

Stephen's Defence

Acts 6:9-7:51

Introduction

Last time we looked at the character of Stephen, and how he was full of faith, the Holy Spirit, grace and power. He really enjoyed the blessing of the Lord, but it did not lead to a bed of roses or to becoming a most popular man. His bold forthright preaching soon stirred up opposition.

Members of the Synagogue of Freedom, i.e. foreign Jews, freed from slavery and now living in Jerusalem, objected to Stephen's preaching. But they could not stand up to his wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. So when arguments failed, his enemies started a smear campaign. They bribed men to say falsely that he was guilty of blasphemy. They took him to the Sanhedrin Court and produced false witnesses.

So the usual cycle – theology, leading to slander, leading to violence. Luke tells us the charges brought against Stephen, and then gives us Stephen's defence. Stephen's final punishment was death by stoning.

Stephen was charged with speaking against the holy place and against the Law. Nothing was more sacred to the Jews than the Temple and the Law. The Temple was God's house, and the Law was God's Word. Stephen was reported to have said that Jesus was going to destroy the holy place and change the customs handed down from Moses. All Stephen had been saying was that Jesus had said the Jewish Temple would be destroyed, and that He would fulfil the Law and, through His death, bring an end to the priesthood, sacrifices and ritual of the Temple.

As the council looked at Stephen's face, it became like that of an angel. His face shone as Moses' face had done when he came down from Mount Sinai with the Law. It was a sign of God's presence and favour on him.

Then Stephen began his defence. He gave the council a history lesson. He traced the story of the people of Israel to show that though God met His people in the Temple, His presence was never limited to the Temple. Stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon demonstrate that God's presence was never limited to one place. He is a living God, always on the move, always at work in people's lives accompanying and directing them. And as for the accusations against Jesus not keeping the Law, Stephen showed them they were in no position to talk, because neither they nor their ancestors even kept the Law. They were constantly in rebellion against God's will. They persecuted the prophets whom God sent. Their rebellion reached its climax in the murder of Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

So Stephen made his point using a history lesson. He gave a bird's eye view of the national story. But how does this affect us? We are not worried about the Temple in Jerusalem and we accept the Law as reinterpreted in Christ. So is there any relevant message for us here?

The impressive thing as Stephen gives his history lesson to make his point is the way he repeatedly emphasises God at work in the story of the Jews. The national history was not just unfolding of its own accord, but the whole thing was controlled, directed and superintended by God. E.g. God appeared to Abraham and told him to leave his country; God judged the Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites; God was with Joseph when he was a slave, and delivered him; God appeared to Moses and sent him to Egypt to lead Israel out; when the people rebelled, God gave them up to sin and idolatry etc.

We cannot understand the history of the Old Testament apart from God, His purpose and revelation. This emphasis suggests how the Christian should interpret history and the story of mankind, God's purposes, where it is all leading, and what is the place for the individual – where does he fit in? We are going to look at some other interpretations of history, compared with the Christian interpretation, and see how this should move us as individuals.

### Some interpretations of history

Some look at the story of history – the rise and fall of nations, wars, battles, discoveries, treaties, great men, politicians – and take a cynical view. They see that the world is just going round in cycles. Nations become great, then decline, then another arises. They point to the rise and fall of Britain, America, Russia, China, and say we are going round in circles, but getting nowhere. Nothing is new at all; there is no advance.

Others say there is progress; we are advancing all the time. At first we were barbarian, then became more and more civilized, with improved conditions and education. One day, there will be a perfect world. This view was popular 100 years ago, when there was indeed great advancement, discoveries, world travel, and education for all. It is less popular now. Two world wars and the Holocaust of 6,000,000, the decline in society and lawlessness and anarchy tell a different story.

And others say it is all meaningless, that history does not make sense. There is no God, no purpose in it all, no rhyme or reason, no point, and it looks as though we are heading towards destroying ourselves one day. So just eat, drink and be merry, indulge self to the full, every man for himself.

### The Christian view of history

And at once, unlike the other theories, the Christian viewpoint does not begin with man but with God. He is in control, He is the secret, He gives meaning, a plan is there and He is behind it all. Five great Bible doctrines are the clue:

- (a) Creation. The world was not always there. It came into being because God chose. The creation of man and woman was the highpoint and climax of creation. He was created to know and love and obey God. But he fell into sin, was separated from God. His nature henceforth has a bias towards evil.
- (b) Providence. God did not abandon the world. He did not wind it up like a big clock and then watch it run down gradually. He guides and directs history.

Sometimes He intervenes supernaturally and miraculously in nature and history.

- (c) Revelation. God revealed Himself to men of God. He called Abraham. He made one special people His own, gave them His laws through Moses, spoke to them through prophets, and through Israel He brought His own Son into the world. God also reveals Himself personally to men and women. He calls them to faith and obedience. Then He fits them into His framework and plan for history. Providence and revelation were at work in Stephen's speech.
- (d) Redemption. Unique and complete and perfect revelation in His Son, who came in the fullness of time. God was in Christ. He was the focus and centre of history. He splits history into two, B.C and A.D. (In the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament) He did His great work of redemption on the Cross. Then He outpoured His Holy Spirit and established the Christian Church. God is now calling out people for His name from all nations of the world. God is perfecting a people of God, changing His people into the image of Christ. From the divine perspective, the most important things that are happening are not the things going on in London or Washington, but God's activity in calling out a people, changing them, preparing them for glory. History's great climax comes when God brings down the curtain on this bankrupt world and Christ comes back in glory. The rest of history is simply scaffolding for the real work. In many cities, scaffolding hides our view of beautiful buildings while they are cleaned and repaired. Then one day the scaffolding is removed, and the true beauty is revealed. The architecture is seen in all its glory. One day God will pull down the scaffolding of world history. He will say to all creation, "This is my masterpiece".
- (e) The return of Christ. Christ will return in glory. It will be sudden and decisive. The final judgement will take place, and a new heaven and earth. God will be all in all. Evil will be put down and receive its just and right deserts. Every tongue will confess Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. This is the appointed end to which all has been leading.

God's plan and purpose in history is clear. Men are responsible for sin and rebellion. But history marches on under God's purposes. He is directing, ruling and overruling. There is mystery here, but the omnipotent God knows what He is doing and where He is going.

#### Our response to the purposes of God in history

In light of this total picture of God, His greatness, sovereignty, glory and purposes, it is important first of all that we see how we are caught up in the flow of history in divine purposes. The meaning of history is found in Christ, His coming and salvation. We urgently need to belong to Him. As men, we can choose to follow Him or not to. So our destiny here and hereafter is determined. God calls us into His divine framework of history through faith in and obedience to Christ. He is the central and focal point of history and also over history and in control of history. We serve God's plan only through commitment to Christ. Then we have to live for Christ and be His witnesses.

As individuals we also need to be assured about the outworking of God's plan for our own lives, which are part of a larger plan for His people. **And we know that in all**

**things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose** (Romans 8:28). God has two great aims as he works in our lives – to bring glory to Himself and our sanctification or conforming to the image of Christ. He wants to see Godly character, reflecting His own image, and our living at the centre of His will. We should be concerned, not with our comfort and wealth, or how we can get what we want and serve our own ends. We must see that everything that happens is either ordained or permitted.

Sometimes adversity, suffering, sorrow and sin are allowed, so that they can be overruled for His purposes. So in stories of God's people – Joshua, Ruth, David, Hosea – and supremely the Cross, what happened was **by God's set purpose and foreknowledge** (Acts 2:23). This gives us assurance in an insecure world. God is still interested, caring and interposing in our lives, answering prayer and supplying needs. He is thoughtful about the least detail in our lives. We are the special objects of His love. He sustains and watches over us. He will handle our affairs. We are not at the mercy of impersonal forces. God is active, not just at major crisis, but also in all detail. He is interested and concerned about everything. Even the hairs of our head are numbered. He knows what we have need of. Every detail of life (including our death) are in His hands. He feels for us. He will never leave us nor forsake us.

This teaches the importance of being patient. We do not see the whole picture. Only God does. We just see the tip of the iceberg. Life is governed by God's timetable and not ours. Israel was enslaved for 400 years. The times they must have prayed, the generations that came and went, and still God did not act. What despair they must have felt. Joseph was years in jail, wondering if he had been completely forgotten. Moses waited 40 years before he moved to Midian, and another 40 years before he saw the burning bush. Over 80 years before the Exodus began in fulfilment of promises made hundreds of years before.

Finally it is our responsibility to enjoy these truths, to find comfort and peace of heart. In the hands of God there is security. We can live our lives in simple humble dependence, resting in His hands. These truths also stir us up to courage and activity, not indolence. **The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid? Teach me your way, O Lord; Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord** (Psalm 27:1,11,14)