

STEPHEN GOES ON OFFENSE

Acts 7:1 – 60 (ESV)

Many Jews were coming to faith through Stephen's preaching and men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (perhaps Stephen's former synagogue) didn't like it. But when they attempted to disprove Stephen's preaching, they couldn't. To defeat Stephen, his enemies resorted to false accusations which they communicated to the Sanhedrin: **"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place (the Temple) and the law...."** When Stephen spoke, he did not defend himself. Stephen set forth Israel's history to show that ***the Jewish people had a habit of resisting changes in God's program and rejecting the men God sent to lead them.*** Stephen pulled three threads through his presentation:

First, ***there is progress and change in God's program.*** That being the case, who was to say that the Law of Moses and the Temple were permanent elements of God's program?

Second, ***the blessings of God are not limited to the land of Israel and the Temple.*** Some of God's greatest works and blessings were received outside the land of Israel and apart from the Temple.

Third, ***the Jews regularly opposed God's plans and God's men.*** This is the main point of Stephen's challenge to the Sanhedrin. **"You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"**

Acts 7:1-53 Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin

Acts 7:1-8 The Promise to Abraham

Change and progress in God's plan: From working with the entire human race, God chooses to work through Abraham and his descendants, the Jews.

God's blessings not limited to land of Israel and the Temple: Abraham was called from Mesopotamia. Abraham was given the covenant of circumcision and his son Isaac prior to possessing the land and the existence of the Temple.

Opposed God's plans and God's men: Instead of going directly to the Promised Land, Abraham tarried in Haran.

Acts 7:9-16 The Trials of Joseph

Change and progress in God's plan: The sojourn of Joseph to Egypt followed by Jacob's entire family took them out of the Promised Land for the next several hundred years.

God's blessings not limited to land and Temple: In Egypt, Joseph found favor with Pharaoh and in Egypt Joseph was able to save his people, the Jews, from famine.

Opposition to God's plans and God's men: Joseph was persecuted, rejected and sold by his brothers into slavery.

Acts 7:17-43 The Deliverance Under Moses

Change and progress in God's plan: The Israelites initially rejected Moses' leadership (23-29). They also initially rejected the Law and continued in idolatry for many years after the Exodus (39-43).

God's blessings not limited to the land of Israel and the Temple: Moses was commissioned by God in Midian where God also blessed Moses with two sons. The Law of Moses was given outside the Land of Israel, at Mt. Sinai.

Opposition to God's plans and God's men: Moses was rejected by the Israelites (vv. 23–29). Both Joseph and Moses were not accepted by the Hebrews until their *second* appearances (vv. 13, 35–36).

Acts 7:44-50 Construction of the Tabernacle and Temple

Change and progress in God's plan: Constructing the Tabernacle in the Wilderness was a change and progress in God's plan.

God's blessings not limited to the land of Israel and the Temple: The Tabernacle was built in the Wilderness, not the land of Israel.

Opposition to God's plans and God's men: The Jews missed the point of the temple (vv. 48–50). The Jews acted like the God of the Universe lived in the Temple. The Temple was a place to worship God, but no structure no matter how magnificent can contain the God of all creation.

Acts 7:51-53 Stephen Applies Speech to Sanhedrin

In like manner of their forefathers, the Jews of Stephen's generation, led by the Sanhedrin, were opposing the progress and change in God's program by murdering God's man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Promised Messiah. The fullness of God does not dwell in the Temple, but in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. The mystery form of the Kingdom will not be limited to the Land of Israel and the Temple, but will spread throughout the world until the second coming of Jesus.

Stephen's words cut deep. What happened next was vicious, it was violent and out of character for members of the Sanhedrin.

They went berserk.

Acts 7:54-60 The Stoning of Stephen

Stephen knew he was going to die. But he was strengthened by the vision given him of the resurrected and exalted Jesus *standing* to honor him and welcome him home. Like Jesus, Stephen, full of grace, prayed for mercy on behalf of his executioners.

In this episode, we see again God's amazing grace in giving the leadership of Israel yet another opportunity to repent, to change their minds about Jesus of Nazareth, and lead the nation of Israel to embrace Jesus as the Messiah.

We see once again Jesus fulfilling His promise to give His followers "...a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict." (Luke 21:10-19).

We see the peace and confidence a believer can experience who is filled with the Holy Spirit and in the center of God's will even as they are suffering violent persecution.

In this episode we see the sovereignty of God over His servants in this case allowing Stephen to be murdered by the Sanhedrin while in the case of the Apostles, delivering them from the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:17-42).

We see in this episode that it is possible for ordinary people like ourselves to be so transformed by God's Word and the Holy Spirit that we are able to love our enemies, as did Stephen, who prayed to God for mercy on behalf of those stoning him to death.

In this episode we are introduced for the first time to Saul, who later will take the name "Paul".

Finally, we see in this episode the fulfillment of Romans 8:16-17:

¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Can any greater honor be bestowed upon a person than to have Jesus stand in one's honor to receive him or her unto Himself?