

Stephen's defence and offence

Littlebourne - November 6th 2022 - Acts 7:1-53

We're looking at a very long speech from Stephen. It's the longest single speech in Acts. 1,266 words in my version.

At first glance, Stephen's speech doesn't seem to be much about the matter at hand. We know in advance that what he says here leads up to his death, but he seems to be talking about things that are irrelevant, and rambling about things his listeners would have known - his listeners are fellow Jews, the council, very theologically knowledgeable people. And he's telling stories from the Old Testament. But I think if we examine more closely, he's being very clever in what he says.

v1

And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Are what things so? Let's look back at what Stephen has been accused of.

Chapter 6 verse 11-14:

Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

So he stands accused of four counts of blasphemy:

1. against God,
2. against Moses
3. against the Temple
4. against the Law.

These are false accusations, but Stephen nevertheless is called up to defend himself from these accusations of blasphemy. The men that Stephen was talking to in the Synagogue of the freedmen were obviously not winning the argument, so they turn to slander - they make up something, to get him out of the way. They turn to Ad Hominem, probably because they are losing the argument.

These accusations should inform us about what it is that Stephen is trying to communicate with his speech - that he is not guilty of blasphemy.

Rather than go verse by verse through all 52 verses, as I usually do, let's examine things at a higher level. Whilst each detail is no doubt important, this sermon gives a broad sweep through Jewish scripture and history, rather than a study of minutiae.

Stephen's defence against blasphemy

Stephen's first defensive tactic is to show he is knowledgeable. He knows his Old Testament, and knows it well. He makes clear to the council that he understands the scripture too, and he cannot be convicted of ignorance. Stephen uses details in his argument to underscore this. The council can't turn around and say, "well you've missed something in the scriptures", because he's thorough and shows he knows the scriptures well.

God

First, the defence against the accusation of blasphemy against God.

Stephen opens his speech by talking about "The God of glory". A phrase that appears once in the Old Testament, in Psalm 29. His hearers would know this well. Stephen starts making it clear that he's not just talking about God, but the God he gives glory to.

Stephen goes on to talk about God appearing to Abraham, and the promises God gave to Abraham. Stephen shows he is neither anti-God, nor anti-Israel, he knows the promises that God gave to Abraham and accepts them. He is making clear that he believes in the same God as they do - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v8). These promises given to Abraham are most precious to his Jewish listeners, and he cites them to show he is one of them.

Moses

Stephen's defence against blasphemy against Moses, likewise, shows he has great respect and knowledge of Moses. He makes clear that Moses was Israel's redeemer when they were in Egypt, that he was vindicated against his opponents, and that he was God's prophet. He is not blaspheming against Moses.

Temple

Blasphemy against the temple is tackled as well. Stephen quotes scripture to show that he doesn't blaspheme the temple, but rather views it in its proper place, because God is more important than the temple - verse 48-49.

Law

Finally, the defence against blasphemy of the law. Stephen doesn't as explicitly argue this one, but in defending Moses and scripture, he is defending the laws of Moses recorded in scripture, showing his understanding of them, and his respect for them.

Stephen does mention the law at the end of his speech, verse 53, as he tells the council that they received the law, but did not keep it. If they want to accuse him of blaspheming the law, they should look at themselves. This leads us nicely on to how Stephen uses his speech to go on the offensive at the same time.

Stephen's offensive

Stephen doesn't just want to defend himself - this is an opportunity to keep doing what he's been doing and present the truth to those listening. It's a chance now to speak to some of the most important people in Jerusalem about the gospel. He wants to show the people listening that they are actually the ones guilty of turning from God, and that this has been the pattern time and again through Israel's history.

The Idolatry of the Temple

In answering the charge of blasphemy against the temple, Stephen shows us a different perspective on the temple and is calling out the idolatry of the present Jewish authorities - they idolise the temple, but do not recognise its proper place.

In the broad sweep of Israelite history that is given, it's interesting what is and isn't included. Stephen records for us occasions of God appearing, but notice that he doesn't include those appearances, of which there are many, where God appears to those within the promised land. He could have talked of Jacob's talking to God, but he focuses on the instances where God is active outside the land.

- God calls Abraham while he is still in Mesopotamia even before he lived in the closer land of Haran (v2).
- Abraham lived only as an alien and a stranger in the land (v4-5).
- Abraham's descendants were also aliens and strangers in a foreign land (v6-7).
- Joseph rose to power in Egypt and saves his family there (v9-16).
- Moses is raised in Egypt as an Egyptian (v20-22)
- Moses encounters God in the land of Midian near Mt. Sinai (v29-34).

Stephen makes the point that the land, the place, is not what is of most importance, and God works outside the confines of the land of Israel or the specific place of the temple. Though the land and the temple may be most revered by the Jews, as Stephen makes clear as he recounts God's promise to Abraham about it, God is not contained by it.

The pattern God showed Moses was a movable, mobile tent. God does not dwell in permanent houses made by man. His spirit moves wherever he pleases and Stephen makes the point that those listening to him are fixated on a place, rather than on God. The true blasphemy is found in their idolatry.

Stephen also compares Israel's past idolatry and present idolatry of the temple. v39-43:

39 Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' 41 And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

*"Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?
43 You took up the tent of Moloch
and the star of your god Rephan,
the images that you made to worship;
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'*

And then, immediately after this, he continues to show the temple idolatry. Note the similarities and parallels in this following passage. v44-50:

44 “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. 45 Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

49 “Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?
50 Did not my hand make all these things?’

These two passages parallel each other:

1. Both begin with a statement about what instruction Moses received from God.
2. Both claim that Israel rejected what Moses received.
3. Both speak about what Israelite hands had made.
4. Both conclude with an Old Testament citation.

Just as the Israelites in the wilderness worshipped 'the work of their hands' (v41), so too are the present day Israelites worshipping a temple 'made by hands' (v48). Just as idolatry existed then, it exists now. The implication is that just as the previous generations were exiled for what they did, so now the present generation faces God's judgement.

The pattern of unbelief of Israel

In the examples from the Old Testament that Stephen gives, there is always a conflict between the man God appointed and others that didn't follow:

- Abraham, blessed by God, but held back by his Father, who Joshua, in his account of the history of God's formation of Israel in Joshua 24 (v2), tells us 'worshipped other Gods'.
- Joseph, the chosen son, but sold into slavery by his brothers.
- Moses, who Stephen describes as the one 'God sent as ruler and redeemer', was opposed by his own people. They don't recognise he is sent by God, they don't follow him, but turn to other Gods.
- David, appointed king by God, but followed by kings that opposed God.

Of course, finally, Christ came. And Stephen makes clear that God's chosen man was again opposed, by those that he is talking to, just as has happened to all God's prophets. Verse 51-53:

51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

When Stephen calls them 'stiff-necked people', he's using a phrase that God uses several times in the Old Testament, in Exodus, to refer to Israel in their state of unbelief - he's saying that they are acting just like the people did when they turned from God, when their generation forfeited the promised land.

Being stiff-necked is a metaphor that comes from ploughing with cattle. When cattle are stiff-necked, they refuse to go where their owner wants. The phrase is specifically first used after they made the golden calf (Exodus 32:9, 33:3, 5, 34:9). It's not just that in their idolatry then, they were not going where God wants them to, but also that they are becoming like what they worship - they are becoming a solid calf.

Similarly, they are 'uncircumcised in heart', which again is a phrase from the Old Testament used to describe unbelieving Israel.

Stephen's final charge against them is that they murdered the 'Righteous One'. This is a title used of God in Isaiah (24v16). It's a title we also saw used in Acts 3 (v14) by Peter, referring to Jesus.

And Stephen finally makes clear that there is no excuse for what they did - they knew the scriptures and laws and broke them, they received all the required revelation, but did not accept it. Israel's story is one of constantly turning from God.

Christ foretold

Stephen shows us a couple of Old Testament figures that foreshadow Christ:

- Joseph, who was rejected by his brothers but God rescues him and places him as ruler over them, from where he rescues the wider world and his family (v19-16).
- Moses, who was rejected by Israel as their deliver but God calls to rescue Israel (v17-37). Stephen even makes this more explicit as he quotes Moses in verse 37:

This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'

Who fulfils this prophecy? Jesus Christ.

Stephen could have, maybe if he had more time, drawn out the parallels between Isaac and Christ, the sacrificial son, or David and Christ, the shepherd King, or many other examples from the Old Testament.

Conclusion

The whole Old Testament points to Christ. The temple, the law, the covenants with Abraham, etc. all lead us to understand Christ and His sacrifice for us, and how we are reconciled to God through Him.

We would do well to be like Stephen and know our Old Testament. Stephen and the earliest Christians only had the Old Testament, so that's what they preached from. In doing so, they show the value it holds for us today. We also, should know our scriptures and be ready and able to defend our faith with them.