

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 7:1-53 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 7:1-53 ESV

1 And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' 4 Then 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. 5 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. 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. 7 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' 8 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. 9 "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him 10 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. 11 Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. 13 And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. 14 And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. 15 And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, 16 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. 17 "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt 18 until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. 19 He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. 20 At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, 21 and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. 22 And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. 23 "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. 25 He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. 26 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?' 27 But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. 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. 31 When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 '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. 33 Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 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.' 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. 36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.' 38 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. 39 Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, 'Make for 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.' 41 And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 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? 43 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.' 44 "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. 45 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, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 49 "'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? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?' 51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 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, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

STRUCTURE (from Dr. Patrick Schreiner)

The Structure of Stephen's Sermon		
<u>Covenant</u>	<u>God's Promise</u>	<u>Rejected Servant</u>
Abrahamic (vv. 2-16)	Abraham (in Ur) / Joseph (in Egypt)	Joseph
Sinaitic (vv. 17-43)	Moses (Egypt, Midian, Sinai)	Moses
Davidic (vv. 44-50)	Solomon (temple, but more)	Amos (and the prophets)
New (vv. 51-53)	Jesus (all the earth)	Christ

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Stephen's narrative occupies from 6:8-8:1, and he will be mentioned again in 11:19 and 22:20—both in contexts where persecution forces the Gospel out from Jerusalem. Stephen's testimony marks a shift in the narrative. It represents Jerusalem's last chance before Israel's "partial hardening" sets in, and Jesus opens the floodgates to Gentiles (Rom. 11:25). This monumental transition explains why Stephen's speech contains 1014 words in the Greek text—more than twice as long as any recorded sermon by Peter or Paul!

For all his words, some have accused Stephen of lacking clarity. Why did he recite Israel's history to people who had it memorized? The context helps. Stephen is responding to the two-fold charge that he opposed the Jewish law and Jewish temple (6:11-14; 7:1). First, by reciting Israel's history, Stephen will show how his enemies were the ones rejecting Jewish law in their solidarity with the fathers' opposition to Joseph, Moses, the prophets, and now Christ. Second, Stephen will demonstrate how God's presence was always more tied to His covenant people—to Abram in Ur and Canaan and Joseph in Egypt and Moses in Egypt, Midian, and Sinai—than to a building that could never contain Him in the first place. **God binds Himself not to a place, but to a people, through covenant.** These "stiff-necked" Jews (note: not representative of all Jews) showed their true allegiance by solidarity with generations of prophet-killers rather than with the law-defending prophets themselves. They clung to the temple like a lifeboat, not realizing that God, not the temple, was their Savior.

Stephen's speech is long and complicated, but by remembering the context, we observe the "wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (6:10). Far from merely defending himself against false charges (7:1), Stephen goes on offense. He displays the proper understanding of God's temple and God's law, both of which ultimately point to Christ, whom they rejected.

Because of its length, I have broken down the text by each main character/subject.

Abraham

1 And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' 4 Then 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. 5 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. 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. 7 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' 8 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.

—“Are these things so?”: the high priest gives Stephen the opportunity to defend himself against the charges that he opposes the Jewish law and temple. Stephen goes on offense (see general commentary above).

—Stott: “The false witnesses had accused Stephen of two blasphemies, namely of ‘speaking against this holy place and against this law’ (6:13). In response to both accusations he developed a similar defense, namely that in each area he was more biblical than they. That is, the Old Testament Scriptures laid less emphasis on the temple than they did, and more emphasis on the law.”

—What boldness! Stephen could have played nice and escaped with his life. His boldness in verbally reproaching his accusers is portrayed as a work of the Spirit (cf. 6:10). He is not mean-spirited in his refutations, but rather displays that there is a time and place for exposing wicked people and broken theology.

—“Brothers and fathers”: Stephen shows humility and respect, despite the strong opposition he will soon display. When we confront evil, we should never cease to offer respect and human courtesy.

—“the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia”:

- “God of glory”: this is temple language. When the tabernacle and temple are created, we are told both times that the “glory of the LORD filled” the structure (Ex. 40:35; 2 Chron. 5:14). The ark of the covenant was especially associated with the glory of God’s presence (1 Sam. 4:21-22), for it was viewed as God’s throne (1 Chron. 28:2). God was envisioned as sitting “between the cherubim,” whose outstretched wings spread over the mercy seat (1 Sam 4:4, Ps 99:1, Is 37:16). When the LORD exits the temple in Ezekiel’s vision, we are told that “the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house” (Ezek. 10:18).
- In Stephen’s argument, the purpose is to show that God’s temple-like presence manifested in Babylon, long before there was ever a temple! Stephen’s enemies had unwittingly placed God in a box. Their own Scriptures testify that “the God of glory” is bigger than the temple!

—“before he lived in Haran... then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran”:

- According to Stephen, God appeared to Abraham in Babylon (“the land of Chaldeans”), telling him to leave everything, but Abraham took a pitstop in Haran. This pitstop is not obvious in the narration of Gen. 11:27-12:3 (because Gen. 12:1-3 occurs chronologically before Gen. 11:27-32), but it can be inferred. I preached on this in January of 2022. It is an example of Abraham—our father in the faith—being slow of heart to believe. God made the promise in Gen. 12, but the call was to leave his father’s household. Rather than doing that, Abraham’s father Terah “took” Abraham toward Canaan, and they settled in Haran (11:31). It wasn’t until after Terah died in Haran that Abraham completed his journey.
- If we want to embrace the promise of God, we must respond to the call of God. It wasn’t until Abraham (at the time, Abram) fully embraced the call to leave his father’s household that he could embrace the promise made in 12:1-3.
- “after his father died, God removed him from there into this land”: God is portrayed by Stephen as the active agent. God removed Terah from the picture to ensure Abraham’s obedience. While it’s true we have a responsibility to obey the call of God, God also sovereignly intervenes to ensure our faithfulness—“for it is God who works in you to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

—“his offspring would be sojourners”: this fits the ‘pilgrim’ theme of Acts 7. God is with His people wherever His people go. He is not bound by a temple. This is a major theme of Genesis. Every time the patriarchs try to settle, things go poorly. When they live in tents and build altars, however—worshiping God on-the-go—He is with them. We, the people of God, have always been a pilgrim people. When we try to settle—we settle for something less than God’s best. All of us are on a journey from Babylon to the New Jerusalem. All of us are waiting for the consummation of the promises. The heart so longs to “be settled”—in a dream home, in a dream job, in a painless and perfect life season—that we sometimes miss God. Until we reach the shores of New Jerusalem, we’ll never be truly settled. The religious leaders who opposed Stephen thought they had arrived because they had the temple. The temple became their excuse for not trusting God. They forgot their calling: to be a pilgrim people.

—Stott: “The connecting feature of these four epochs is that in none of them was God’s presence limited to any particular place. On the contrary, the God of the Old Testament was the living God, a God on the move and on the march, who was always calling His people out to fresh adventures, and always accompanying and directing them as they went.”

—Stott: “long before there was a holy place, there was a holy people, to whom God had pledged himself.”

—“and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place”: Stephen is addressing the issue of temple worship, but he’s working his way there. The charge against him is that he speaks against the

temple, so he shows them that the Moses generation—as it was promised here to Abraham—worshiped God at Mount Sinai before there ever was a temple. The worship of God was never confined to the temple of God. A symphony as sweet as the exodus did not require a temple for its crescendo.

—“Abraham... Isaac... circumcised him... Jacob... twelve patriarchs”: this verse provides the hinge to the next story, where Joseph is rejected by the patriarchs. It also reminds us—through the covenant sign of circumcision—that Abraham’s descendants belonged to God by covenant. As His covenant people, He will be with them wherever they go—even if they find themselves in Egypt, as Joseph soon would.

Joseph

9 "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him 10 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. 11 Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. 13 And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. 14 And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. 15 And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, 16 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.

—“and the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt, but God was with him”:

- The two themes that run through Stephen’s sermon emerge here in a single verse: (1) the rejection of God’s servants by His own people, and (2) God’s ‘mobile’ presence for His pilgrim people.
- Joseph’s rejection by his brothers foreshadows Christ’s rejection by His brothers. Stephen will imply this by his resounding conclusion in which he condemns the council: “As your fathers did, so do you” (7:51).
 - Schnabel: “the story of Israel is a story of God’s raising up leaders of his people whom Israel repeatedly failed to recognize...”
- God’s presence with Joseph thus points to Jesus, who not only “was with God” but also “was God” (John 1:1). Despite the Jews’ jealousy of Joseph—and Jesus—God remained with both. Joseph was sold into slavery and became a prince who not only forgave and saved His formerly jealous brothers, but also rescued Egypt. Likewise, our Greater Joseph, Jesus, would one day save Israel and the nations through the jealousy of His Jewish brothers who sold Him and crucified Him.

—Why does Stephen detail the first, second, and third visits of his brothers/father to Egypt? It is not just to advance the story toward Moses; he could have omitted much. Rather, he is showing how God blessed the whole nation of Israel in a foreign land—his blessing never depended upon Jewish land or a Jewish temple.

—“Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died... carried back to Shechem... laid in the tomb that Abraham bought”: why is this detail mentioned? It emphasizes that Egypt was never home for God’s covenant people. They would not be buried there. Nevertheless, this did not prevent God from meeting His pilgrim-people in their wanderings.

Moses, 1st 40 years

17 "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt 18 until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. 19 He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. 20 At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, 21 and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. 22 And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

—“time of the promise drew near... people increased and multiplied in Egypt”: God’s covenant blessing is emphasized by the mention of timing and of multiplication. Multiplication has been the fruit of God’s blessing ever since Genesis 1, where “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (1:22, 28). Thus, once again, Stephen rams home that God’s blessing never hinged on a temple, but rather on His covenant. —The covenant did not mean his people would be shielded from all suffering, though. The king of Egypt “dealt shrewdly” with them, even killing their infants. Similarly for us, God’s covenant does not mean we don’t suffer. It does mean, however, that God is always with us.

—“and he was beautiful in God’s sight”: this does not suggest that Moses was an exceptionally cute baby, although maybe he was! This expression rather suggests that Moses caught God’s attention and received His special favor. It shows that God had a plan for Moses’ life from the very beginning. God delivered Moses in infancy; in adulthood, Moses would deliver God’s people.

—Perhaps this example shows that before we deliver others, we must be delivered. Whether we can derive that from the text or not, it is definitely true. Israel is freed from slavery and God uses them to set the world free. Jesus is delivered from Herod and God uses Him to deliver us. Gal. 5:13 says that the freedom God gives us is for serving others. God sets us free; we use our freedom to serve. Another example is 2 Corinthians 1. God comforts us. We comfort others with the comfort we have received. It is generally true to the Scripture that when God delivers us it is so we can deliver others.

Moses, 2nd 40 years

23 "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. 25 He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. 26 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?' 27 But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

—Moses' life is broken down into 40-year segments, and Stephen touches on all of them. First, the segmentation of Moses' life displays God's sovereignty. Forty is the number of fullness; completion. God sovereignly ordained that Moses was brought up in Pharaoh's household; God sovereignly ordained his exile; and God sovereignly ordained the exodus. Each of these played together. Moses' connection with Pharaoh's household positioned him as a mediator between Egypt and Israel. Moses' exile humbled him so that he could be a good mediator (unlike when he killed the Egyptian). Moses' final forty years—the exodus, the giving of the law—were what the others built toward.

—I'm reminded of David's prayer: "All of my days were written in your book before any of them came to be." We need the seasons of humbling. We need the seasons of preparation. And we need the seasons of breakthrough. Everything has a season (Ecc. 3). Wisdom accepts the sovereignty of the season. O Lord, may we not be like a person who wears winter coats in summer! May we accept the seasons You ordain.

—"supposed his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand": Moses knew he had the calling of a mediator and deliverer, but he went about it the wrong way. And the people didn't understand. This launches his season of rejection. Moses and all the prophets were rejected, and they each pointed to Christ, who was rejected even more profoundly. Jesus is our Greater Moses. He offered salvation to his Jewish brothers, but they did not understand. He nevertheless purchased their salvation and became the Mediator of a better covenant.

—1 Tim. 2:5: "There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus." Just like Moses "started out on top"—in a royal household, in Egypt—Jesus started out on top too—in heaven! But Jesus humbled Himself to become like us. This humbling is mirrored in Moses' exile (7:29).

Moses, 3rd 40 years

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. 31 When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 '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. 33 Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 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.' 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. 36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.' 38 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. 39 Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, 'Make for 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.' 41 And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 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? 43 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.'

—"an angel appeared in the wilderness of Mount Sinai": Mount Sinai was not the temple, yet God appeared there.

—GK Beale in his book, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*: "Mount Sinai... approximates a temple site... First, Sinai is called 'the mountain of God' (Ex. 3:1; 18:5; 24:13), a name associated with Israel's temple on Mount Sinai. Second, just as with the tabernacle and temple, so Mount Sinai was divided into three sections of increasing sanctity: the majority of the Israelites were to remain at the foot of Sinai (Ex. 19:12, 23), the priests and seventy elders (the later functioning probably as priests) were allowed to come some distance up the mountain (Ex. 19:22; 24:1), but only Moses could ascend to the top and directly experience the presence of God (Ex. 24:2). Third, just as an altar was in the outermost section of the temple, so an altar was built at the lowest and least sacred part of Sinai, where Israel 'offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and... sprinkled [it] on the altar' (Ex. 24:5-6).... Fourth, not only does the top part of Sinai approximate the holy of holies because only Israel's 'high priest', Moses, could enter there, but it was the place where God's theophanic 'cloud' and presence 'dwelt' (Ex. 24:15-17). Fifth, earlier in Exodus God's presence at Sinai was depicted as a 'cassia tree [seneh, or bush] burning with fire, yet the cassia tree was not consumed' (Ex. 3:2). In the light of the parallels already adduced, this 'unconsumed burning tree' may be the proleptic equivalent to the lampstand-like tree in the holy place on Mount Zion, whose lamps burned continually. Correspondingly, the ground around the burning tree is called 'the place' of 'holy ground' (Ex. 3:5)."

—As mentioned in the above quote, "holy ground" reminds us too of the tabernacle/temple. God has never needed a plot of dirt or human structure to have a "holy place." God's holy place is wherever He decides—even if that is on the outskirts of a wilderness, appearing to a fugitive.

—Stott (quoting John Chrysostom): "Both when Moses was being educated in the Egyptian palace and when God appeared to him in the desert of Midian, there is 'not a word of temple, not a word of sacrifice' (Chrysostom repeats this phrase). In fact the 'holy ground' at the burning bush was 'far more wonderful than... the Holy of Holies,' for God is nowhere said to have appeared in the inner sanctuary in Jerusalem as he did in the burning bush. So the lesson to learn from the experience of Moses is that 'God is everywhere present' and that 'the holy place is there wherever God may be.'"

—"I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob": it has been emphasized throughout this narrative that our God is the God of the patriarchs and of the covenant. Christianity was not a new religion; it is the true religion. It dates back to the very beginning, and it is rooted in the covenant God made with His people. God's presence goes with His covenant people, wherever they go.

—"This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers'": this quote from Deuteronomy 18 promises that a prophet will one day arise "like me"—that is, like Moses the covenant mediator—and He will speak on behalf of God as a Greater Moses and Perfect Prophet. Jesus fulfills Deuteronomy 18. Peter already told us that (Acts 3:22). Now Stephen tells us.

—"Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt":

- It's possible to "turn to Egypt" in our hearts! Egypt was the land of slavery. When we, as Christians, are delivered from slavery to sin and yet return to it, we are like the Israelites were here.
- Israel rejected the original prophet and covenant mediator, Moses. They will likewise reject the Greater Prophet and mediator of a new covenant, Jesus.
- Thus, Stephen continues to weave between his two themes: (1) the rejection of God's servants by His own people, and (2) God's 'mobile' presence for His pilgrim people.

—"offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the work of their hands, but God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven...": this sounds a lot like Romans 1, where God hands people over to their idolatry. When we worship the work of our hands, God hands us over to it. It's the slippery slope of idolatry. In Romans 1, God "gave them up" three times to ever-increasing sin (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

—I am reminded of the quote from John Owen: "The most tremendous judgment of God in this world is the hardening of the hearts of men."

—"Did you bring me slain beasts.... I will send you into exile beyond Babylon":

- Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27, so that Israel now rejects the prophets too (cf. Acts 7:52: "which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?").
- Amos is rebuking Israel for thinking the Day of the Lord will be a day of rescue—simply because they are Jewish—rather than a day of gloom and judgment. For those who resist God, the Day of the Lord will be painful. Amos refers to the Exodus generation to show that from their day to his, Israel has rejected God and should not feel safe from God's judgment. Nine centuries later, Stephen quotes Amos to show that, still, nothing has changed. Israel feels safe, even as she teeters on the precipice of divine judgment for rejecting God's messengers and worshiping false gods.

Tabernacle/Temple:

44 "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. 45 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, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 49 "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? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?"

—"Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness":

- It's called the "tent of witness" because the law of God was placed inside of the ark as a "witness" or "testimony" against Israel for breaking it. Deut. 31:26 confirms this: "Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you."
- God was with them in the wilderness, long before the temple was ever built. The tabernacle was portable, and God was with them.

—"found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob":

- Moses built the tabernacle after the pattern shown from heaven, but David asked God to build a house. Put differently, God commanded Moses to build a portable house (the tabernacle), and David asked God to build a permanent one.
- The difference is subtle, but it indicates that God never asked for a house to start with. In fact, when David asks God to build a house, God tells him, "Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" (2 Sam. 7:4-7).
- God goes on to say (paraphrase), "You want to build me a house? The answer is no—your son Solomon will—but I like the impulse in your heart, and for that I will bless you. Rather than YOU building a house for ME, I will build a house for YOU!"—see 2 Sam. 7:12-17.
- Stephen is thus driving home the point that the temple was only a concession from God to David, since David found favor in God's eyes!

—David was not allowed to build the temple because he was a man of blood. God intended His temple to be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7), so Solomon—whose name means 'peace'—would build the temple.

—Here is God explaining it in his own words. 1 Chron. 22:8-10: "But the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth. Behold, a son shall be born to you who shall be a man of rest. I will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies. For his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days. He shall build a house for my name. He shall be my son, and I will be his father, and I will establish his royal throne in Israel forever.'"

—"Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands":

- This is often a theme in Scripture:
 - [Dan 2:34-36 ESV] 34 As you looked, a **stone was cut out by no human hand**, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the **stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth**. 36 "This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation.
 - [Mar 14:58 ESV] 58 "We heard him say, '**I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.**'"
 - [Act 17:24-25 ESV] 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, **does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything**, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.
 - [2Co 5:1 ESV] 1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, **we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.**
 - [Heb 9:11, 24 ESV] 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then **through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ... 24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with**

hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

- Comment on Dan. 2: The stone that struck the image was Jesus (cf. Lk. 20:17-18), and the image was the kingdoms of this world. The stone was made without hands because Jesus is God. He is also our new temple (cf. John 1:14; 2:19; etc.). As such, He becomes a "mountain" that fills the whole earth. The mountain and the temple were so closely related as to be one in the Jewish mind (Isa. 2:1-3; Micah 4:1-2).
- Comment on Mark 14: This statement was made by "false witnesses" (14:57), but Jesus says this in another passage (John 2:19-21). It could be that he was talking about the temple of his body, as in John 2, but they construed it to be that He was talking about the literal structure. The same misunderstanding occurred in John 2.
- Comment on Acts 17: Paul addresses not just Jewish temples but pagan ones. Not a single temple can house God, for they are all made by human hands, and God does not need us to make Him a house or serve Him.
- Comment on 2 Cor. 5:1: Paul speaks of our future resurrection bodies as a sort of eternal temple that replaces this temporary tent of our decaying bodies (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18). This would suggest that our bodies are more like portable tabernacles now, but one day they will be like a permanent temple—not to suggest we won't move around in our eternal state, but rather to suggest permanence. Paul emphasizes that our resurrection bodies will be "made without hands" to emphasize their perfection and permanence, however our current bodies are also made without hands. This is why some interpreters (a minority) understand the "building from God" to speak of the New Heavens and New Earth (cf. Rev. 21), not our human bodies. They make a good point, but the prior context is about human bodies.
- Comment on Heb. 9:11, 24: Heaven is a sort of temple, which Jesus entered as our Great High Priest to apply the sacrifice of His blood. Again, it is made without human hands and is thus perfect.
 - Beale on these verses: "To believe that Israel's temple or one rebuilt by human hands would last forever is a false view because it mistakes the symbolic temple (Heb. 9:8-10) for the real one (Heb. 9:11)."

—"Heaven is my throne...": the verse comes from Isa. 66:1-2. Now both Amos and Isaiah have testified against the council. The verse reinforces that Solomon's temple was never intended as the end-all-be-all for worship, and it never made the Jews invincible. The Jews of Stephen's day were like the Israelites who thought the ark of the covenant was a good luck charm for battle (cf. 1 Sam. 4). When the ark was stolen, it was not a sign of God's impotence but of their recalcitrance. God will not be mocked. We cannot live as we please and expect God to automatically deliver us, just because we have the right religious trappings.

—The Jews relied heavily on the temple to pat themselves on the back and say, "God is on our side"—even when they opposed God at every turn. Sure, they had religious activity. They prayed, they tithed, they worshiped. But as Jesus says, quoting Isaiah, "You worship me with your lips but your hearts are far from me." Now, my question is, how do we do this? We don't have a physical temple. But in what ways do we pat ourselves on the back and say, "God is on our side"—even as we live how we please? It seems to me like we can do the same thing, even if we don't have a temple. Our church activity and right doctrine can offer us self-assurance, but it's possible to have church activity and right doctrine, yet a heart far from God.

—Schreiner: "in his recounting of history, he [Stephen] only spends five verses of forty-nine on the temple period. What came before the temple period should inform how one views the temple. God has been near to all the patriarchs long before there was a temple."

—Where Israel's fathers worshiped gods made by human hands, Stephen's contemporaries worshiped a temple made by human hands. They idolatrized the center of Israel's worship! They worshiped a worship-center! And yet, they would have never claimed they worshiped the temple. In the same way, we can claim we worship God because we do religious things and have good doctrine. But we worship whatever our life is centered on—whatever we trust in for security (they thought they were invulnerable because of the temple)—and if our life is centered on something made by human hands, we worship that thing. Be it money or a career or even people or a place, if it is a created thing, and our life centers around it more than God, it is idolatry.

Jesus:

51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 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, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

—“stiff-necked people” depicted their stubborn unwillingness to “turn their head” so to speak, and respond to God. It is a common phrase in the Old Testament:

- [Exo 32:9 ESV] 9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.
- [Exo 33:3 ESV] 3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."
- [2Ch 30:8 ESV] 8 Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD and come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever, and serve the LORD your God, that his fierce anger may turn away from you.

—“uncircumcised in heart and ears” reminds us of the Old Covenant sign of circumcision. Circumcision was physical, but it had symbolic meaning. Moses tells Israel to circumcise their hearts and not be stubborn (Deut. 10:16); he also promises that in the latter days, God will circumcise our hearts (30:6). Jeremiah warns Israel to circumcise their hearts to avoid judgment (Jer. 4:4). He also says those who are “circumcised merely in the flesh” will be punished, accusing Israel of being “uncircumcised in heart” (9:25-26). Thus, even those who had been circumcised physically would be considered uncircumcised if they did not love God.

—“you always resist the Holy Spirit”: the Spirit leads us to repent and turn to Christ. They opposed him at every turn.

—“As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?”: Stephen’s speech mentions Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon. It also quotes or alludes to Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos. When it comes to persecution, the emphasis in the story is upon Joseph and Moses. Moses receives the greatest treatment, not only because he prophesied of the Christ, but also because they accused him of breaking the law of Moses (6:11, 14).

—Schnabel: “Those who rejected God’s servants include Egyptians (vv. 6-7), the patriarchs (i.e., Joseph’s brothers, vv. 9-10), the Israelites in the desert (vv. 35-41), the ancestors who killed the prophets (v. 52), and Jewish leaders who killed Jesus (v. 52).”

—“the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered”:

- Stephen says these people not only share in the guilt of their fathers by acting in solidarity with them, but they are even more guilty. The One they sinned against was the Righteous One Himself. And not only did they sin against Him; they betrayed and murdered Him. What boldness Stephen displays!
- “Righteous One”: a title for God in Pr. 21:12 and Isaiah 24:16. A title for Jesus in Isa. 53:11, Acts 3:14, Acts 7:52, and Acts 22:14. See below:
 - [Pro 21:12 ESV] 12 The **Righteous One** observes the house of the wicked; he throws the wicked down to ruin.
 - [Isa 24:16 ESV] 16 From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the **Righteous One**. But I say, "I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me! For the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed."
 - [Isa 53:11 ESV] 11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the **righteous one**, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.
 - [Act 3:14 ESV] 14 But you denied the Holy and **Righteous One**, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,
 - [Act 7:52 ESV] 52 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,
 - [Act 22:14 ESV] 14 And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the **Righteous One** and to hear a voice from his mouth;
- In Acts, he is often called, the “Righteous One,” and this probably alludes to Isaiah 53:11, where in the Old Testament, Jesus—the Righteous One—bears our sorrows, atones for our sin, and justifies us in the courtroom of God.
- Schreiner: “Stephen’s discourse can be understood as centering around one point: God’s transcendent presence will not be limited by any building, region, or even people group; it is found in the person of Jesus.”

—“you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it”:

- Stephen’s face looked like an angel (6:15); they rejected the law given by angels (7:52). Stephen’s angelic face reminds us of Moses’ glowing face, as He received the law passed down by angels. The council claims to stand for Moses, but they resist him—and the Holy Spirit.

- Stott: "What he did was not just to rehearse the salient features of the Old Testament story, with which the Sanhedrin were as familiar as he, but to do so in such a way as to draw lessons from it which they had never learned or even noticed. His concern was to demonstrate that his position, far from being 'blasphemous' because disrespectful to God's word, actually honored it. For Old Testament Scripture itself confirmed his teaching about the temple and the law, especially by predicting the Messiah, whereas by rejecting him it was they who disregarded the law, not he."

—The sermon actually continues until they cry out against him in 7:56, but Luke interrupts the sermon to tell us what is happening in 7:54-55. The climax in 7:56, where Stephen sees Jesus at the right hand of God, portrays Christ as seated in His heavenly temple, which was made without hands, standing in approval of Stephen's witness.

—O Lord, that we might have the boldness of Stephen! May we not care what others think, and may we only care what You think!