As we return to our journey through the book of Acts, let me remind you where we are. Very recently in chapter 6 we were introduced to Stephen who was one of seven men chosen by the Apostles to help manage the ministries of the church. Stephen was chosen to be a leader and a servant of the church because he was a man of good repute and full of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in 6:8, we learned that Stephen was full of grace and power, and that he was doing great signs and wonders among the people. He was also defending the Gospel through long debates with synagogue leaders from the Hellenistic synagogues. In vs. 10 Luke reports, “But they, the synagogue leaders, could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.”

We’re going to look a bit deeper in to the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking in just a moment. But remember also that Stephen has so befuddled his opponents, so infuriated the critics of Christianity, that they have now created lies about Stephen. In 6:11 Luke writes, “They secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God…this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’” Stephen is thus arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for a “trial.” Luke concludes chapter six by stating, “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of angel.

This morning we’ll pick up the story in chapter 7 where Stephen provides his defense against the false allegations that have been pressed upon him. Our text is 53 verses long, but I want us to stand and read the very end of our text, vss 51-53, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” Let’s pray.

What we just read summarizes the 50 verses that came before where Stephen defends himself against the accusations of blasphemy by recounting and reinterpreting the history of Israel according to Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit at work within him. We’re going to walk through that together, but before we do, I want you to be listening for something.

Stephen is not going to simply regurgitate scripture here. There is a very specific argument that Stephen will make that will be so powerful, and so offensive, that it will get him stoned to death as we’ll see next Sunday. If you miss Stephen’s argument, his stoning won’t
make a lot of sense, so even before we get started, let me help you understand what’s going on here.

In the ancient Jewish world, there were three sacred pillars: the land, Moses and Mosaic Law, and the Temple. As we just read a moment ago, the critics and instigators have accused Stephen of blasphemy against Moses, God, the Temple, and the Law. So this trial is a very big deal. If Stephen is publicly preaching blasphemy, the Sanhedrin can justify stoning Stephen according to Deuteronomy 13 which states in vs. 5, “That prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God…you shall purge the evil from your midst.” Again, just a few verses later in vs. 10, “You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the LORD your God.”

All Stephen has to do in this trial to save his skin is play ball. He needs to simply recite all the Jewish scriptures and align himself with Jewish orthodoxy, and he will defend himself against the accusations of blasphemy. However, as we know, Stephen does get stoned, so what is that Stephen says here that so infuriates the Jewish authorities? Let’s get started and I will show you as we go along.

In 7:1 we read, “And the high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’” The High Priest named Caiaphas is referring to the false accusations made against him by the instigators. So Stephen begins his response in vs. 2 saying, “Brothers and fathers, hear me.” Stephen is addressing his listeners as brothers in the Jewish faith, and using the proper terms of respect by referring to the Sanhedrin officials as “fathers.” Stephen continues, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you. The he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.”

Stephen begins his defense by appealing to Abraham whom he refers to as “our father Abraham.” So far so good. Stephen is claiming his Jewish heritage, he is relating to his accusers, and remember, if you’re every making a defense that you’re a good Jew, you always start with “our father Abraham.” Notice also that Stephen refers to the Glory of God…the term is one of great honor and respect, so Stephen is not at all blaspheming God. But notice the points of emphasis that Stephen is making to the Jewish authorities.

The Glory of God came to Abraham where? When he was in Mesopotamia. And then God moved Abraham to Haran. Both Mesopotamia and Haran are not part of the Holy Land of Israel. And even when God moved Abraham into the “promised land” for a time, Abraham…the father
of their faith…had no inheritance in the land. All he had was a promise for his children…and at that time he didn’t even have any children. What’s the point? Here’s his point: Not only is Stephen not blasphemous toward God, he is helping to correctly interpret the Jewish scriptures in defense against “Land Worship.” The scriptures reveal that God was never bound to a piece of land, nor is their faith bound to a piece of land. God’s glory was revealed to the father of the faith in foreign lands, and the righteousness of Abraham was tied to his belief in the promises of God, not the occupation of the land. So…if you’re listening…that is, if you know what you’re listening for…Stephen just began tipping over the one of the three sacred cows of Judaism: the land. Now…that’s not blasphemy because it’s scriptural, but Stephen’s interpretation of scripture has gone from “preaching to meddling” in light of the prevailing religious beliefs of the day that held the Land in such high regard.

Stephen continues in vs. 6, “And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ And 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.” Again, Stephen is defending his biblical worldview by correctly reciting the historical narrative of God’s brilliance found in the book of Genesis: God predicted what would come to pass regarding their time in a foreign land and the hardships that would follow, but God promises that He will ultimately deliver the descendants of Abraham into the Promised Land. God’s promise is called a covenant, and the sign of that covenant is circumcision. God then works out his promises through the descendants of Abraham just as he promised, beginning with Abraham’s son Isaac, and Isaac’s son Jacob, who then fathers the twelve men (the patriarchs) who would make up the twelve tribes of Israel. This is all standard fare for the first century Jews, so Stephen is right on track in honoring God and the Torah from which this history comes.

In vs. 9, Stephen continues, “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.” Once again, where does God bless and express his power and purpose? Is it with the patriarchs and the land? No. God blesses the one the patriarchs rejected, and gives him power to rule over them all in a foreign land. No doubt Stephen, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is now seeing these stories as precursors to Jesus. Like so many of us today, we begin to see Jesus in so many of the Old Testament stories, and that changes the way we understand history. That is most certainly why Stephen caused so many waves for the Jewish leaders, but it’s also the reason why “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” Stephen is not just reciting Jewish history; he is very subtly reinterpreting Jewish history in light of Jesus.
Stephen goes on in vs. 11, “Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five person in all. And Jacob went down to Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

Stephen concludes this chapter of Jewish history with a sober reminder: Jacob and the patriarchs lived a great portion of their lives and died in Egypt. Again, the land is a false god. God’s blessing has never been bound to the land…God’s blessing is His presence and His promise and the fulfillment of His promises.

Stephen will now turn his attention to the next sacred cow of Jewish tradition: Moses and the Mosaic Law. Remember, Stephen has been accused of being blasphemous toward both.

We pick up in vs. 17 where Stephen states, “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God’s sight.”

Again, if you are not familiar with the Old Testament, all of this history thus far can be found in Genesis and Exodus. Notice how Stephen celebrates and honors Moses, stating that he was beautiful in God’s sight. Notice also how Luke mentioned not long ago at the end of Acts 6 that Stephen himself had the face of angel. There is a subtle message here regarding God’s anointing and beauty…that the favor of God makes a person beautiful in some way. I’m still holding out for that personally!

Stephen continues in vs. 20, “And he (Moses) was brought up for three months in his father’s house, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to
kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.”

Notice how Stephen honors Moses as the chosen “savior” of Israel, but the Israelites don’t get it…they don’t understand. They become indignant and ask, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” The answer is clear: God did! God chose Moses. God chose his faithful servant to deliver his people out of bondage, but the people didn’t get it. You see the parallel on that one, right? Make no mistake, Stephen is reciting this history in a way that is setting up his final punch. God has been making promises to Israel since the days of Abraham, but time and again, the Israelites…the Jews…have refused God’s agents who were sent to fulfill his promises. They rejected Joseph, they rejected Moses, and they are once again rejecting Jesus…who is the ultimate fulfillment of every promise God ever made.

Stephen continues to recast the history of Moses in vs. 30, “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the LORD: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, “Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.”

Now listen as Stephen reinterprets this famous story and corrects the tendency to idolize Moses. Look at what comes next in vs. 35, “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

Wait for it…now here it comes…
Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’

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Do you see what Stephen is doing here? The Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin want to stone Stephen because of his blasphemy towards Moses and the Law, but Stephen turns around and says “You crazy hypocrites! Can’t you see that our own fathers blasphemed Moses and the Law worse than any of us could have ever imagined? Have you forgotten how they rejected him, rejected the law, and made idols? God was with Moses…God sent Moses to be our ruler and our redeemer…and we missed it!” Stephen is confessing the plight of the Jews…they have over and over again missed the fulfillment of God’s promises, choosing instead to reject God’s messengers and worship idols. Stephen is not just saying, “You did that.” Stephen is saying, “WE did that. Blasphemy and sinful rebellion is our history…it is part of our collective narrative.” Can you see the second sacred cow of ancient Judaism…the veneration of Moses and the Law…can you see that sacred cow being tipped here in Stephen’s speech? Rest assured…the Sanhedrin got it…and at this point their faces are turning red and their teeth are clenched. But Stephen’s not quite done yet. There is one more sacred cow to tip: The Temple.

Stephen begins reinterpreting the temple in vs. 44: “Our fathers had the tent of witnesses in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?’”

Boom. That cow just hit the deck…hard. The first century Jews were very proud of their Temple. It was the center of commerce, the center of their worship, and the center of their identity. For centuries they insisted that God resided within the Holy of Holies at the very center of the Temple, in a room that only priests could enter. All the while, the scriptures were clear: God doesn’t live in houses, or temples, or structures built by the hands of men. Jesus was clear on this subject in a conversation he had with a Samaritan woman in John 4. Remember what he said, “The hour is coming when neither on this mountain in Samaria nor in the temple in Jerusalem will you worship the Father…but the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” God is out of the box, says Stephen. God will not be contained in your religious practices or your sacred buildings. God is not bound to this land, nor can He be hemmed in by the Mosaic Law.

All of this history, reinterpreted through the lenses of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, comes to a head when Stephen declares in vs. 51, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.” And that’s the
point…that was the point throughout Stephen’s entire defense. This is nothing new. God loves you, God has kept His promises, God has sent messengers and rulers and redeemers all throughout history, and over and over again people like you, the ones who should know better, turn around and reject God’s anointed. Stephen goes on: “Which of the prophets did your fathers NOT persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Now…we have to wrap up here, but I think we all get why Stephen was stoned. But let’s be clear: Stephen was not stoned for lying, or spreading lies about God or Moses or the Law or the Temple. Stephen was stoned for telling the truth. Everything he said was rooted in scripture, and everything he said revealed the lies and distortions that had gone unchallenged for centuries. The Jewish authorities don’t become enraged because Stephen lies…they become enraged because the truth that Stephen reveals is so offensive…it hits so close to home…it is so crushing…that they would rather kill the messenger than deal with the implications of his message.

Now, many scholars believe that Stephen never got a chance to finish his sermon here. At the point that Stephen makes his point regarding the collective sin of the Jewish leaders for rejecting and crucifying Jesus, who was the final and perfect Righteous One, the fulfillment of God’s promises to their forefathers…at the point when the full weight of that message hits home with the Sanhedrin…all hell breaks loose and they stone Stephen immediately.

However, had Stephen had the opportunity, we know that he would have most certainly said, “But friends…brothers and fathers…even in the midst of our rejection and our sinful history, God still loves us. Repent, therefore, and call upon then name of our Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, that you might be forgiven of your sins and brought into the Kingdom of God!”

But Stephen never had that opportunity. Instead, Stephen is slain on account of his testimony…he becomes the first Christian martyr…and there will be hundreds of thousands, even millions upon millions…who will suffer a similar fate.

Now, before I close, I want you to take a few things away to think about from this text.

1) Know your history. Stephen shows us that to defend a biblical worldview, we need to know our history. God is not bound to your experience of God. God has been active throughout history since the beginning, and human beings have been pretty screwed up for a very long time as well. There really isn’t anything new under the sun…we all remain sinners in need of a savior, and there is only one who saves: His name is Jesus. If you don’t know your history, you will likely become chronological snobs and believe that the only thing that matters is what is

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happening now. That’s naïve and dangerous. Truth is rooted in history, so study the Bible, study history, and I believe your faith, your testimony, and your outlook on life will be richly enhanced.

2) Recognize that telling the truth makes people angry when they’ve become accustomed to believing falsehood. If you know that going into a conversation, you might anticipate the need for some grace, patience, and many expressions of love to accompany the proclamation of truth. Remember, we are always striving for a balance of truth and grace. Sometimes, however, as we’ve seen in the life of Jesus and now here in the story of Stephen, we simply have to tell the truth and suffer whatever the consequences. Listen: Whatever the circumstances…tell the truth, because according to Jesus, the truth will set us free.

3) Finally, note that over and over again, it’s the people who should know better who don’t get it. It’s the people we hold in high esteem…the “authorities” if you will…who often can’t see the truth…who have “uncircumcised” hearts and ears…they simply refuse to yield to what is plainly true. I fear that we have become accustomed to deferring to the smart people…the professionals…the leaders…the people who publish books and run companies and lead big churches. But I cannot help but observe that biblically and historically…these are the very people who are often the most resistant to the truth when it is presented to them. Be careful. Be humble. Do your own homework and your own thinking and wrestle with what the Bible says, not what other people say about the Bible. Stephen was a lay person, a Greek-speaking Jewish lay person, and apparently his simple take on Biblical history was more accurate to God’s truth than the interpretation of those 70 men wearing robes who picked up stones to kill him. Seek the Lord with repentance, humility, and an eagerness to learn. Many a simple person have received profound insights and truth through God’s Holy Spirit speaking through His Word.

Again, we’ll pick up here next week. Let’s close in prayer.