

Bible Stories

STEPHEN

Mark 13:11

September 23, 2023

As the church grew, it began to experience growing pains. One source of that pain involved the distribution of food to the Jewish and Gentile widows. The Gentile widows made accusations that they were not getting their fair share of the daily food distributions. The Apostles, believing that their responsibility to the congregation was Spiritual, proposed that 7 men – known to be filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit – be given the responsibility for the physical care of the congregation. Stephen was one of those men.

Stephen had a powerful ministry in his own right.

- Acts 6:8 - Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

Some men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen {a Greek-speaking synagogue in Jerusalem comprising Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria as well as those from the provinces of Cilicia and Asia} became jealous of Stephen and intentionally got into an argument with him, but they were unable to match his wisdom or Spirit. Failing to overcome him with their intellect, these men paid some baddies to stir up the people against Stephen.

He was arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin.

False witnesses were produced, who testified that Stephen spoke against the Temple and the Law – “We heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

As the gaze of the Sanhedrin fell on Stephen they saw “that his face was like the face of an angel.” Stephen stood there, unafraid, his face glowing with the peace and calm of heaven.

High Priest: *Are these charges true?*

Stephen proceeded to give a history lesson of God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness:

Men - brothers and fathers - listen closely... While our father, Abraham, still lived in Mesopotamia, God appeared to him. 'Leave your country and your people and go to the land I will show you.' He said. Abraham settled in Haran until the death of his father. After that, God sent him to the land where you are now living. God promised Abraham that his descendants would possess the land, even though he had no children. God spoke to Abraham about the mistreatment his descendants would suffer, of their slavery in Egypt and of their deliverance. He gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. Abraham became the father of Isaac. Isaac became the father of Jacob. Jacob became the father of our twelve patriarchs.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his 10 brothers, but God was with him. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the favor of the king of Egypt so that he became ruler over Egypt. When the great famine struck the land, Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, so he sent his sons to purchase grain. On their 2nd visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was. He sent for his father and entire family - 75 people in all. Jacob went to Egypt, where he and his sons died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem.

As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. At that time, another king ruled Egypt - he claimed to know nothing about Joseph. He oppressed our people and forced them to expose their newborn sons so that they would die. It was at this time Moses was born. He was no ordinary child. For 3 months his parents cared for him. When he was eventually placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He was powerful in speech and action. When Moses was 40 years old, he saw one of his fellow Israelites being mistreated by an Egyptian. He came to the man's defense and killed the Egyptian. He thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to intervene, but the stronger man pushed Moses away and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Moses fled to Midian, where he settled and had two sons..... 40 years passed.

*One day, an angel appeared to Moses from a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. As he approached it, he heard the voice of God: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, I have indeed seen the oppression of my people. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.' Moses was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself and he led them out of Egypt. He did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for 40 years in the desert. He received living words to pass on to us. **But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and, in their hearts, turned back to Egypt.** They brought sacrifices to the god Aaron had made and held a celebration honoring their own creation. God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. Through the prophets, God accused His people of infidelity and spiritual adultery and eventually sent them into exile in Babylon. This happened, even though our forefathers had the Tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert, made from the plans given to Moses by God Himself.....*

You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him -- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.

Those who were listening became so angry that they covered their ears and rushed at Stephen. They dragged him outside the city, picking up stones as they went. As the crowd prepared to stone Stephen, they threw their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Saul stood by adding his encouragement to those throwing the stones.....

Scripture tells us that as Stephen was being stoned, he gazed into heaven and saw Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father. As the stones rained down, Stephen fell to his knees and in a loud voice cried: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And with that he fell asleep in Jesus.

What do we do with this story?

Stephen was a man full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit.

Stephen faced death without fear.

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, Stephen did not feel the need to defend himself. Instead, he proclaimed God's faithfulness and challenged his persecutors to see their own unfaithfulness against the backdrop of their ancestors recurring unfaithfulness.

Stephen knew Scripture.

Stephen was completely oriented to Jesus. He was not concerned about his own reputation. He was not concerned about his personal safety. He was not concerned about being misunderstood. He was not concerned about conflict. He was not concerned about the outcome. His only concern – His only focus – was Jesus.