he too ministered in the Synagogues (primarily to foreign Jews) and based on what we read in Acts 6-7, he would often debate them.
- ✓ His primary character traits are listed in Acts 6:5 and in Acts 6:8:
 - He was full of faith which means his life was governed by it
 - He was filled with the Holy Spirit and full of God’s grace and power
- ✓ He (as someone outside the circle of the 12 Apostles) **had the unique ability to perform great wonders and signs.** Two others (besides the Apostle Paul) are recognized as being able to do the same – Barnabas (Acts 15:12) and Phillip (Acts 8:4-8)

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. **Opposition arose**, however, **from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen** (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.” (Acts 6:8-10)

- ✓ Who were these members from the Synagogue of the Freedmen
 - They were “Hellenized” or Greek speaking Jews who returned to Jerusalem after fleeing to other parts of the known world during the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman occupation of Jerusalem.
 - Their common language was Greek (for they had been Hellenized) due to the strong influence of Greek culture during the reign of that empire.
 - Many of them or their descendants were probably slaves during the time that the Roman Empire conquered the Greek Empire, and these Hellenized Jews found themselves back in Jerusalem as “freed slaves” or “Freedman”. Collectively they formed their own Greek speaking “synagogue” in Jerusalem.

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. **Opposition arose**, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—**Jews of Cyrene** and **Alexandria** as well as the **provinces of Cilicia and Asia**—who **began to argue with Stephen**. But **they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.**” (Acts 6:8-10)

- ✓ Its not clear if this was a single group, or several smaller groups consisting of Jews from Cyrene/Alexandria (North Africa), Cilicia (modern day Turkey) and other regions of what is called Asia Minor, who may have shared the same specific facility (Synagogue)
- ✓ Members of this synagogue begin to argue with Stephen, now a leader in the early church, but could not overcome his wisdom. This will lead them to bring false charges against him regarding the Temple and the Law of Moses.
- ✓ It is interesting to note that Saul of Tarsus (later to become the Apostle Paul) was from the region of Cilicia and (as some conclude) may have been involved in this dispute with Stephen before Saul’s conversion of faith in Acts 9.

“Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” So, they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.” (Acts 6:11-12)

- ✓ The words that Stephen spoke probably centered around the death and resurrection of Jesus (The Gospel), as well as the claim that Jesus was the Messiah.
- ✓ These Hellenized Jews who couldn't debate Stephen on this topic chose instead to attack him and spread lies that he spoke blasphemy against Moses and God.
- ✓ This debate will cause an uproar, and they will seize Stephen and bring him before the Sanhedrin where they will hear the case against him, albeit the charges were totally false as we will see from Stephen's eloquent defense.
- ✓ All of this shows the fallacy of human reasoning that leaves out the wisdom of God, for error is no match for truth!

“They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” (Acts 6:13-15)

- ✓ They produced an array of false witnesses who claimed:
 - That Stephen’s message spoke against the temple in Jerusalem
 - That Stephen blasphemed or spoke against the Law which was at the core of the Jewish belief system
 - That Stephen was advocating for changes to the customs and laws the Jews had live by for centuries
- ✓ These accusations were a complete fabrication and purported in this fashion because they could not defeat him in debate or withstand the wisdom and Spirit by which he spoke. Although false, these accusations were similar to charges made against Jesus and were designed to provoke the Sanhedrin council along with the people, to be against him

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✓ *“God Himself answered their false charges by putting His glory on Stephen’s face – something experienced by no other person in history except Moses” - Exodus 34:27-35. This is a clear declaration by God of His approval of this New Covenant and of Stephen himself*. (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts, page 196)

“When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.” (Exodus 34:29-32)

✓ *“God singled Stephen out as one of the greatest men who ever lived. And his life and testimony profoundly affected an even greater man – Saul of Tarsus.” (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts, page 196)*

“Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” To this he replied:

“Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’” (Acts 7:1-3)

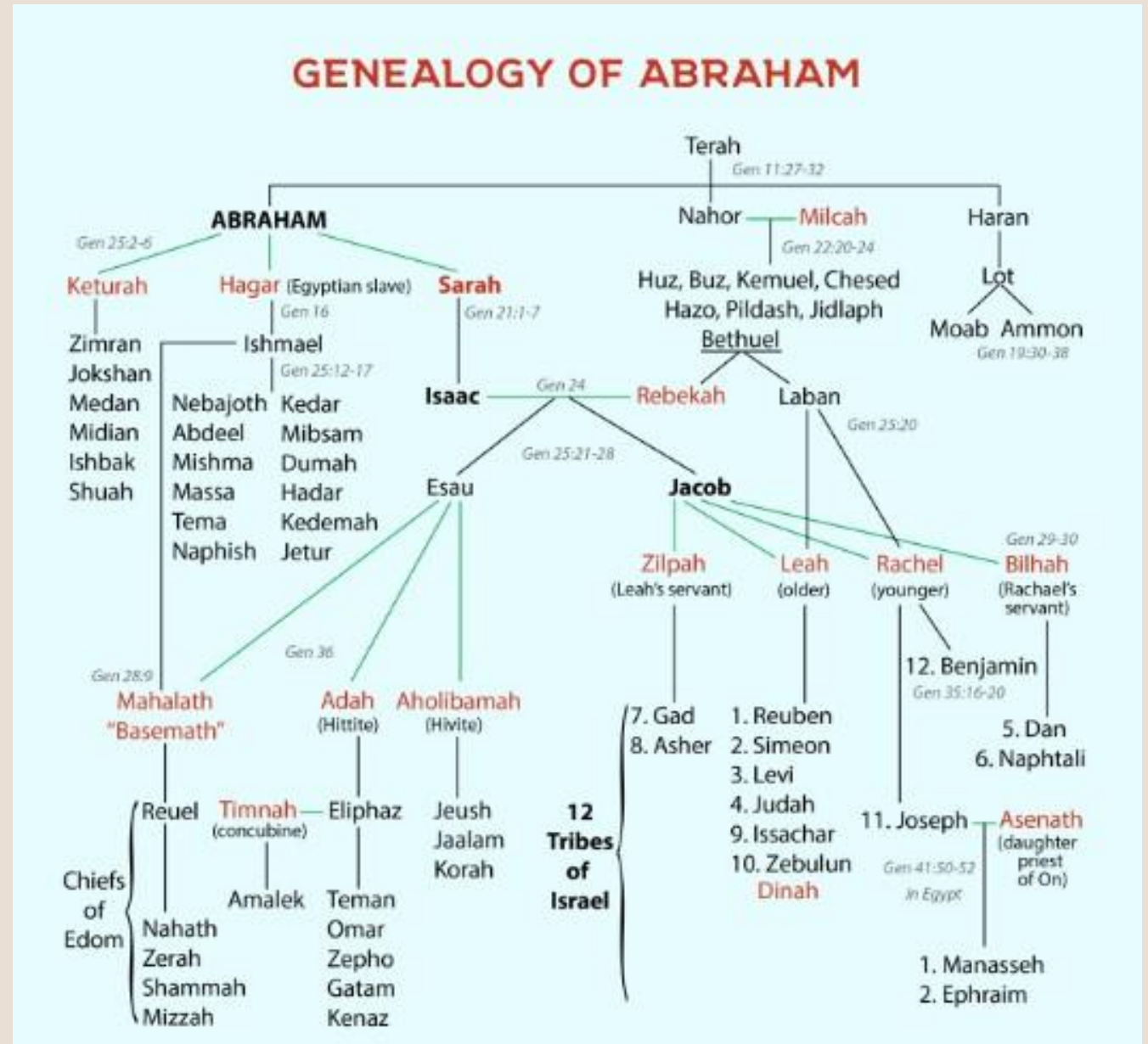
- ✓ The accusation of “blasphemy” against Stephen had been made (Acts 6:11, 13) and he will now set out to answer those charges.
- ✓ His answer is a rather lengthy address (a sermon if you will) in which his defense is less of a legal defense of his own actions and more of a recital of Israel’s history, in which he will use to vindicate the truth claims of Christ and His followers.
- ✓ In answering the charges against him, Stephen’s primary defense is the very history of the ancestors that his hearers (the Jewish people) were so proud of. How could they dispute the very claims that they themselves believed in and loved to hear about?
- ✓ In addition to reciting Israel’s history, Stephen will remind the hearers (just as Peter did) that they rejected the Messiah. By rejecting Jesus, they also are guilty of rejecting Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and even David for each one pointed to Christ the Messiah.

“Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” **To this he replied:**

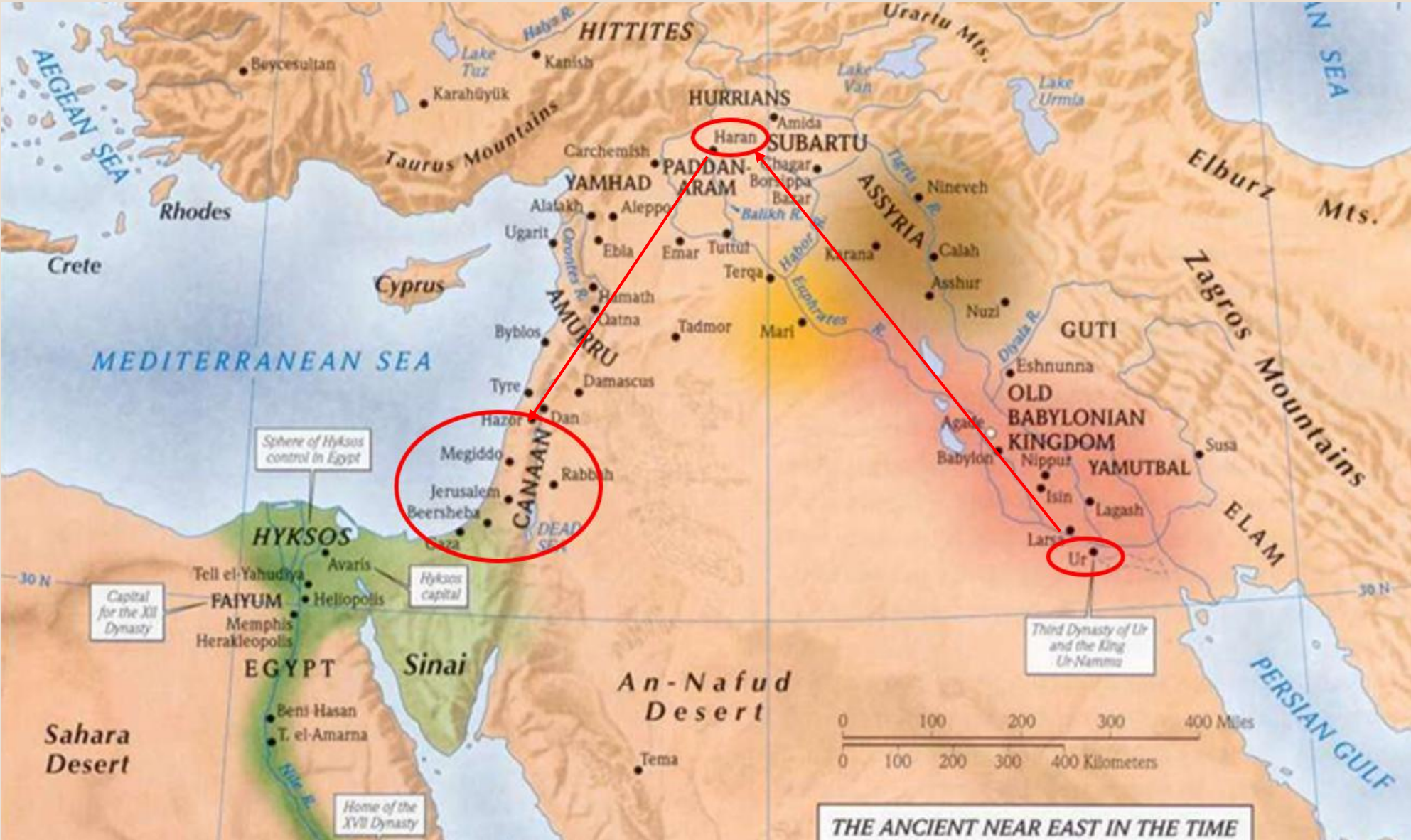
“Brothers and fathers, listen to me! **The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia**, before he lived in Harran. **‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.** So, he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. **But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.”** (Acts 7:1-5)

- ✓ Out of the thousands of people on the earth at that time, what an amazing honor it was for Abraham to be called by God to be the father of His chosen people.
- ✓ God called Abraham from his home, (Ur of the Chaldeans) which was in Mesopotamia and relocate to a land (the land of promise) that he knew nothing about!
- ✓ His descendants (beginning with Isaac, and then Jacob, and the 12 sons of Jacob/Israel) would become a nation of people too numerous to count. This was amazing for at the time that God made this promise to Abraham he had no children.

This is just a list of Abraham's descendants through 5 generations. By the time David became King, his descendants numbered in the millions



Abraham left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans – went to Haran – and then to Canaan (The Land of Promise)



“God spoke to him in this way: ‘For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’ Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.” (Acts 7:6-8)

- ✓ Stephen refers to Abraham’s descendants being enslaved 400 years which was prophetic to Abraham and happened long after he died. It is in reference to the Egyptian captivity which eventually brought about the Exodus from Egypt and the return to the Land of Promise

“Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Genesis 15:13-16)

“Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:3-8)

“Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. **He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt.** So, Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. **Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan,** bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. **Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died.** Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.” (Acts 7:9-16)

- ✓ Joseph played a pivotal role in saving his family (his father Jacob and his other 11 brothers and their children) from extinction due to a major 7-year famine (est - 1800 BC)
- ✓ Approximately 75 of Josephs family members relocated to Egypt to survive the famine but due to changes in Egypt’s leadership – the Israelites became enslaved there.

“As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, **the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased**. Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ **He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.**” (Acts 7:17-19)

✓ This is how life was for the children of Abraham who were now in Egyptian bondage:

*“Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them, or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” So, they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. **But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread;** so, the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; **in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.** (Exodus 1:8-14)*

“Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. **Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.** His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.” (Exodus 2:1-4)

✓ It was necessary to hide Moses because of the edict given by Pharaoh to drown all males born to Hebrew women for God had plans to deliver His chosen people and the man who would lead them out from Egypt was Moses.

“At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, **Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son.** Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.” (Acts 7:20-22)

- ✓ Moses was no ordinary child, and his mother (Jochebed) knew it. She trusted in God (not the gods of Egypt) to protect her son, even at her own peril for disobeying the law of Pharaoh to kill all the male children born to Hebrew slaves.
- ✓ Jochebed, the mother of Moses, is recognized as a pivotal figure in Israel’s history. After placing her child in the Nile to save his life, she was providentially hired to nurse and educate him during his formative years. She instilled in him his Hebrew identity and knowledge of God's promises before he entered the Egyptian palace to be educated.
- ✓ She took it upon herself to teach him the stories of his heritage—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their hope of deliverance, enabling him to later choose his people over Egypt
- ✓ Moses was highly educated, well skilled, and a man of power in word and deeds, but he would soon turn his back on Egypt and follow the call of God.

“When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’ But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ **When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.”** (Acts 7:23-29)

✓ Moses, once considered a Prince of Egypt, was now faced with the fulfillment of his calling which was to deliver his people (the Israelites) from Egyptian bondage but neither the Israelites nor Moses were quite ready for this, and Moses goes to the land of Midian and it is there he meets with God (in the form of a burning bush) on Mount Horeb/Sinai

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. **He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.”** (Hebrews 11:24-28)

“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, **he heard the Lord say: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’** Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. “Then the Lord said to him, **‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free.** Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.” (Acts 7:30-34)

- ✓ Stephen recites a very familiar story from the Old Testament where Moses has an encounter with God where he sees a bush burning but the bush is not consumed by the flames. **God identifies himself**, as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, **establishes the boundaries of holiness**, and **instruct Moses to return to Egypt and deliver His people**.
- ✓ Stephen’s choice to detail (to the members of the Sanhedrin) this account between God and Moses which took place in the wilderness/desert of Mt. Sinai, might have been for the purpose of proving that **God’s presence is not restricted to a particular building** nor is He confined to the defined parameters that mankind places on Him. **God is God!**

“This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness. “This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’ He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.” (Acts 7:35-38)

- ✓ The Israelites (this would include the members of the Sanhedrin whom Stephen was speaking to) had a history of disobeying and rejecting the words of the prophets and other messengers whom God sent them.
- ✓ Stephen is implying (it’s the reason the members of the Sanhedrin will become so angry with him) that in the same way that the Israelites (after Moses led them out of Egypt) rejected his words by turning to idolatry (worshipping the golden calf) , they too rejected Christ and his words by condemning him to death on a cross, thus placing their selfish desires above God’s plans for them, which was to deliver them (through Christ) from their sin and make them “holy” and “right” before God.

“But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made.” (Acts 7:39-41)

- ✓ Stephen, by sharing this story they all knew about, is point out to them that they are simply repeating the same historical pattern of disobedience as their ancestors did
- ✓ Stephen uses this story to confront them of their own stubbornness and will argue that it is they, and not him who were dishonoring God.
- ✓ Perhaps, the temple had become a “type or form” of idol worship to the religious leaders, and they simply could not acknowledge that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the temple:

*“The Jews then responded to him, **“What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”** Jesus answered them, **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”** They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” **But the temple he had spoken of was his body.** After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:18-22)*

“But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? **You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.** Therefore, **I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.**” (Acts 7:42-43)

✓ Stephen quotes from Amos 5 and his point was that the Israelites dedication to God was continuously compromised because of their frequent pursuit of false gods

“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god which you made for yourselves. Therefore, I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty. (Amos 5:25-27)

✓ At the core of the Sanhedrin’s issue with Stephen and his preaching was their accusation of his undermining of the temple and the Law. **By mentioning that Israel fell into idolatry during the time of the Tabernacle and Moses, perhaps Stephen was arguing that holding a physical building (the Temple) in higher regard than God himself was a form of idolatry similar to that of their ancestors.**

“Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. **It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.” (Acts 7:44-46)**

- ✓ Stephen continues his defense against the accusations against him that he blasphemed the temple and the law by reminding the religious leaders about the Tabernacle (a portable and temporary dwelling place and allowed God to be among them), once again arguing that God is not confined to human-made structures, and turning the accusation around to show that the religious leaders are restricting God and resisting the Holy Spirit
- ✓ It wasn’t until “the time of David” when his son Solomon built a permanent house for God which became the place where offerings were given and sacrifices were made. This progression shows that God was moving them towards a permanent state of worship which was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus – though the religious leaders rejected that idea

“But it was Solomon who built a house for him. “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human 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 where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?” (Acts 7:47-50)

- ✓ The construction of the temple was a milestone in Jewish history and considered by most Jews to be the peak of their glory.
- ✓ Stephen reminds the hearer that this was a mere symbol of God’s presence and not his “literal” home. God is not limited to anything (including space) and because He is Omnipresent (present everywhere), **a physical dwelling place is not needed for God to be present.**
- ✓ The Scriptures clearly teach that we (those who are redeemed – follower of Christ) are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16). That is what Jesus meant when he told the Samaritan woman that a day was coming when “true worshippers” will worship the Father in spirit and truth. (John 4:20-24)

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands) - **remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,** without hope and without God in the world. **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. **His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.** He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. **For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.** Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.** In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. **And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.** (Ephesians 2:11-22)

“Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” (I Corinthians 3:16)

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.” (I Corinthians 6:19-20)

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but **you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.**”

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. **Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.**” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” **Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”** (John 4:19-26)

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. **You are just like your ancestors:** You always resist the Holy Spirit! **Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute?** They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 7:51-53)

- ✓ Stephen argues that the spiritual leaders of Israel have a pattern of rebellion where they rejected God's chosen prophets/servants. His reference of “stiff-necked people” was a similar description as to how God described them during the days of Exodus from Egypt

“Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, **because your people,** whom you brought up out of Egypt, **have become corrupt.** They have been **quick to turn away from what I commanded them** and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ **“I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people.** Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” (Exodus 32:7-10)

“It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity **that you are going in to take possession of their land;** but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. **Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.”** (Deuteronomy 9:5-6)

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? **They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 7:51-53)**

- ✓ Stephen’s statement “they even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One” could be any one of the Old Testament prophets including John the Baptist.
- ✓ Jesus is the “Righteous One” spoken by the Prophets, whom the religious leaders murdered by disobeying the law and sanctioning his ruthless death on the cross

“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. **After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”** (Isaiah 53:10-11)

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. **This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.”**

“When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:54-56)

✓ The members of the Sanhedrin were furious, angry, and enraged. They could barely control themselves and it was evidenced by their outward sign of gnashing their teeth

“The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.” (Psalm 37:12-13)

✓ The Sanhedrin were without excuse for this is (at least) the third time that they heard a clear presentation of the Gospel and refused to accept it. There are consequences for a person to continually reject the Gospel message for the risk is eternal separation from God. The “gnashing of teeth” (precisely what the members of the Sanhedrin did) is what those who reject Christ will do in hell.

“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, **where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**” (Matthew 13:40-42)

“When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. **But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and **the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.**” (Acts 7:54-56)

- ✓ Notice that Stephen didn't respond in anger but chose to react as the Holy Spirit prompted him to respond:

“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” (Luke 12:11-12)

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.** Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. (Ephesians 5:22-26)

- ✓ Stephen accepted the consequences that he faced and more than likely because of the grace supplied by the Holy Spirit he did so with peace and joy. In many ways Stephen will become a good example for many thousands of martyrs who will come after him.

“At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (Acts 7:57-58)

- ✓ Most (if not all) of the members of the Sanhedrin were spiritually blind for they openly rejected Jesus as God and could not accept the words of Stephen; ***“I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”***. Those words could in no way be tolerated by the religious leaders and they reacted accordingly.
- ✓ To accept that Jesus was standing at the right hand of God would require them to acknowledge Jesus rose from the dead, which would require to accept his words that he is the Son of God. As such they considered Stephen’s words blasphemous and worthy of death by stoning. (Leviticus 24:14)
- ✓ Although Saul may have been complicit in this action, the mention of his name was no accident. Perhaps by witnessing the actions (love and compassion) of Stephen, it may have had a profound impact on him. It is possible that this may have been the initial seed that was planted in Saul’s (later called Paul) heart that will later lead to his conversion.

“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:59-60)**

- ✓ Stephen’s cry; **“Lord Jesus receive my spirit”** is similar to the words that Jesus uttered on the cross ““Father into Thy hands I commit my spirit””.
- ✓ Even upon his death he requests that the sin of those who stoned him would not be held against them because he knew their hearts were desperately wicked and he had immense compassion toward them.
- ✓ The compassion that Stephen displays to us even in the midst of death is a good reminder of how we should act towards others, even those who may be our enemies.
- ✓ You may never fully know the impact of your life on someone else (whether it is a believer or an unbeliever, an enemy or friend) and it’s in these moments of crisis where our faith and belief really show the Jesus we believe in, to those around us.