

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 6th September 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 7:20-43

Introduction

We are currently making our way through Acts ch.7 which is an account of Stephen's Speech before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. In it he is giving us a very clear defence of the Christian faith. We looked at the first part of his speech a couple of weeks ago, when we were taken on a world-wind tour of the book of Genesis from the call of Abraham to the birth of Moses.

We covered a lot of ground then, but let me try to make this speech very simple for you. You just need to remember 3 things about this speech.

Abraham – **Land** (vs.1-19)

Moses – **Law** (vs.20-43)

David – **Temple** (vs.44-50)

And then Stephen finishes by driving his accusations home in vs.51-53.

Why is this a useful way to break this speech up?

Well in vs.1-19 we have seen God calling Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and he heads for Haran, away up in the North. Then eventually God calls him again and he arrives in Shechem – right in the heart of the Promised Land. As soon as he gets there, God says: *'To your descendants I will give this **Land**.'* Even though throughout his life Abraham never owned any of it, and in the end he only ever owned the cave in which he was buried there, God had promised to give his descendants the **land** of Canaan as their own.

However, when we came to look at the Covenant that God spelled out to Abraham in Genesis ch.17, we discovered that as well as promising his descendants a land – a physical place to call their own, God had much bigger plans for his people. He said that through their offspring – through Abraham's seed - **all nations** on the earth would be blessed. Yes, God had a plan for the **land**, but he also had a far bigger plan for **all the nations** of the earth. Israel was supposed to be that light to the nations, but it had failed miserably. But now through Abraham's seed – the Lord Jesus Christ – coming and dying for sin on the cross at Calvary and rising again, the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was about to be preached to the Nations, through the NT Church, and so the apostles and the followers of Jesus Christ were about to bring blessing from the **Land** of Israel to the **Nations** of the World, and that is still happening through the Church to this very day.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Leaders that Stephen was speaking to here in Acts ch.7 had got so taken up with their claim to the **Land**, that they had totally disregarded the needs of the **Nations** all around them. That's why God was

now about to set them aside, and to use the Church for his purposes instead. So the focus on the **Land** has been replaced by a focus on the **Nations**.

As we come today to look at the second part of Stephen's speech, we will move on from Abraham to look at Moses – Moses was the **Law**-giver. Just as God was now moving his people on from focussing on the **Land** to focussing on the **Nations**, He was also about to move them on from focussing on the **Law** to focussing on **Grace**.

Why does Stephen spend so much time talking about Moses here?
Well, that's because of the things he stands accused of by the Sanhedrin.

Look at Acts 6:11-14:

*'Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak **words of blasphemy 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.

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**".'*

Was Stephen against Moses?

Stephen's emphasis is very much on how God's people during his lifetime did not revere Moses at all – in fact they more often than not rejected him!

But nevertheless Moses had been called by God. He was God's Leader for the people of Israel, but they kept rejecting the one that God had sent.

The Sanhedrin thought they were the Guardians of Moses and the Law, but in fact they were rejecting yet again those who stood in the true line of Moses – those who had now been called by God, but were still rejected by his people!

Do you see the similarities between Moses and Stephen?

Well let's see what Stephen has to say about Moses in his speech:

1. The First 40 Years – He was a Prince in Egypt (v.20-22)

'At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child.

For three months he was cared for in his father's house.

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.'

This doesn't sound like someone who was against Moses, does it?

In fact this sounds like someone who has a very healthy respect for Moses:

When he was born, '*he was no ordinary child*' or he was a very special child.

In fact this can be translated, '*he was fair in the sight of God.*'

Stephen has nothing whatsoever to say against Moses.

His life began as normal in his father's home, a Hebrew home, but because of the death threat against all Hebrew male children by the Pharaoh of the day; his mother took him and hid him in the bulrushes along the banks of the Nile. It's interesting the way Stephen puts that – *'when he was placed outside'* – in other words he's outside the protection of a Hebrew home, a Covenant home, from 3 months old - but we all know that God was looking after him.

He prompts Pharaoh's own daughter to take him in to the Egyptian Palace and there he was brought up as her own son, right under Pharaoh's nose! Then Stephen says that Moses was *'educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action'*. In other words, Stephen has got it – the God of the Hebrews was the God of the whole world, not just a Hebrew family who were slaves in Egypt. God could train his man in all the wisdom of the Egyptian super-power to equip him to serve the Living and True God. There was no contradiction in that as far as Stephen was concerned, but there is no way the Jewish Sanhedrin would have talked in those terms. They believed that wisdom was only to be found in their culture and literature!

You see God was in control at the time of Moses' birth. He was the right man, born at the right time, and God had an amazing plan and purpose for his life. God had prepared him well in Egypt, and it was now obvious that he was powerful in word and deed – a very gifted man! And yet, Moses was...

2. A Failure at 40 – He had to flee to Midian (v.23-29)

'When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites.'

The amazing thing was that Miriam, Moses' sister had been watching when Pharaoh's daughter had come down to bathe, and had quickly offered to get a Hebrew maid to look after the child she had discovered in the bulrushes. Of course she ran home and got the child's mother, and so Moses was in fact brought up by his own mother within the courts of Pharaoh's palace. Do you see how our God can turn the wicked schemes of men on their heads and still cause his purposes to be worked out right under their very noses?

It's because of this that Moses knew that he was really an Israelite - perhaps the only Hebrew boy of his age that had survived Pharaoh's death threat. So when he became a man of 40 years old, he decided to go to visit his fellow Israelites who lived in the part of Egypt called Goshen, near the Red Sea.

When he arrived he saw one of the Israelites being ill-treated by an Egyptian! So straight away, as a Prince of Egypt, Moses took the law into his own hands and jumped to the Hebrew man's defence, by killing the Egyptian.

What would happen now? Well, Moses thought that his own people, the Israelites, would accept him, and realise that God was using him to rescue them and welcome him with open arms! But quite the opposite – they rejected Moses. So much so, that the next day when Moses discovered two Israelites fighting with each other, and stepped in to try to sort it out and to reconcile them, one of them actually pushed Moses aside and said,

'Who made you ruler and judge over us? (v.27)

'Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' (v.28)

Moses could hardly believe it, but very quickly he knew that he couldn't stay in Egypt, he had to flee for his life – and he went to Midian. There he settled as a foreigner, confused and bewildered, not really knowing where he belonged. He wasn't really an Egyptian, and he wasn't really accepted by the Hebrews either. So he finds a wife, and settles down in the land of Midian, and there he has two sons. And another 40 years pass before he knows it. So now he's 80. So he had been a Prince in Egypt for his first 40 years, and then he had to flee as a failure to Midian for his second 40 years, but then out of the blue he was:

3. Called by God at 80 – To go back to Egypt (v.30-35)

This is where we come to the well known story of the Burning Bush. (v.30) Stephen says that an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai - the Mountain on which God would one day give him the Law. So Stephen is very clearly making the link between the call of God on Moses' life, and the giving of the Law to Moses by God, many years later. Despite the fact that Moses had been rejected by his own people, God was still calling him to be the leader of his people Israel. So if Stephen was about to be rejected by his own people, it didn't mean that he wasn't called by God, because this wasn't the first time it had happened!

Moses was of course struck by the sight of a bush, with flames coming out of it, but its branches and leaves were not being burned up. The Presbyterians have the burning bush as their logo to this day, with the words '*Ardens sed Virens*' underneath it – '*Burning, yet living.*' It was a bush that was burning with flames coming out of it, but yet its leaves and branches weren't being consumed or destroyed by the fire. So Moses turns aside from tending his sheep in the desert to investigate this strange phenomenon further.

It's at that point that he hears the Lord's voice calling to him:

'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'

'Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.'

We know the rest of the story – The Lord told Moses:

'Take off your sandals; 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.'

God had prepared his man in the best universities of Egypt for 40 years. Then he had prepared him for life in a desert for another 40 years. Now at 80 years of age, God's man was now ready to go to work. God was now sending Moses back to Egypt to lead his people out of bondage. God had certainly been teaching his servant great patience. He had spent 80 years in preparation, for a task that was going to take another 40 years to do! But how would the people of Israel accept him now? Would he be welcomed, or would he still face rejection in the coming days even though called by God? And this is Stephen's point as we come to vs.36-43:

4. Moses was Called by God – but Rejected by God's People (v.36-43)

This is Stephen's point in vs.36-43 and also in vs.52-53. Moses was called by God, he was God's Servant, but the people rejected him again and again - and all that he stood for & nothing had changed in the NT!

(v.35) *'This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words: 'Who made you ruler and judge?'*

God had actually chosen the very man that his people had already rejected!
'He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself!'

And he was a successful leader at that:

'He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for (another) 40 years in the desert!'

That brought Moses to the grand old age of 120. And it was at that stage when he was about to hand over the reins of leadership to Joshua that he gave them the prophecy in v.37 that we touched on last Sunday night:

(v.37) *'This is that Moses who told the Israelites' - of the coming Messiah! – 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'*

And the teachers of the Law sitting on that Sanhedrin, would have been able to finish that verse themselves. It's Deuteronomy 18:15. The full quotation is:
'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.

You must listen to Him!

They should have listened to Moses as God's messenger in his day, but they didn't – they rejected him instead.

But even more so they should have listened to the Prophet that God had just raised up, like Moses, from among their own people – that was Jesus of Nazareth. But just like Moses, they refused to listen to him too, they rejected him instead, and they put him to death on a cross – just a matter of months earlier.

Stephen goes on to say in v.38 that **'He was in the assembly in the desert...'** Who does the 'He' refer to? It could refer back to Moses in the previous verse, but it could in fact refer to 'the prophet like Moses that God would raise up' –

i.e. Stephen could be saying that Jesus, the Son of God, was with the assembly in the desert. That word assembly is also significant. It's the word for congregation, or **church** as well. Again as we saw last time Stephen is making it clear that there is only one true people of God for all time. Those who faithfully followed God in the Old Testament are one with us in the Church in the New Testament. Just as Christ is with us today in the NT Church, he was with his people – the OT people of God – as they wandered through the wilderness following Moses' leadership. He was there when the Law was mediated through angels to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai, and with their forefathers, and he received living words to pass down to us. God's Word, and everything that was written in the Old Testament, including in the Books of Moses (The first 5 books of the OT) – all of it was written for our learning in NT Times as well. That's why God has made sure that it has been faithfully preserved for us, and passed down through all the centuries since – because in our Bibles we now have the living and enduring Word of God. But do people accept God's written Word? No...

(v.39) 'But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.'

Back in Moses' day, they refused to obey him, they rebelled against him. In fact they rejected Moses' God-given leadership, again and again, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt. They longed for life as slaves back in Egypt. A bit like the Jewish leaders in Stephen's day. Christ had come, a new era of grace had dawned. The final sacrifice for sin had been offered by Jesus, the Lamb of God, on Mount Calvary. But instead of embracing the new era, the new covenant, New Testament times, the Jewish leaders on the Sanhedrin, were still rejecting God's Servant, the Messiah. They were refusing to obey his teaching, and in their hearts they just wanted to stick with the past. Spiritually they wanted to go back to Egypt, instead of forward into the promised land that Christ was offering them for the future – in heaven itself!

But the sad thing is, and the dangerous thing is, that whenever we reject God's message, and whenever we reject God's servants, and His leadership in our lives, Idolatry inevitably follows. (Look at vs.40-43).

Even while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law – the Ten Commandments from God, the people down at the foot of the mountain were asking Aaron, Moses' brother, to...

'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!'

And before Moses could get back down the mountain again, they had made an idol in the form of a golden calf! They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honour of what their own hands had made!

And what was the first of the Ten Commandments that God had just given to Moses at the top of the mountain: *'You shall have no other gods before me'* And what was No.2: *'You shall not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.'* (Ex.20).

You see God knew the hearts of his people, before He had even given the Ten Commandments, they had already broken them! So what did He do?

(v.42) *'But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies.'* God didn't force his people to respond to him. He let them go their own way. They chose idolatry. He let them go – to worship these false gods, idols and images for a while, to see how they got on. They made their choice. God allowed them to experience their choice to the full.

We read something very like this in Romans 1:18-32 – *'God gave them over!'*

And believe it or not, when the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem chose to put the Son of God to death on the cross at Calvary, and when they continued to put to death Stephen and many of the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, it was inevitable that they would end up in idolatry – worshipping created things rather than the Creator himself.

They claimed to revere Moses now 2000 years after his death. Their forefathers hadn't listened to him during his life-time, and they certainly weren't listening to him now. They had just rejected the prophet God had raised up like unto Moses – they had rejected the Messiah he spoke of. They thought they stood in the line of Moses, but in fact they were worshipping the Law, and they were worshipping the Temple, and they were worshipping the Land, in a way that God had never intended them to do. These things – the Land, the Law and the Temple were becoming the idols and images in the minds of these Jewish religious leaders. They chose to worship them, instead of the one they were supposed to point to – Jesus!

And we need to be careful to this day, because people in other churches can worship their buildings, their altars, their liturgy – all kinds of relics and images, and think they are pleasing God, when all the while God is seeking for worshippers who will worship him 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). But we need to be careful in this church too, that we don't have any 'sacred cows' either – ways of worshipping that have become more sacred to us than Christ himself – things that are only man-made traditions. 'In spirit and in truth'

But the idolatry that started during the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel actually continued on down through the centuries that followed, and it was in fact never totally eradicated from Israel. Look what one of the later prophets had to say about this subject, as Stephen reminds them:

(v.42) *'This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:'* (Amos)
*'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for 40 years in the desert,
O house of Israel?
You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile
beyond Babylon'*

The original quotation from Amos 5:25-27 actually says *'beyond Damascus'* but Stephen changes it slightly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to say *'beyond Babylon'* – making the point very strongly to these religious leaders that the reason God's people were sent into Exile, was because of the idolatry that was still in their hearts – because they weren't worshipping God in spirit and in truth. And so, from the Exodus from Egypt to the Exile to Babylon, God's people never learned – they continued to reject God's ways, and to follow their own ways into idolatry, and now they had done the same again!

Conclusion (vs.51-53)

That's why Stephen in the conclusion to his speech attacks these Religious Leaders with these words in v.51-53:

*'You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears!
You are just like your forefathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!
Was there ever a prophet your fathers 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 put into effect through angels
but have not obeyed it.'***

Stephen was a brave man to say what he did, but he was absolutely right. These people who prided themselves on keeping the Law, and condemning everyone else who didn't cross every 'T' and dot every 'i' the way they did, were actually guilty of persecuting not only the prophets all the way from Moses to Zechariah, but actually of murdering the Messiah himself – Jesus!

They had received the Law – but they had not obeyed it.

But the fact of the matter is that none of us can obey the Law perfectly.

The making of the golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai just proves it.

The giving of the Law was never going to save anyone.

It's the coming of Christ – *full of grace and truth* – who is able to save us, and He is the one who enables us to worship the Father *in spirit and in truth*. Don't reject the one that God has sent. Hear him calling you - and trust him today!

