

Acts 7 • God's Will for Israel Explained

Introduction

The problem with each new generation of Israel is that, in spite of their claims, they become like their disobedient fathers before them. Their "heritage" was consistently to reject God's message through the covenants made with their forefathers, to forsake God's Law and true worship for false gods and religions, and to reject His Word provided through the leaders and prophets sent by God. Yet they clung to their bloodline heritage through the very men whose words they rejected, they clung to the Law given through Moses which they reinterpreted to their own liking rather than obey, and they prided themselves on possessing the temple yet fell short of true worship. So when Jesus Christ came to them as the embodiment of all these things – like their fathers before them – they rejected and killed Him in the name of the very heritage to which they clung, but yet were disobedient to. Acts 7 is the beginning of the fulfillment of the Parable of the Vineyard in Luke 19:11-27 wherein the "vineyard" is about to be taken from the Jews and given to the Gentiles.

To understand this passage and the point that the Holy Spirit is making through Stephen, first read Acts 7:51-53. Keep reviewing these points as we study through Stephen's message to see how it is emphasized in this condensed history affirming this pattern from Abraham all the way to that day at Stephen's trial.

¹¹Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹²And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. ¹³They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

[Read 6:11-14]

Q: Against whom is Stephen accused of blasphemy?

A: Moses and God. (v.11)

Q: Can a person blaspheme Moses?

A: We can speak blasphemy regarding the Law given through him, or the signs performed in God's name through him, but not the human person of Moses who is *not* divine. This is the beginning hint that they neither understand nor acknowledge that in Jesus, "One greater than Moses is here."

Q: In v.13, what are the two things against which Stephen is accused of speaking? Against what specifically are these allegations of blasphemy directed?

A: This holy place (the temple) and the Law.

Q: What do they purport Jesus will do based on Stephen's quote/unquote "blasphemy"?

A: Destroy the temple and change the customs handed down through Moses.

Q: What do you think — were Stephen's accusers right or wrong?

A: Mt. 7:2, "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you." Ever notice how Jesus' accusers have an uncanny knack of wording the situation precisely as it **actually is** yet are simultaneously blind to the truth of it? For instance, before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:70-71) and before Pilate (Luke 23:3-4) and Caiaphas' prophecy (John 11:49-51)

Point: The Holy Spirit's reply through Stephen will address the issues of God, Moses, the temple, and the Law to show the current generation that they, like their fathers before them, have once again rejected God's ways and, in particular, the Prophet in Whom was the fulfillment of all that God's covenants, the Mosaic Law and the temple knit together.

¹The high priest said, “Are these things so?”

²And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’ ⁴Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. ⁵But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. ⁶But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. ⁷AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,’ said God, ‘AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.’ ⁸And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹“The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, ¹⁰and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

¹¹“Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. ¹²But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. ¹³On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. ¹⁴Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. ¹⁶From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the

[Read 7:1-8]

Q: What are the things that God promised and/or foretold to Abraham?

A: The possession/inheritance of the land, a son/descendants, his descendants’ slavery in Egypt, God’s deliverance of them, and their service to God in the land of inheritance.

Q: What was the sign of these promises, or what we call the Abrahamic Covenant? What was it’s purpose?

A: Circumcision. It was a physical reminder through all these events of what the end result would be, based on God’s Word in spite of the present circumstances. (Abraham would never live to see most of these things fulfilled, but circumcision was the sign between he and God that they would all happen according to God’s Word.)

Q: Read Exodus 3:12, God’s promise to Moses at the call at the burning bush, and compare it to Acts 7:7. What is common in God’s promises to both Abraham and Moses?

Exodus 3:12: *And He said, “Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.”*

Acts 7:7: *“And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge,” said God, ‘and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.’*

A: That Israel would serve God. Stephen has essentially begun to tie the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants together as a framework to show they’ve missed the point of their heritage in Abraham and Moses – to serve God and be obedient to **ALL** His Law and Promises.

[Read 7:9-16]

Q: How do we know that the patriarch’s actions regarding Joseph are NOT in concert with God’s will?

A: They sold him into slavery out of jealousy. To be sure, God’s will was not thwarted, but God used Joseph **IN SPITE** of the patriarch’s unrighteous treatment of him. This is the first intimation through Stephen that their heritage is really faithlessness and disobedience to the very things they’re claiming as a spiritual foundation.

Q: What are some of the parallels between the life and example of Joseph and the Jewish authorities’ treatment of Christ?

- Several times they were jealous of Christ to the point of wanting, plotting, and finally actually killing Him.
- Joseph prepared in advance a haven of rest for Israel.
- Joseph completely forgave the sins committed against him. Moreover, he gladly welcomed them back and to a safe haven of rest and prosperity.

Q: According to v.15-16, what is the goal of a true patriarch of God? How does that contrast to this generation prosecuting Stephen?

A: The true patriarch wants to find eternal rest in God’s Promised Land. But this generation, like the generation of Moses’ time, was always “returning to Egypt”. (Read ahead 7:39-40) The account of Joseph is the

sons of Hamor in Shechem.

¹⁷“But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, ¹⁸until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. ¹⁹It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. ²⁰It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home. ²¹And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.

²²Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. ²³But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. ²⁴And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. ²⁶On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?’ ²⁷But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US?’ ²⁸YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?’ ²⁹At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

beginning of a repeated pattern on the part of Israel to be disobedient and self-seeking, always missing what God was really doing.

[Read 7:17-21]

Q: What are the two obvious parallels to Christ in this passage?

A: At the time of Christ’s birth Israel was conquered and subjugated to Rome, and at His birth there was the same kind of persecution in an attempt to thwart God’s plans.

[Read 7:22-29]

Q: If Moses was in the right place at the right time, by whom was he rejected?

A: The Jews themselves (see v.35 for further confirmation). The Moses that Stephen is accused of blaspheming is the same Moses who was rejected by the Jews themselves over and over again from the very beginning. The person of Moses to which they claimed to cling was never really embraced by **ANY** generation of Jews.

Q: What is the obvious parallel in v.25 between the Jews of Moses’ time and the Jews of Stephen’s time?

A: This isn’t the first time that they don’t understand what God is doing or through whom He is doing it.

³⁰"After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH.

³¹When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:

³²'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. ³³BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. ³⁴I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'

³⁵"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. ³⁶This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' ³⁸This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

³⁹Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT—WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.'

[Read 7:30-34]

Q: What did the burning bush represent?

A: The bush, unconsumed by the fire, represented Israel in Egypt undergoing the fire of affliction yet not being consumed by it; in fact, God would deliver them to something greater. This symbolism was about to transfer from Israel brought out of Egypt to the Church brought out of Israel.

[Read 7:35-40]

Q: According to v.36 in spite of what did Israel reject Moses?

A: In spite of performing signs and wonders.

Q: According to v.38 in spite of what did Israel reject Moses?

A: In spite of the Law given to them through Moses.

Q: According to v.39 how did their rejection become personal?

A: They rejected God from the heart, desirous to return to the old life in Egypt. They did not want the Law and ways offered by God through Moses.

Q: What is the Holy Spirit reminding the Jews of in v.37?

A: It did not begin and end with Moses. He was a type – or example – of the True Prophet to come.

Q: What are the parallels between Christ and Moses to this point?

- Both were God-ordained deliverers rejected by Israel but "resurrected" to finish God's work in spite of Israel.
- Both were God-ordained rulers rejected by Israel.
- Both performed signs and wonders for Israel, yet Israel continued to reject God.
- Both of them brought the Word of God to which neither generation was obedient or receptive.
- Christ was the **FULFILLMENT** of the work begun in Moses.

Point: *The very Moses Stephen is accused of blaspheming is the Moses that the Jews themselves have actually blasphemed through **their** disobedience and unbelief. And in the same way, so they have treated Christ. Stephen is not blaspheming Moses but is the only one paying the proper respect to Moses' legacy.*

⁴¹At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴²But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? ⁴³YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

⁴⁴'Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. ⁴⁵And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. ⁴⁶David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. ⁴⁸However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

⁴⁹'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE,
AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY
FEET;
WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD
FOR ME?' says the Lord,
'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY
REPOSE?
⁵⁰WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE
ALL THESE THINGS?'

[Read 7:41-43]

Q: Therefore what is Israel's TRUE legacy? How have THEY treated God, Abraham, Moses, the Law and the temple?

A: Consistently rejected them in favor of idolatry and false worship. The case being articulated here is that this generation is doing the very same thing regarding Christ.

[Read 7:44-50]

Q: The Holy Spirit has addressed all the accusations raised except that of "this place", the temple. What is the significance of the designation "tabernacle of testimony" in v.44?

A: It not only contained the Word of God (in the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies) but was a sort of witness as to whether or not their worship and sacrifices were to God or not. It was about **TOTAL** obedience to **ALL** the Word of God through the Law of Moses, the sacrifices, the feasts, etc.

Q: How does this contrast to the tabernacle mentioned in v.43?

A: Embracing a false tabernacle (Moloch's) over the true tabernacle (God's).

Q: If the temple couldn't even hold God in the first place, how could blasphemy be uttered against it?

A: The point is it's just a place and that true "blasphemy" is clinging to things like one's heritage, the Law, or a building in name only while rejecting the Giver of all those things and the commitment to obedience they represent.

Summary So Far....

- God's promise was given through Abraham but subsequent generations to this day have exhibited their unbelief through their disobedience. They're circumcised in flesh only, not of the heart through obedience.
- The pattern of disobedience began with the patriarchs of Israel themselves in their treatment of Joseph.
- Unlike Jacob, the generations of Israel never sought rest in God's Promised Land but continually looked back to Egypt and to other gods.
- The very Moses held so dear by the Jews was rejected literally by the first generation and subsequently by every succeeding generation through their disobedience.
- Moses embodied the character, events and works that would also be rejected in Jesus Christ:
 - Both were God-ordained deliverers rejected by the people but resurrected by God.
 - Both were God-ordained rulers rejected by the people.
 - Both were God-ordained prophets rejected by the people.
 - The signs and wonders they worked among Israel were rejected in Israel's disobedience to the message that accompanied these works.
 - And Christ was the fulfillment of Moses, predicted by Moses Himself.
- The temple in which they placed so much trust is nothing more than a building to the God of that temple (that can't actually contain Him), which the Jews have rejected through their disobedience.

⁵¹“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵²Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

[Read 7:51-53]

Q: What are the chief impediments described in v.51?

- Stiff-necked
- Uncircumcised in heart **AND** ears
- Resisting the Holy Spirit
- Following in the footsteps of their fathers

Discussion Points

- If we're really honest with ourselves, whatever area of personal struggle we're now engaged in is rooted in one or more of these areas. What do you need to do to overcome each of these conditions? [Ask for suggestions for overcoming each of the four.]
- Is there a past or heritage that we cling to – familial, denominational, doctrinal – that we need to submit to the authority of Christ in order to be completely obedient and submitted to Him?

Q: What is the key difference in Stephen's "hope" vs. the Jewish authorities' "hope"?

A: One looks back, clinging to the past, never finding its fulfillment because it's more of a myth that really never existed in the first place. The other looks forward, relinquishing the past and finding its fulfillment in Christ.