

Stephen Rocks!

We recently zoomed in for a close-up of Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, who starred in the birth of the Jewish people. Were it not for his sufferings and successes, the world, as we know it, would not exist. Now we zoom out to see the impact of his life in its historical context

(<http://tinyurl.com/hkcx5hm>). **Let's read Acts 6:1-7 (p. 1096, NIV).**

It's AD 35. Rome is the world's largest city. Its Empire claims 20% of Earth's census. It was the worst and best of times, leaving a legacy of languages, architecture, philosophy, law, highways and government.

Jesus of Nazareth, the scorned Messiah, has returned to heaven. His followers multiply like rabbits. Greek-speaking Jews from other lands settle in Jerusalem, having come for Pentecost where they first heard the new Gospel in their own tongue (Acts 2:5-13). Their widows are not receiving food from the native-born apostles who speak only Aramaic and Hebrew, creating some ethnic tension (1 Timothy 5:16).

So Jesus' twelve disciples commission seven men who speak Greek, are full of the Holy Spirit, and are wise and trusted (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The seven, including an evangelist and skilled debater, Stephen, relieve the apostles to pray and teach God's Word (Mark 1:35-38).

Despite warnings by religious authorities, many Jews stream to Christ, even rabbis who realize that His sacrificial death has replaced animal offerings, and that God works through various people in many places, not just with Israelites within their borders (John 4:20-24).

DISCUSS: Describe your spiritual roots and their effect on you.

Stevie (Doesn't) Wonder

Let's read Acts 6:8-15 (p. 1096, NIV).

Stephen boldly preaches in synagogues, many founded by Jews from Libya, Egypt and Turkey (Luke 2:40, 52; 24:19). Fearing the loss of their clout and unable to refute him, his foes falsely accuse him of blaspheming the temple and setting aside Moses' sacrificial systems.

DISCUSS: A Wall St. exec was fired for inviting a peer to follow Jesus. How can we prepare to take a strong stand for Christ?

The Changing of the Gospel Guard

Stephen is hauled before the 71-member, Sadducee-led Sanhedrin which had condemned Jesus to die (Matthew 26:57-67). God wanted them to hear Stephen make the final offer of the Kingdom of God which Jesus came to bring to earth (Matthew 10:5-7, 15:24, 21:43; Romans 11:15). Moses gave Israel the Law and saved them from Egypt, but that pales next to Jesus' gracious gift of dying for our sins.

Stephen taught that we cannot perfectly obey *all* Ten Commandments, so God sent His Son to do that *for* us. We no longer get our sins pardoned by a human mediator. **God now counts His Son's death as the once-for-all-forever sacrifice for all of mankind's sins.**

We become right with God not by circumcision or obeying the law or attending the temple, but as Abraham did, i.e., by *believing* and *trusting* God, not trying to *earn* His approval (Genesis 12:1-4; 15:6). This is the new *Gospel of the Grace of God* which Paul calls "the *mystery*," "the *secret*" and "*my gospel*" (Romans 2:16, 3:19-24; Galatians 1:11,12; Ephesians 3:1-12; Colossians 1:25-27).

This Gospel, given to Paul in person by the risen Christ, replaces Israel's works-based Judaism which blinded them from recognizing their Messiah/Redeemer, even while standing next to Him.

DISCUSS: How does life look when lived under God's grace *vis a vis* His laws? (2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 2:20-21, 5:1)

The Frozen Chosen

Let's read Acts 7:1-53 (p. 1097, NIV).

Instead of self-defense, Stephen recaps Israel's record of snubbing God and His messengers. He points to God's favors which took place *outside* their borders. For example, Passover *began* in *Egypt*. God gave Moses the Law in today's *Saudi Arabia* where the tabernacle was built.

Stephen recalls how Joseph kept the Jews from starvation during Egypt's famine. This, after his brothers, the patriarchs of Israel's twelve tribes, had sold him into slavery. After forty years in exile for murder, Moses led the exodus. Fifteen centuries later the Hebrews' descendants crucified their Messiah (Zechariah 12:10; John 1:11).

Today many Jews choose Jesus as their Savior, but their nation still stiff-arms Him who said, "I *am* the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*. Nobody comes to my Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

Judaism claims that as Abraham's offspring, Jews are *ipso facto* "right with God" (Matthew 3:7-12; John 8:33-59). Unconcerned with salvation or the afterlife, their goal is to be as good as possible, denying Jesus' own words that we must be *born again* by *personal faith* in Him (John 1:11-13; 3:3,17-18).

Moses' Law was given to shield Jews *from* evil. But when he delivered those stone tablets, they have Aaron make them a gold calf (Exodus 20:1-5; 32:1-4). Stephen chides the Jewish hierarchy for their hollow piety and idolizing foreign gods which condone perverted sex, temple prostitutes and child sacrifice (Romans 1:24-32)!

God disciplines and warns them, but in 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar carts them off to captivity in Babylon for seventy years. Judgment falls again in AD 66 when Rome massacres 3,600 in Jerusalem. In AD 70 Titus' Roman legions raze the city and burn the temple, leaving no stone on another, as Jesus had predicted (John 2:13-22).

Moses built the tabernacle, a portable house of worship, the forerunner of Solomon's temple, to be God's "home" (1 Kings 8:27-30). How absurd to think God can be confined to a building (Isaiah 66:1-2)!

DISCUSS: What can Steve teach us about how to live and die?

"Holy Terror!"

Let's read Acts 7:54-8:4 (p. 1098, NIV).

Stephen traces Israel's spiritual rebellion, accusing them of unfaithfulness to the God they claim to serve. Infuriated, they drag Stephen out of the city and stone him to death. Like Jesus, he asks God to forgive his killers (Luke 23:34, 46). Pelted by rocks, Stephen sees the Lord *standing* to welcome him to heaven. In Scripture "Jesus *sits*" signifies *completion* (Luke 22:69; Mark 16:19). When He *stands*, He does so to *judge* (Romans 11:25-32). He *stood* to welcome Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and to announce He was turning His attention to the Gentile world, having been rejected by Israel.

A hatchet boy during Stephen's stoning, Saul becomes a one-man death squad, having Jesus' followers jailed, beaten and killed (Acts 22:4-5,19-20; 26:9-11). But God saves this misguided zealot to, as Paul, be the chief envoy of God's grace to the Gentiles (Acts 22:1-5; Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:1-11; **Romans 10:1-13**)!

DISCUSS: What do we learn from Steve about how God works?

Joseph, Stephen, Abraham and Moses were mere mortals. But because they made themselves available to God, you and I are able to know who Jesus is and receive God's forgiveness of *all* our sins by *trusting* in what Christ did for us on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

May Stephen's story kindle a spreading fire in each of us.