

19b ACTS

Let's pick up our study now in Acts chapter 7. We have seen this rather lengthy sermon, in fact this is the longest sermon in the book of Acts, and it is given great emphasis by Luke under the ministry of God's Holy Spirit, and we ask ourselves, well why am I getting this big rehash of Israelite history, and why is this a good answer to the accusation being made against Luke that he is a rabble-rousing, tradition-breaking, unbiblical bad guy? Well, we pick up here at verse 35, this Moses whom they rejected saying, who made you a ruler and a judge, is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. There are so many things in this sermon that we could talk about, like the fact that in Exodus it says that God was in the bush, here Stephen says an angel was in the bush. So which was it, God or an angel? And the answer is yes, it was God's presence, and it was manifest through an angel.

God is not an angel, but in ancient days, if a messenger spoke on behalf of his master, it was as though the master himself was speaking. You find this in the account of the Roman centurion and his servant or son, who is, the word can be used for either in Greek, who is ill, and when Jesus is going through in one account, it says that Jesus spoke to the centurion, and in the other gospel account, it says he spoke to his servant. They are the same thing, speaking to the servant, the servant speaks on behalf of his master, he is the emissary, he's the representative, and in the ancient mind, it is all the same as speaking to the master, when you speak to the trusted servant.

The same thing when Abraham sent his trusted servant, put his hand under his thigh and sent him back to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, that servant had authority to speak on Abraham's behalf and negotiate a wedding contract. Same thing here, there was actually an angel who spoke to Moses from the bush, but he spoke the words of God. He didn't say, thus saith the Lord, he said, I am the God of Abraham, I am the God of Isaac, I am the God of Jacob, Yahweh is my name, and when people ask you who I am, tell them, I am.

And the angel speaks in the first person on God's behalf, because he is the angel of the Lord, and that's his job. So, there have been a lot of accusations, people who want to try to find something to pick apart in the Word of God, come to this sermon of Stephen's, and they say there are discrepancies, there are mistakes in Stephen's history here, and this proves that the Bible has errors. If you ever run across a copy of the Believer's Study Bible, which was originally the Criswell Study Bible, and was later reprinted as the Holy Bible Baptist Study Edition, all three of those are senior editors, W.A. Criswell and Paige Patterson and some others.

It's basically a production of the Baptist community, Southern Baptist pastors and scholars got together and put that Bible together back, and it was first published in 1979, and it's been through two or three editions. But there is a great chart in that Bible

talking about all of these discrepancies and giving an explanation, these supposed discrepancies. I'll just read you a couple of them, because there's only a few of them that have any substance at all.

One is that Stephen says that there were 75 people who came down to Egypt with Jacob in chapter 7 verse 14, and when you go to Genesis 46-27 and Exodus 1-5 and Deuteronomy 10-22, all of those say 70 persons. So which is it? Is it 70 or 75? Did Stephen add wrong? Well, remember, what kind of a Jew is Stephen? Talked about it last week, talked about it this week. He's a Hellenized Jew.

He's a Greek, and Hellenized doesn't mean he's going to hell, the Hellenistic world. In Greek, the name for Greece is not Greece. It's Hellas, H-E-L-L-A-S.

I don't know if the Jews or the Christians decided to get back at them by naming the hot place Hell, but Hellas, H-E-L-L-A-S, is the name for Greece. When I visited Athens back in my traveling days as a young marine, every place I would go in a foreign country, I would try to get some memento, and I would often pick up a t-shirt because they were cheap. So when I was in Athens, I got a t-shirt, and it had in Greek these Greek letters across, and if I still have that t-shirt, if you ever see me wearing it, it has H-E-L-L-A-S in Greek letters across, and that means Greece, if you're in Greece.

So he's a Hellenized Jew. He's a Greek-speaking Jew. So what Bible is he using? What's his Old Testament? Anybody remember the name of the Greek Old Testament? It's the Septuagint, the LXX.

Well, guess what? When you go to Genesis chapter 46, verse 20 in the Septuagint, and I have it right here in my precious right hand, it says, Egananto de hui Yosef engei... You want me to read this whole thing, or just tell you what it says? Basically, what it says is that the sons of Joseph included not only Ephraim and Manasseh, but it goes on to list the two sons of Ephraim, and a grandson of Ephraim, and a son of... It adds two sons of Manasseh, two sons of Ephraim, and a grandson of Ephraim. It adds in five more people in that passage. Well, this was Stephen's Bible.

So he's just quoting his Bible in front of these Greek-speaking people who have the very same Bible he's got. And so in that Bible, there are 75 who came down, because these individuals, these sons and grandsons, were born before they came down to the land. And they are counted in some records and not counted in others.

It depends on whether or not you want to count the minors. You want to count the people under the age of 12 or not. So either answer is correct depending on how you count them.

Another discrepancy that I mentioned earlier, he says 400 years they will be oppressed and be in bondage. And when we went through Exodus, we saw this whole question of

430 years versus 400 years versus 215 years, which is it? The 400 years that are mentioned here is a slightly different period of time. I think I've explained all of this back in Exodus.

I'm not going to go back through that whole agonizing process. But it depends on what you're talking about. It depends on if you're talking about the first giving of the promise to Abraham all the way down to Mount Sinai.

Suffice it to say that from the original giving of the promise to Abraham until the going down into Egypt is 215 years. From the time they started living in Egypt in Goshen until the time they walked out on the day after the first Passover is another 215 years for a total of 430 years. Now that covenant was repeated by God on several different occasions and one of those was at the 400 year mark.

And so depending on which Genesis reference you want to go to, it can be 430, it can be 400. So there is no discrepancy. There's another issue where he says that Jacob and his sons were buried in Shechem in verse 16 and nothing is said about the burial of Abraham because you remember that Abraham bought the tomb in Machpelah from the sons of Heth and that is not in Shechem.

And Abraham and Isaac and Sarah and a lot of these others were buried in Machpelah and yet Stephen says that Abraham bought a tomb in Shechem. This is probably the toughest of these to reconcile because Jacob bought some land in Shechem, Abraham bought land in Machpelah. So the only thing I have to say about this is if it is in fact a discrepancy you have to remember that people didn't have a Bible like you and I have.

Could any one of us stand up and recount all of the history of Israel from memory having done nothing but hear it read from scrolls in synagogue on Saturday and get every single detail correct? What Luke records is what Stephen said and if Stephen said Abraham when he met Jacob that's what they put down. I have a job during the week of working with transcripts of W.A. Criswell. He preached thousands of sermons and if anybody including me who speaks on tape hour after hour after hour, week after week, year after year, occasionally you're thinking two or three sentences ahead and your mouth says one thing when your brain is thinking something else.

And this is an accurate record of what Stephen said on the occasion and evidently it's possible that he said Abraham. The people of Abraham bought it. You can say that Judah has done something when in fact it is the descendants of Judah.

You can say Abraham did something when in fact it says that Abraham bowed down to the Lord Jesus because he's a priest after the order of Melchizedek and Abraham did obeisance to Melchizedek and so therefore it shows that the Melchizedekian priesthood which Christ is a high priest of is greater than Levi because Levi was in Abraham's loins when Abraham did obeisance to Melchizedek. And so in the Semitic mind this is not an

error. It's just an error in our mind because of the way we look at it.

So there are many other things that people try to pick this apart but just remember Stephen is speaking from memory. He gives this long speech and it is correct from his Bible at the time that he spoke. But our interest is primarily in what does it mean to me? So what? Stephen gave a speech 2,000 years ago.

Why do I care? Well first of all it is a great model for us of how we should behave when we are falsely accused. I have been falsely accused. I'm sure you have been falsely accused or falsely or wrongly oppressed or attacked when we thought it was not fair, when we thought it wasn't right, it wasn't deserved.

How should we respond? This is a great model for how to respond. Instead of saying well let me tell you why you're wrong and why I'm really a great guy and you shouldn't be attacking me. Let me tell you how false these accusations are.

This man wasn't even there on the day when I was talking about Moses. How can he say that I said this? And you get into all of this he said verses I say and you know my word against your word all that. Stephen says look let's go to the Word of God.

What does the Word of God say? And he points out the fact that God from time to time does a new thing and he always marks it out with signs and wonders. When Joseph came he had a dream and there was a miraculous revelation to him that even though he was one of the youngest sons he would be the deliverer for his entire family and God revealed it in two separate dreams. Everybody said oh that's ridiculous I hate that idea.

You're stuck up. We're sick of you. Sell you to the slave traders.

Get rid of you. Tell dad you're dead and yet miraculously he does provide the salvation for the future nation of Israel. Same thing with Moses and when Israel comes out of Egypt there are these miraculous signs and wonders the like of which have never been seen before.

The ten plagues, the parting of the sea, the provision of manna, the pillar of cloud, all these mighty acts of God mark out a new thing that God is doing. In the same way Stephen implies God is doing a new thing now and you ought to pay attention to what the Word of God says about these events. Don't think that it's never happened before because it has.

So then look at verse 27. This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren him you shall hear. Now think about the time in history that Stephen is giving this little speech.

Moses was this great leader in Israel. Has there ever been another prophet like Moses? There has not. So if God said there will be another prophet like Moses that will rise up

from your brethren it's reasonable to assume that it could happen at any time because it hasn't happened yet.

Him you shall hear. It's a command of God that when this prophet comes you identify him and then you pay attention to him. This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness.

The angel spoke to him again on Mount Sinai with our fathers the one who received the living oracles to give to us whom our fathers would not obey but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt saying to Aaron make us gods to go before us as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt we do not know what has become of him. They made a calf in those days they offered sacrifices to the idol rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

So God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven as it is written in the book of the prophets. Did you offer me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during your 40 years in the wilderness? And the answer is no you didn't. You took up the tabernacle of Moloch and the stars of your God Remphan, images which you made to worship.

So I will carry you away beyond Babylon. And the interesting thing about this quote is that this is from the book of Amos over in chapter 5 verses 25 to 27 and if you look it up the last word doesn't say I will carry you away beyond Babylon it says I will carry you away beyond Damascus because Amos was prophesying to the northern kingdom of Israel. And the first if you remember your Israelite history back in 721 BC there was northern Israel there was southern Israel there was Israel and Judah in other words and the northern ten tribes were manifestly evil and so God let the Assyrians come down and take them captive beyond Damascus.

That was in 721 BC. Well in 586 BC the Babylonians came down Nebuchadnezzar came down and did the same thing to the southern kingdom and they got carried away beyond Babylon. So when Stephen does this on purpose he quotes this prophecy and this statement about the northern ten tribes who were everybody in Judah still hates them because they are now the Samaritans.

And he says you remember what the prophet said about northern Israel I'm applying it to you. Carried away beyond Babylon and he wraps up Judah with the northern kingdom. And what is he saying here about the people he's talking to.

In the same way that God gave you his truth on Mount Sinai and our fathers decided that they had a better idea and started worshipping the hosts of heaven and worshipping idols. You have made a God out of your temple worship and you've made a God out of your sacrifices here and you've got all of this ritual and all of this religion that is not real and it doesn't pertain to God anymore. It's something you've made up.

Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness as he appointed instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern he had seen. Our fathers received it and brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob with Solomon built in the house. However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands.

Now this is getting at the accusation. What is Stephen accused of? What are the false witnesses saying? Stephen is speaking blasphemous words against this temple. So now he's getting down to the point and he's saying what does scripture say about the temple? Scripture says of God the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands.

Verse 49, God says heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool. What house will you build for me says the Lord or what is the place of my rest? Has my hand not made all of these things? So Stephen quotes them scripture against these accusations. Now this is what's going to get them ticked off.

We're coming to the end of the sermon. So if I lost you partway through don't miss the ending. Look at verse 51.

You stiff-necked uncircumcised people. You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and in ears. Now to call somebody uncircumcised in Israel is just the worst insult.

It's like calling them a pimp. You godless pimps. I mean that's kind of a bad word in our society but uncircumcised was a bad word in Israel.

I don't know any other way to get this across to you. He has just insulted them to their face. He says you people, he's just taking the gloves off and saying look, gave you the history lesson, told you what the Word of God says.

You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit just as your fathers did. So do you.

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the just one of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers. Not much sugarcoating on this message. Who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.

They're getting new information from the same Holy Spirit and they're not paying attention to it either. So look at verse 54. What do you think the response is going to be? When they heard these things they were cut to the heart.

Now where have we heard that phrase before? Remember Peter's first sermon on the day of Pentecost? They were cut to the heart and what was their reply? What shall we do? How can we make this right? Peter says you've just crucified the Lord of glory. They

were cut to the heart and they said what do we need to do? How can we fix this? These men are cut to the heart and they gnashed at him with their teeth. He being full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and he saw the glory of God and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Every other New Testament passage pictures the Lord Jesus Christ sitting at the right hand of God. If you've ever seen throne rooms and kings and princes and things, what does it mean when the king or when a prince stands up when someone comes into view or comes into the throne room? It's a great honor isn't it? It's a mark of respect. You only do that for someone who is highly esteemed that the royal personage would stand rather than remain seated and you get the idea that the Lord Jesus Christ is honoring Stephen because he stands up at his father's right hand when he sees Stephen.

Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he said look I see the heavens opened and I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Well that was totally the last straw for these people. They cried out with a loud voice.

They stopped up their ears and they ran at him with one accord. Do you get the picture? These people are just cramming their hands over their ears and running at him saying tell us no more. We are sick of listening to you and they grabbed him and they carried him outside of the city and they stoned him.

The witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. I will tell you that stoning someone is work because you don't use little grenade sized stones to kill someone. You have to pick up big rocks that will break bones and that will crush flesh and that will do some serious damage.

So they take him outside the city to a rocky place where there are lots of these watermelon sized boulders and they're picking these boulders up and they're throwing them at him and they're in a ring and they're all throwing these great huge stones at him. If you think about it, it takes a while. You've got to knock a guy down and then you've got to keep hitting him and hitting him and you've got to hit him in the head and hit him in the face and hit him in the ribcage and when they're mad at someone they don't aim for a mortal blow.

They want to break his legs and break his arms. Well if you've ever lifted up boulders of this size you know they're heavy and it's work and after the first few they're hot and sweaty and they start taking off their clothes. They say I'm gonna need this cloak back when I get all finished murdering this guy and so they look for somebody to keep watch over the clothes and not let somebody run off with all of them.

Well there's a young Pharisee standing there in his self-righteous arrogance and he's too good to participate. He's not going to stone the man but he's watching and they said well

if you're not going to pick up a rock you watch the clothes. Well that young man is Saul who will become the Apostle Paul.

He's standing there and he sees this. He has heard the testimony of Stephen. He has heard this Old Testament argument, this preaching of the Word of God and it cuts him to the heart as well but he doesn't respond on this occasion.

He doesn't. It is as though this message is going to have to come to him a second time before he will respond just as it does so often to the nation of Israel. So they laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul and they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying Lord Jesus receive my spirit.

Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice. Notice they still haven't knocked him down with these big rocks but he kneels down and he says Lord do not charge them with this sin. Now what kind of an attitude does that take? There's only one other person I know of that has had that attitude as he was dying.

Who was that? It was the Lord Jesus on the cross when he says Father forgive them for they know not what they do. He said Lord do not charge them with this sin and when he had said this he fell asleep. And consistently in the New Testament you find the death of believers pictured as sleep.

Now does this mean that our soul falls asleep and there is some great sleeping chamber where all of the souls are in suspended animation? Not really. It is the biblical way of telling us that when we die we will lose track of time. When you fall asleep at night and then you wake up the next morning you're not sensitive to, you're not aware of the passing of time are you? It seems as though I just fell asleep.

I don't remember the ticking of the clock and the minutes going by and the hours going by. It just seems like it was such a short time ago I was awake and suddenly it's morning. And I think this is the biblical way of telling us that when we die we will be absent from the body and then our next perception is going to be face-to-face with the Lord and that will be at the rapture.

If we perish before the Lord returns we will be in our hospital bed or we'll be at the front bumper of the truck or whatever it is that gets us. And when we lose consciousness we will regain consciousness as we come up out of our grave to meet the Lord in the air. And we'll look down and we'll see those who are alive and remain trying to catch up with us.

As it says in Thessalonians, in a moment in the twinkling of an eye the dead in Christ will rise, we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them. And so it's pictured as sleep. It isn't something to be afraid of.

As a believer we recognize that God is checking us out of this life to take us into the

next. So all of the stuff you hear about disembodied souls floating around interminably waiting for the rapture and so on, how does that comport with what the Bible says about he fell asleep? Well there are people who say well from our point of view they fall asleep but from their point of view they're in conscious bliss or whatever. Well people will have their own ideas about that.

But here's the main thing we want to look at in this regard. Stephen preaches this message and he says look you need to recognize that God changes things in a radical way from time to time through history. He did it in Abraham's day.

He did it in Joseph's day. He did it in Moses' day. He did it in David and Solomon's day.

And he says he's doing it in our day, in his current day. There are people who still haven't heard Stephen's argument and believed it. There are people today who think that the church is really just kind of an extension of Israel.

Who believe that we are going to go through the tribulation. Who believe that Jesus will not come back for us until the second coming when he sets up his kingdom. And the reason they do not understand what we understand about the 69 weeks of Daniel that have already gone by and week 69 stopped at the time that Jesus was crucified.

And there is seven years left to run that has not happened yet. And it's all about Israel. There will be a hundred and forty four thousand people, twelve thousand assigned to each tribe in Israel.

The church is not mentioned from Revelation 4 through Revelation 20. And they don't understand it. They think no God just widened his program.

It's just an extension and a slight modification. No Stephen says it's a new thing. And he says get used to it.

Look at it. If we do not understand the difference between Israel and the church, there's very little we're going to be able to learn from the Word of God. Because we are in Christ.

Old Testament saints, we're not. We are the body of Christ. We are the bride of Christ.

We are the possession of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are chosen in him before the foundation of the world. There are so many unique things that are your privilege and my privilege in this age.

And it ought to wake us up. We ought to say, you know what, I don't know how many days are left in my life. But I need to devote them to getting ready for the infinitude of days that is coming up when the Lord Jesus returns for me.

I need to listen to the message of Stephen and not miss it. I don't want to wait and not

get the message until the second time the Lord Jesus comes. Let's get it the first time.

Let's get it right and learn from the mistakes of others and redeem the time and use the days of our lives productively. Building temples, setting up money changer tables, looking for fame, looking for satisfaction the way these people in the synagogue of the Greeks here are doing, the synagogue of the freedmen. They're not free of anything if they miss this message of Stephen.

We need to know who we are and we need to know why we're here. We can and have the great privilege of sharing the gospel with other people but that's not why we're here. We are here to have the image of God restored in our souls, to be equipped and ready to rule and reign with Christ in his kingdom, to serve him and to reflect his glory both now and in the age to come.

Let's close here in a word of prayer and we'll pick up next time in Acts chapter 8. Father we thank you for the great privilege you have given us of living in this age. We thank you for the information you have provided for us so clearly in your word. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will impress it on our hearts and on our minds so that we will live in a way that is pleasing in your sight and we will not only reflect your glory but as Stephen did, see your glory in the heavenly realms.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.