

“Stephen’s Sermon”
 Pastor Sam Richards
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 Texts: Acts 7:1-60

Peter’s first sermon majored on prophecy fulfilled Joel 2, Jesus’ identity from the Scriptures especially as captured in the messianic Psalm 16 written by David, Peter’s second sermon dealt with a specific miracle (the healing of the lame man through the power of Jesus’ name) and avoided the wonders, signs and miracles alluded to in the first sermon. The second sermon cites a different source in Scripture: Deuteronomy 18 (the Pentateuch) and Genesis 12:3 (Abraham’s seed); 18:18 (sons) and 28:14 (families) which is to say, salvation history and patriarchal allusions. There is a decisive shift away from prophetic fulfillment to historical material. Perhaps this is explainable by audience analysis: the first address was to popular Judaism and the second was more to the religious believers—the Jewish leadership would figure in Stephen’s defense and it would signify a subsequent period in time, when the megachurch was making waves in the sacred city—big waves. Christianity as a sect of Judaism was exploding in terms of sheer numbers and in impact. Another way to phrase this is to say that Jesus was becoming more of a focus of Jewish opposition and the church as a social and religious institution was becoming an established thing. The passage of time would lead to this kind of development experientially and naturally.

The third apostolic sermon, preached by a spiritual giant who was a Greek convert to Christianity/ a Gentile named Stephen and it is interesting that the leadership of the food distribution appears to have been largely Gentile. This was, perhaps, to counterbalance the privacy of the Galilean/Jewish apostles who held the highest place of spiritual authority in the church. There was contention over the food distribution between the Hebraic widow and the Grecian widows with the former suspecting that the later were being favored. We don’t have a census to establish if this tension was rooted in demographic features such as a preponderance of Grecian widows. The intervention was apparently successful and church growth continued apace. Acts 6:7 added this striking note: **a multitude of the priests were obedient to the faith.** This suggests a hemorrhaging of religious workers from the temple cult to the Christian church and this would have induced suspicions, distrust and ecclesiastical tensions. The sectarian nature of religious life in the day was accentuated: yes, there were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots, two priesthoods, plus several synagogues which were assemblies resembling the church and there were groups representing class and ethnic differences. One of them, the synagogue of the Libertines made up of freed slaves from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia and they were disputing with Stephen on points of doctrine no doubt. And the synagogue unable to match Stephen’s **spirit and wisdom** hired some false witnesses to get him in trouble with the Jewish authorities: **We heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.** (Acts 6:11) The implication is that these were fabrications designed to entrap Stephen. He probably said no such things. **And they stirred up the people. And the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him and caught (arrested) him, and brought him to the council.** (v.12)

Now Stephen, as well as other Christians, were performing **great wonders and miracles** (v. 8)—like the Apostles’ healing of the man born lame which occasioned the

second sermon. Things took an ugly, anti-Christian turn with the specific charge: **We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.** (v. 14) This was nothing new and we know from the gospels that what Jesus had said, and meant, was to allude to his own body—**destroy this temple and in three days I shall raise it up** which is the doctrine of the resurrection, pure and simple. Those who mocked him countered with claiming it took forty-six years to complete Herod's renovated temple complex and suggested that Jesus had asserted he would rebuild all of that in three days. A preposterous and inaccurate assertion! Anyway the inflammatory remarks had their desired effect and Stephen defended himself with what we are calling the third apostolic sermon. And we shall see if the seven marks are evident here.

The first mark, explaining the present situation in terms of divine activity, is answered by the whole sermon. See particularly verses 51-53 where Jewish "resistance" to the Holy Spirit is declared.

Stephen begins with an astonishing reprise of Jewish salvation history, starting with the call of Abraham out of Ur, in Mesopotamia (the land of the Chaldeans). Abraham passing by way of Haran was brought into the Promised land—an inheritance promised to his descendants after their sojourn in Egypt as slaves there. Stephen covers the covenant of circumcision (on the eighth day). This is a lot more detail than we have had prior! Sometimes the convert to a faith knows more about the faith than those who come into their religion through family ties and tradition. The patriarch, moved with envy sold Joseph into slavery **but God was with him, delivered him out of his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom—the very gifts that Stephen was manifesting in his day!** And Joseph by becoming governor, delivered his whole family from famine and death.

Verse 17 **But when the time of promise drew nigh which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt.** Then came the deliverance through Moses—raised in Pharaoh's household, a prince, and learned **in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and mighty in words and deeds.** (v. 22) A master of speech, but, perhaps, not in his own eyes! At forty years of age, Moses defended one of his countrymen, and murdered a slave driver and fled into the wilderness of Midian for an additional forty years. When he was eighty, he encountered God in a burning bush and anointed him **as ruler and leader** to lead out the nation of Israel. But they refused his leadership and were rebellious, awkward and troublesome. Here Stephen makes an important transition: Moses announced **A prophet shall the Lord raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto men; him ye shall hear.**

This is the second and third mark, for Stephen is alluding to the fulfillment of this Mosaic prophecy in Jesus, the Just One in verse 52 citing his betrayal and murder. This charge is much abbreviated here, but quite expansive in Peter's sermons.

Stephen reports that Moses gave to Israel God's **living oracles in the face of rejection and opposition—they continually turned back to Egypt**—to carnality, and bondage to this world. (v. 39) Stephen then reports the gold calf incident as a result of which God gave them over to idolatry for a period of forty years during which that rebellious generation perished. The ark of the covenant was built at that time and was carried into the promised land by Joshua who drove out the Gentiles and brought in the

monarchy of King David. David wanted to build God a temple but that honor fell to Solomon.

Stephen pivots again and turns on his accusers, explaining the present circumstances now: **48 However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says** (Isaiah 66:1-2):

**49' Heaven is My throne,
And earth is the footstool of My feet;
What kind of house will you build for Me? 'says the Lord,
'Or what place is there for My repose?
50 (Psalm 102:25)'Was it not My hand which made all these things?'**

51 (Ex. 32:9; Is. 6:10, Lev. 26:41) "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 (2 Chr. 36:16) Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, mark five, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 (Ex. 20:1) you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Marks four, five and six are situated in Stephen's indictment of his accusers and the Jewish authorities (**the council**). The vindication of Jesus as our crucified and risen Lord is embodied in the vision (vv. 55-56) **he saw . . . the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. And said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God."** As Stephen expired he called out, **Lord Jesus receive my spirit. . . Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.**

When we search for mark seven, "the believe, repent and be saved clause," we do not find it. There is conviction, an admission of guilt but no repentance. Instead of belief there is rejection of Jesus as **the Just One, as Son of man** (Jesus' messianic self-designation) as the Mosaic successor, **a prophet like unto me. *Stephen, like his master, sought the forgiveness of those who murdered him for them.*** If they were saved, it would be in God's answer to Stephen's petition. And, happily, we know the answer was granted in the heart of one of Saul—later Paul—who served as the coat keeper at the execution. Stephen was struck down as a blasphemer *yet nothing in his entire sermon was blasphemous only truth.*

Amen