

# Acts 7: 1-53

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[ 0 : 00 ] So good morning everyone. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Christine. I'm going to be speaking about Stephen Part Two this morning. His response.

! And a couple of weeks ago Andrew spoke about Stephen as he was arrested. And I'm going to focus on his response to those who arrested him today. But I want to set the scene first.

The first time we heard about Stephen was at the beginning of Acts chapter 6 when the first deacons were chosen. They were chosen to serve tables or run a food program, feed the widows. And amongst those chosen was Stephen who was described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. But Stephen didn't just stick to running a food program or giving out stuff for the widows. And we come in now at Acts chapter 6 verse 8. It's a very long passage so Emma has read it for us. She's not here now. She's read it previously. And there are some pictures to accompany the reading.

[ 1 : 11 ] Acts chapter 6 verse 8 to Acts chapter 7 verse 59. Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people.

But one day some men from the synagogue of freed slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and the province of Asia.

None of them could stand against the wisdom and the spirit with which Stephen spoke. So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, We heard him blaspheme Moses and even God.

This roused the people, the elders and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. The lying witnesses said, This man is always speaking against the holy temple and against the law of Moses.

We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us. At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen because his face became as bright as an angel's.

[ 2 : 20 ] Then the high priest asked Stephen, Are these accusations true? It's a bit like when they arrested Jesus.

They couldn't find anything against Stephen. So they lied. And probably the high priest referred to here is Caiaphas, the one who was involved in the arrest of Jesus.

So two weeks ago, Andrew talked about Stephen being full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit and full of God's grace. Today, I want to suggest that Stephen was also full of the knowledge of God, full of knowledge about God and his dealings with his people.

And we can tell this from his reply, which demonstrates that he knows and understands God's history of working with his people. He was also full of wisdom.

He was accused of blaspheming Moses and even God, of speaking against the Holy Temple and against the law of Moses. And he answered those accusations as he told of Israel's history with God and how people had worshipped God long before there even was a temple.

[ 3 : 40 ] So let's listen to what Stephen said. This was Stephen's reply. Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to our ancestor Abraham in Mesopotamia before he settled in Haran.

God told him, leave your native land and your relatives and come into the land that I will show you. So Abraham left the land of the Shuldeans and lived in Haran until his father died.

Then God brought him here to the land where you now live. But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants, even though he had no children yet.

God also told him that his descendants would live in a foreign land where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, God said, and in the end they will come out and worship me here in this place.

God also gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision at this time. So when Abraham became the father of Isaac, he circumcised him on the eighth day. And the practice was continued when Isaac became the father of Jacob and when Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs of the Israelite nation.

[ 5 : 00 ] So Stephen's told of the beginning of the history of God's people. He's told of God's promises to Abraham and of the prophecies that all came true.

The promise of the land for Abraham's descendants. Abraham's descendants living in a foreign land. Becoming slaves until they escaped and worshipped God right at the place where Abraham was.

And Stephen then went on to explain how that came about. These patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph and they sold him to be a slave in Egypt.

But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. And God gave him favour before Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God also gave Joseph unusual wisdom so that Pharaoh appointed him governor over all of Egypt and put him in charge of the palace.

But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery and our ancestors ran out of food. Jacob heard that there was still grain in Egypt. So he sent his sons, our ancestors, to buy some.

[ 6 : 10 ] The second time they went, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers and they were introduced to Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent for his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to Egypt.

Seventy-five persons in all. So Jacob went to Egypt. He died there, as did our ancestors. Their bodies were taken from Shechem and buried in the tomb Abraham had brought for a certain price from Hamar's sons in Shechem.

As the time drew near when God would fulfil his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Israel greatly increased. But then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.

This king exploited our people and oppressed them, forcing parents to abandon their newborn babies so they would die. If I was telling that story, I'd have made much more of Joseph's dreams, of his brothers and his parents bowing down to him, of interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh.

But Stephen used the wisdom and the Holy Spirit within him to pick on the right points. He understood what was really relevant and just said God gave Joseph unusual wisdom and favour before Pharaoh.

[ 7 : 28 ] Short and to the point. At this point in Stephen's brief history of the Jewish people, he tells how when God's people had been in a foreign country, which was Egypt, for 400 years they had become slaves.

So God sent them a deliverer, Moses. Stephen had been accused of speaking against Moses, so he speaks now about him at length. At that time Moses was born, a beautiful child in God's eyes. His parents cared for him at home for three months. When they had to abandon him, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and raised him as her own son. Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was powerful in both speech and action.

One day, when Moses was 40 years old, he decided to visit his relatives, the people of Israel. He saw an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite. So Moses came to the man's defence and avenged him, killing the Egyptian.

Moses assumed his fellow Israelites would realise that God had sent him to rescue them. But they didn't. The next day he visited them again and saw two men of Israel fighting.

[ 8 : 40 ] He tried to be a peacemaker. Men, he said, you're brothers. Why are you fighting each other? But the man in the wrong pushed Moses aside. Who made you a ruler and judge over us?

He asked. Are you going to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? When Moses heard that, he fled the country and lived as a foreigner in the land of Midian. There his two sons were born.

Forty years later, in the desert near Mount Sinai, an angel appeared to Moses in the flame of a burning bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he went to take a closer look, the voice of the Lord called out to him.

I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses shook with terror and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, So God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected when they demanded, Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Through the angel who appeared to him in the burning bush, God sent Moses to be their ruler and saviour. And by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and through the wilderness for 40 years.

[10:06] Moses himself told the people of Israel, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people. Moses was with our ancestors, the assembly of God's people in the wilderness, when the angels spoke to him at Mount Sinai.

And there Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us. But our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. They rejected him and wanted to return to Egypt. They told Aaron, So they made an idol shaped like a calf and they sacrificed to it and celebrated over this thing they had made.

Then God turned away from them and abandoned them to serve the stars of heaven as their gods. In the book of the prophets it is written, Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during those 40 years in the wilderness, Israel?

No, you carried your pagan gods. The shrine of Moloch and the star of your god, Repha, and the images you made to worship them. So I will send you into exile as far away as Babylon.

That's better. Sorry. In his reply, Stephen's highlighting Moses' likeness to Jesus. Moses was rejected. It says God sent back the same man his people had previously rejected.

[11:40] Stephen also mentioned one of their wrong beliefs. Moses had prophesied that God would raise up a prophet like him from among the people. And the Jews thought that prophet was Joshua.

But Stephen knew that they were actually prophesying about Jesus, about the Messiah. And then Moses was not listened to.

Our ancestors refused to listen to Moses, he said. And you wouldn't listen to Jesus. And Stephen also makes it clear that God was worshipped before the temple was built.

The first place, physical place, where God was worshipped was the tabernacle, which was the sort of tent that went wherever God led his people. And that existed long before the temple was built.

And even before that, God was being worshipped. And Stephen now goes on to talk about wandering through the wilderness and Joshua.

[12:38] Our ancestors carried the tabernacle with them through the wilderness. It was constructed according to the plan God had shown to Moses. Years later, when Joshua led our ancestors into battle against the nations that God drove out of his land, the tabernacles taken with them into their new territory.

And it stayed there until the time of King David. David found favour with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent temple for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who actually built it.

However, the Most High doesn't live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that? asked the Lord.

Could you build me such a resting place? Didn't my hands make both heaven and earth? So Stephen had been accused of preaching against the temple.

Well, the temple that Solomon built, that we heard about then, had been destroyed many years before at a time when God's people had rebelled against him.

[13:43] And it was destroyed about 586, 587 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonians into Jerusalem. They set fire to the temple and burned down the city.

And the temple that was standing at the time Stephen was speaking was far inferior to that first temple. And while Stephen recognised the importance of the temple, he knew that it was not more important than God.

God could be worshipped anywhere. God was not limited. It didn't only have to be in a place of worship. We can worship God anywhere. We don't have to come to church to worship God.

God created the heavens and the earth. We can worship him anywhere. And Solomon declared, after he'd built the temple, the first temple, will God really dwell on earth with humans?

How the heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain you, he said. How much less this temple I have made. God can't be contained within a building.

[14:50] Stephen now turns his attention to the council who've arrested him and accused him. And he declares they're just like God's people throughout history. I think he's very brave.

Let's listen to what he says. You stubborn people. You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did.

And so do you. Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute. They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the righteous one, the Messiah, whom you betrayed and murdered.

You deliberately disobeyed God's law, even though you received it from the hands of angels. The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusations, and they shook their fists at him in rage. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honour at God's right hand. And he told them, Look, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing in the place of honour at God's right hand.

[15:55] Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.

As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. He fell to his knees shouting, Lord, don't charge him with this sin. And with that, he died.

Stephen wasn't standing before his friends, but before the authorities, before those who held his future in their hands.

And he accused those authorities of a number of things, of being stubborn, of being heathen at heart, being dead to the truth, deaf to the truth, resisting the Holy Spirit, betraying and murdering the Messiah, and disobeying God's law.

He didn't hold back. I don't know what you or I might have done or said in that situation. But no wonder they were furious.

[17:03] Andrew's going to talk a bit more about this part of Stephen's experience next week. So I'm not going to say any more about it now. A few weeks ago, Sean quoted this verse.

But when you are arrested and stand trial, don't worry in advance about what to say. Just say what God tells you at that time. For it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

And Sean spoke about Peter and John being taken before this same council after healing the lame man. And Peter and John said what the Holy Spirit told them to say at the time.

And they were released. They escaped. And now it was Stephen's turn. Stephen really didn't do a very good job of defending himself, did he?

Instead, he seized the opportunity to accuse the religious leaders of failing to obey God's laws. He knew they prided themselves on that. And Jesus had actually accused them of the same thing.

[18:09] And it didn't turn out as well for Stephen as it had for Peter and John. If we speak up for God, we can't know what the outcome will be.

When we share our testimony, we might immediately see someone respond to God. Hopefully, we won't be murdered, although that is a possibility in some parts of the world.

But we may suffer for speaking up. Peter talks about this in his letter. Now, who will want to harm you if you are eager to do good?

But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life.

Peter's letter isn't directed to a specific group of people. It's a very general letter. So what he's saying applies to us, just as much as it did to those people who originally read it.

[19:12] And it carries on. And if someone asks you about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear.

Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live, because you belong to Christ. Remember, it's better to suffer for doing good if this is what God wants than to suffer for doing wrong.

So we need to always be ready to explain our faith. The Greek used here gives the sense of being in a court.

Paul uses the same terms for preparing his defense for his court appearance. And the verse could equally have applied to Stephen's situation.

But what Peter is describing is the interaction of any Christian with any non-believer. Be ready to give an account.

[ 20 : 19 ] We should always be ready to give an answer gently and respectfully to anyone who asks about our faith, our lifestyle, our Christian perspective.

And our lives should back up what we say. There's quite a lot about living a good life in that passage. So I think Stephen's response leaves us with three challenges to consider today. And the first is, are we prepared to suffer for sharing our faith? One of the church's values is courageous.

Are we courageous enough to stand up for the truth? One of the reasons that people generally accept that Jesus Christ was brought back from the dead, that he did come back to life again, was the fact that the disciples were prepared to die to support that truth.

They were so convinced that Jesus had come back to life that they would die rather than deny it. Are we that convinced about God, about Jesus?

[ 21 : 31 ] If not, we need to ask God to make us sure. That was one of my reasons for first asking God to send his Holy Spirit to me.

I knew I wasn't that sure and I wanted to be sure. Are we that brave? If not, we need to ask God for courage.

And do our lives back up what we say? Stephen had got himself into trouble by his life.

If he'd stuck to the food program, probably no one would have noticed him. But he did miracles. He performed amazing miracles and signs and the people that were part of the council couldn't argue with his wisdom.

No one will listen to us if our lives don't back up what we say. If we say God is love and we don't show any of that love, no one will listen.

[ 22 : 40 ] If we're always miserable, if we're always complaining, no one's going to see our hope in Christ. No one's going to ask us what's different about you. Can others see your hope in Christ?

And are you able to tell them what Christ has done in your life? Are you living a life of integrity? And the last challenge, do we know enough to give an answer?

Stephen really understood the law and the prophets. None of the men from the synagogue could stand against him. against his wisdom and his spirit. Do we know our Bible?

Do we understand it well enough to defend our faith? I really, truly believe that the Holy Spirit will bring to our minds what we need to say in any given situation.

But I also am convinced that we need to put stuff into our minds first. That he will bring things to our remembrance. But he's very unlikely to suddenly put something into our mind that we've never heard or never read.

[ 23 : 53 ] He may do because God is able to do that. But generally, he brings back to our mind something we've already learned, already read, already experienced. So if we don't know God's word, the Holy Spirit is going to struggle.

If our faith is shaky, then that's all God has to work with. Do we know enough to give an account for the hope that we have?

people ask us questions sometimes. One question they might ask is, how can you be cheerful when the world's in such a state?

How would you answer that? I'm not going to ask you now. You're all right. You can relax. What's wrong with the world?

Tim gave me this question to ask the soldiers a few weeks ago. And I asked them, what do you think is wrong with the world? And their replies were very interesting. Lots of things was the most common reply.

[ 25 : 02 ] People didn't say anything specific apart from one specific answer. Four people said the same thing. The same thing that was wrong with the world. And what they said was Donald Trump.

But then someone said to me, what do you think is wrong with the world? In my answer, I tried to give a Christian perspective.

It's sin that's wrong with the world, basically. And another question we might get asked, sort of a question, it's okay to tell a lie, isn't it, if no one gets hurt?

Well, what's our response to that? Or what do Christians think about and put anything there, really? What is a Christian?

And a question or something I was talking about this week when I went to see the army, it's a shame about the Pope, isn't it? Well, is it a shame about the Pope?

[ 26 : 10 ] He was, by all accounts, a good Pope, but actually he was very old, he wasn't very well, and he died after doing something he loved doing, and he's gone to be with his father in heaven.

So from the Pope's point of view, it's a good result. The Cardinals have got a task ahead of them, but we need to think about the questions we might get asked.

We need to educate ourselves, and I've got a load of suggestions there. A Bible in a modern translation that you can understand. There's stuff online.

If you struggle to read, Bible Gateway and David Suchet can read to you. You can buy David Suchet audio Bible from Amazon. There are lots of Bible reading plans.

You can go on Alpha if you've never been on Alpha. A number of us did the Bible course last term, and that really was very instructive. Or first steps, or be part of a life group and explore the Bible with a group of people.

[ 27 : 15 ] There are lots of things we can do to educate ourselves. So, the three challenges I want to end with, are we prepared to suffer for sharing our faith?

do our lives back up what we say? And do we know enough to give an answer? Challenges, not to come forward and respond now, but to think about, to take on board, and to make them part of our life.

love. Let's pray. Father, we want to thank you for your dealings with your people, for the example of Stephen, and for the fact that Jesus died and rose again.

We want to thank you for your love for us, and where we are lacking in courage or faith or knowledge. We ask that you will fill us with those things and equip us to give an answer for the hope that we have in you.

Thank you that there is an answer. Thank you that we do have hope in you. Help us, Lord. Amen. And back to Jason.

[ 28 : 42 ] Thank you.