

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 23rd August 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 6:11-7:19

Introduction

Last Sunday we were introduced to the first seven deacons. Among them were Stephen and Philip. Two men we will hear more of in Acts chs.7 & 8. Stephen comes to the fore in the middle of chapter 6 when more opposition arises towards the Christian Church from the so-called Synagogue of the Freedmen (v.9). These were Jews who had come from Cyrene and Alexandria (along the Mediterranean Coast of North Africa) as well as from Cilicia & Asia (from the other side of the Mediterranean which is now part of Turkey). These Jews began to argue with Stephen in particular, but when they did, they discovered that he was too good for them. *'They could not stand up against his wisdom – or the Spirit by whom he spoke.'* As I said last Sunday, Stephen was a man who knew what he believed and why he believed it. He could not only witness for the Lord Jesus, he could actually defend the Gospel clearly. No matter what they said against it, he had an answer for them. As we move into Acts ch.7 we come to Stephen's 'apology' or defence of the Christian faith. It's quite a long chapter in which he surveys the main characters and points of Old Testament history from Abraham to the coming of Christ. To break it up a bit, we'll look at it in three parts, over the coming weeks.

How well do you know your Bible? Especially the Old Testament part of it? I suppose in the past we have relied upon Sunday School teachers to make sure our kids have had a good overview of the main stories of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. But in more recent times we can't always assume that everyone coming into our churches has a Sunday School background. If we assume they have all that Bible knowledge then, I believe, we are assuming far too much, and we are putting newcomers at a disadvantage when it comes to listening to sermons in church, as so much of what we talk about, they have no prior knowledge of! They don't know how the Bible stories all fit together.

About 10 years ago in Cavan we organised a Walk Thru the Bible Seminar for many of the churches in the area to come to. We first of all ***Walked Thru the Old Testament*** with Jacob Reynolds from Dublin, and then a couple of years later we ***Walked Thru the New Testament*** with Sean Mullan from Cork. I know our people in Cavan found it really helpful. It was a course that used actions and words to help us remember the 'Big Picture' of the Bible:

Creation – Fall – Flood – Nations - 4000 years – Ur – Persian Gulf – 'SALT' – Sarah – Abraham – Lot – Terah – Tigris – Euphrates – Haran – Terah dies – Sea of Galilee – Jordan River – Dead Sea – Mediterranean – Israel – Ishmael – Isaac – Esau – Jacob – Joseph – Egypt – Jews – Egypt – 400 years bondage. And that brings us up to the time of - Moses.

That is part of the Old Testament history which Stephen covers in his speech to the Sanhedrin that we have recorded for us in Acts 7:1-20. That's the part we want to concentrate on this morning - from Abraham to Moses.

1. God's Call to Abraham (v.1-7)

Why does Stephen begin with Abraham? Why not Adam & Eve?

Well, look at what he is doing here in v.1.

Look at how he addresses the Sanhedrin – The Jewish Ruling Council.

It's the High Priest, Caiaphas, who has asked him if the charges against him are true. This is the same High Priest that Jesus stood before, facing the exact same trumped up charges (6:14).

How does Stephen address these people in v.2?

He calls them '**brothers and fathers**' and he asks them to listen to what he is about to say. And then he says, '*The God of glory appeared to **our father Abraham.***' (v.2)

Do you see the terminology he is using? He's reminding these leaders of the Jewish nation, and of the Jewish religion, that he, like them, counted Abraham as his father – his ancestor - the spiritual founder of their nation and religion.

Not for one minute is Stephen putting himself outside of that fold. He is still very much part of the People of God, connected to the Old Testament Nation of Israel, he still counts Abraham as his spiritual father, even though he has now become a follower of Jesus, the Messiah. i.e. even though he is now a Christian, he has not forgotten his roots!

We as Christians, with 2000 years of church history behind us since the events of the New Testament, should also remember that we are connected to Abraham also. There is only one true people of God. Just as Abraham lived by faith, trusting in God's promises of a coming Messiah, we too, even though we live 2000 years this side of the cross, still live by faith in the Messiah who has come, and who has died for us on that cross. It's not as if there is a 'NT Church' and then there was 'OT Israel'. As if there are two peoples of God, two churches, two brides for Christ. There is only one, and Stephen is very clear in this chapter that he has not put himself outside of the people of God, or of God's Covenant and Promises. In fact what he has done by trusting in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah who has come, was to put himself right at the heart of the people of God for all eternity. So no matter what these leaders might do to him here on earth, it would not affect his eternal relationship with God – it would not change his eternal destiny. That is why he spoke with such confidence in the face of this fierce opposition.

So what Stephen was really saying to these men was '*Abraham is your father, but he is also **my father**, so that makes us **brothers still.***' The question is, '*are we each following God and his call upon our lives – just like Abraham did?*'

That's why he begins this speech by reminding the leaders of the Jewish religion about how Abraham had heard God's call upon his life away back in Mesopotamia – even before he lived in Haran.

Mesopotamia literally means 'in the middle of the rivers' or 'between the rivers' i.e. between the Tigris and the Euphrates – the two rivers that to this day run down through modern day Iraq. Ur of the Chaldeans was at the bottom of that long fertile crescent – down near the Persian Gulf, below Baghdad today. That's where Abram originally came from. And it was there that 'the God of glory' appeared to him. That's an interesting title for God, 'The God of glory', it comes from Psalm 29 where it clearly refers to God as the Great Creator God:

'The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful (v.3) ... 'and in his temple all cry 'Glory!' (v.9)

That's obviously what Stephen has in mind here: 'The God of Glory' is the God who hovered over the face of the deep before this world was even created. He is the one who just spoke a word, and everything came into being. He is the one whose voice is powerful. He alone deserves our worship and praise. It was that God, the living and true God, who stepped into that culture in Ur that worshipped all kinds of idols and images such as the sun, moon and stars - He broke into the darkness, and called one man, Abram, to follow him.

And what did Abram do? He followed the voice of God out of Ur until he came to Haran, away up at the northern end of this fertile crescent – at the top of modern day Iraq, up where the Kurds now live, and there he settled for a while in Haran, and it was there that one of the four family members died. Abram's father, Terah, died and was buried in Haran. So that left just Abram and his wife Sarai, and their nephew Lot, to follow God's call again, and so to travel south-west to come for the first time to the promised land – of Canaan (v.4).

God had said to Abram (v.3):

'Leave your country and your people, and go to the land I will show you.'

That's all he was told – 'just get up and go, leave your country and your people behind, and go to the land that I will show you.'

That was the first missionary call in the Bible. Abram was to be God's missionary to a lost world. He was to be a witness for the living and true God wherever he went. God promised in Genesis 12 when he gave Abram that call, that he would be with him, wherever he went, and he would bless him, but more than that, through him, through Abram, and his seed, *'all nations on the earth would be blessed.'* Some time we will look at Genesis ch.12 in more detail because it is a very important chapter of the Bible, God's call to Abram. But we now know today that 'Abram's seed' spoken about in that chapter is

Jesus, one of Abram's descendants. It is through Him, that all nations on the earth will be blessed. Because it is through his death, burial and resurrection that *'we now have a Gospel to tell to the nations.'* Israel as the descendants of Abram, should have been that light to the nations, that witness and blessing to the nations, but sadly they had so miserably failed to do so. They got wrapped up in themselves and their petty rules and regulations, so much so that they lost sight of the fact that they were supposed to be an outward looking people; they lost sight of their mission in the world, and their light grew so dim that it was nearly out, by the time Christ appeared!

Stephen and his fellow Christians were now just about to take that light and that Gospel to the nations, as we will see in the coming chapters of Acts. And we as a Christian Church to this day are still fulfilling that promise given to Abram so long ago, if we continue to be a light to the nations here at home, and through those we send out on mission, to the uttermost parts of the earth – such as Andrew & Carolyn – our missionaries in Peru!

The challenge to us as a church today is exactly the same as it was for Israel back then: will we remember our mission in the world and be outward looking, or will we get so closed in on ourselves, and get so wrapped up in our own petty concerns, that we lose sight of the needs of a lost world all around us?

Notice as Stephen says in v.5 that although God had called Abram out of Ur and then from Haran to the land of Israel (where they were then living) that God had not given Abram any inheritance there at that time at all. He didn't even possess a square foot of ground there during his life time. The only piece of property that Abram's family had eventually was the Cave of Machpelah in which they were all buried at Shechem (v.16). That was it! Throughout Abram's lifetime he possessed nothing in terms of land or property. He was continually moving around dwelling in tents. He was a pilgrim following God. Maybe that's something we need to be reminded of more often. Like the old Negro spiritual song put it: *'This world is not my home, I'm just a passin thru'*.

With our fine church buildings today, and the fact that so many of us own our own homes, we have got tied down, we've become static, we have become the immovable objects, when all the while God wanted us to be his own pilgrim people, ready to move at a moment's notice, when he would give the call. Is that why it's so hard to get people to go out on mission these days? Yes, we'll go on short-term teams and short-term mission trips, but it's so much harder to get people to go for long-term or lifetime service to bring the Gospel to those tribes and people-groups all around our world who still need to hear about Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders that Stephen was talking to had got so wrapped up in their magnificent temple that everything centred on Jerusalem, and nobody else seemed to matter. Let's not be like that, let's not be tied to this church building. Let's be open to wherever God would lead us as a church or as individuals in the coming days.

2. God's Covenant with Abraham (v.5-8)

A Covenant is a solemn binding promise, in this case made between God and one man, Abraham. Today we refer to marriage as a covenant relationship: Two people who have made solemn vows and promises to be faithful to each other throughout the rest of their lives here on earth. They mark that covenant usually by the giving and receiving of rings – an outward mark to remind them of the promises and the covenant they have made with each other. Well that's exactly the kind of relationship that God and Abraham had. God began to make his covenant with Abram in Genesis 12:7 after he arrived in the very heart of the Promised Land at Shechem. There God appeared to Abram and said, *'To your offspring I will give this land.'*

But it was in Genesis ch.17 that God spelled out that Covenant relationship more clearly to Abram. In Gen.17:4-9:

*'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 are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.'***

Notice two things from this Covenant: Yes, God was promising to give Abram's descendants the land of Canaan as their everlasting possession, so they were to have a piece of land – a physical country. And the Jews and the Palestinians are still fighting over that bit of ground to this day.

But God's Covenant with Abram's descendants went way beyond that – Abram was clearly told that he was to be the father of **many nations** – and that through his seed **all nations** on the earth would be blessed.

It seems that the Jews of Stephen's day, and since, have got so taken up with the part of the Covenant that had to do with **their land**, that they have lost sight of the part that talked about the other **nations**.

In Acts ch.8 following Stephen's death or martyrdom, the Christians will be scattered because of the persecution that Saul of Tarsus unleashes on the church, and through Philip, the Gospel will go to the Samaritans, and then through Peter in Acts ch.10-11 the Gospel will go to the Gentiles, and then through Paul, the Gospel will begin to spread to all the nations around the Mediterranean and especially to the Continent of Europe.

God was about to up-turn the salt cellar of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, and he was about to ensure that His Covenant, that he had made with Abram

2000 years earlier, was going to be kept as far as all the other nations of the world were concerned. He is still doing that to this day through the church.

In Genesis ch.17 God seals his Covenant with Abram with an outward sign – the sign of circumcision. Every male child was to be circumcised at 8 days old, and every male member of Abram’s household including the children of any of his slaves or workers were to be circumcised as well, otherwise they would have broken God’s Covenant.

Stephen reminds his listeners of this in Acts.ch.7:8. Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised on the very day that God made his Covenant with Abraham, but it wasn’t through Ishmael’s line that God’s Covenant would be kept; it was through Isaac’s line – Abraham & Sarah’s son, who wasn’t even born at that time! But a year later Isaac, the child of the promise, the son of the Covenant, was born to Abraham when he was 100 yrs old, and to Sarah when she was 90 years old. Both of them were well passed the years of normal child bearing, but God performed a miracle and Isaac was the child that was born.

Isaac and Rebekah in turn had twin boys called Jacob & Esau, and even though Jacob was the younger of the two, it was through Jacob’s line that Abraham’s offspring would be reckoned.

Jacob then married Rachel and Leah, and altogether they had 12 sons and 1 daughter. Those twelve sons, Stephen refers to as the Twelve Patriarchs of Israel. They were the heads of the Twelve Tribes of Israel: The founders of the nation. Stephen’s listeners could not have objected to anything he had said so far. They all knew about God’s Covenant with Abraham, and they were very concerned that they continued to keep that Covenant, or so they thought.

But what they couldn’t get their heads round was that God had now made a **New Covenant**, this time not sealed with the blood of animal sacrifices, such as bulls and goats and lambs that would have been sacrificed for sins under the Old Covenant, but this time God had sealed his New Covenant with the blood of his own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, this very Council had handed over to the Roman authorities to be put to death on a cross. What they couldn’t understand was that his death, burial and resurrection had ushered in a whole new age for God’s People. No more sacrifices were needed, the Temple would very soon be destroyed, because it was no longer needed. When Jesus had cried out ‘It is finished!’ from the cross, he had really meant it – no more sacrifices would ever be needed for sin. In fact circumcision, the sign of the Old Covenant would no longer be needed. The sign of the New Covenant would be believers’ baptism, and instead of the Passover, Christians would remember the death of the Lamb of God by partaking of bread and wine in a simple remembrance feast whenever they met for weekly worship. Everything had changed, but the Sanhedrin just couldn’t accept it, and soon they would have more blood on their hands as they began to try to stamp out this new departure from Judaism as they saw it!

3. God's Chosen People (v.9-19)

But you know, this wasn't the first time that the Nation of Israel couldn't quite see or understand God's plan: Stephen reminds us in v.6 that God had foretold to Abraham, before it ever happened, that there would come a time when his *'descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated for 400 years. But (God said) I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.'*

God said that it would happen, but he didn't say how it would happen. But v.9 tells us how. It was the jealousy of the Patriarch's of Israel, the sons of Jacob, towards Joseph, that would motivate them to sell Joseph as a slave down to Egypt. But then we read this wonderful phrase:

'But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles.' (v.9-10)

Through 13 long years, God looked after Joseph in the slave-market, in Potiphar's house, in prison, and even when others forgot about him, God remembered him and eventually lifted him out of prison one day to the second highest position in the land of Egypt, the next day. And so Joseph, one of God's own people, one of Abraham's descendants, was put in charge of the super-power of Egypt at a critical time in world history. It was at a time when the rest of God's people back in Canaan were going through a famine, and they were in danger of dying out (v.11) – what then would have become of God's promises to Abraham and his descendants?

But when father Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt he sent those patriarchs down to Egypt to buy food so that they wouldn't starve. On their second visit Joseph revealed to them who he was – he was their long-lost brother – the one they had sold as a slave into Egypt – he was still alive!

After they had been reconciled, and Joseph forgave them all, Pharaoh invited the whole family down to Egypt to live until the famine back home passed. So 75 of Abraham's descendants moved down to Egypt, and there they all eventually died, but in faith their bodies were brought back and buried in Shechem – right at the heart of the promised land – the land that God had covenanted would be theirs and Abraham's descendants forever.

God had not forgotten about his people, or his covenant with Abraham, even though by now almost 400 years had passed, we read in Acts 7:17

'As the time drew near for God to fulfil his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased.'

We learn two things here – that God was working to his own timetable, and that he was making sure that the descendants of Abraham would not die out, in fact they were growing at a faster rate than the Egyptians they were living

among! That was why the new king or Pharaoh of Egypt who came to power, not knowing anything about Joseph and how he had saved Egypt at a time of great famine, decided to put the Hebrews to forced-labour to make bricks for Egypt's vast building programmes, and also to pass an edict that all Hebrew males be put to death at birth! He was determined to stamp them out one way or another! What then would have become of God's Covenant promises to Abraham, if he had succeeded? If none of Abraham's descendants had survived Egypt, then all of God's promises of blessing for the nations of the world would have come to nothing.

But every time God's people were being threatened with extinction, God always raised up a new deliverer, a Saviour for Israel. And on this occasion it was to be Moses: *'At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child.'*

Conclusion

You see all through Scripture there is a cosmic battle going on – between God and his ancient adversary the devil. Right from the serpent deceiving Eve, and leading Adam into sin in the garden of Eden, the devil has been doing his best to thwart God's plans.

When Abraham and Sarah were getting on in years, the devil thought there was no way that God could keep his covenant with them to bless all nations through Abraham's seed. But God worked a miracle and Isaac was born! When the sons of Jacob sold the favourite son, Joseph into slavery in Egypt, the devil thought he'd got the upper hand again, but God was with him, not only preserving his life, but raising him up as a Saviour for Egypt as well as for Israel at that time of great famine.

And when Pharaoh was about to wipe out God's people after 400 years in Egypt, by killing off all their male children, God spares one of them, Moses, and raises him up to be the Saviour, the Deliverer of his people out of Egypt.

Likewise when religion in Israel was at a very low ebb, with all the corruption going on at the Temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus having been put to death on a Roman Cross, God raised him from the dead, as a Prince and a Saviour, not just for Israel, but for all the nations of the World.

And now even if they put Stephen to death, he knew this Gospel would still go on, because God was working His purposes out, and the time was drawing near when Satan would not only be defeated, but banished for all eternity to the Lake of Fire.

That's just part 1 of a three-part story, but what we do know already is that ***'our side wins in the end!'*** Are you on the winning side this morning? Do you belong to Christ, like Stephen did? If so, you have absolutely nothing to fear!

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