

## **CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

### **DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 8 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 7**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Stephen, one of The Seven, who was chosen to “serve tables”, entered into a debate with some Greek-speaking Jews. The nature of their debate was not mentioned but the fact was that whatever they were debating, they could not refute Stephen’s arguments. They then resorted to dishonest means by instigating men to falsely accuse Stephen for blasphemy (or speaking evil) against Moses, God and the Temple in Jerusalem (6:11, 13). Stephen was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin, the highest religious authority of the Jews. The charge against Stephen was centred on “this Jesus of Nazareth” that He would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem, and change the laws given by Moses (6:14).

The high priest asked him, “Are these things so?” (v.1). Almost an entire chapter was devoted to Stephen’s response. A study of his speech shows that he was actually conducting an apologetic discourse on the Christian faith, especially against Judaism. Knowing that he was speaking to a council of seventy members who knew the Scriptures (the Old Testament), he based his reasoning on that authority. He had to show from Scriptures that he

was not guilty of blasphemy against Moses, the Law and “this holy place” (The Temple and Jerusalem). Stephen took them through two thousand years of Israel’s history to show them how God progressively revealed Himself through His words and actions.

In order to better understand Stephen’s speech, one must keep in mind the charge against him. In his message, he stressed three major themes: (1) God’s dealings with Israel, beginning from Abraham to Joseph, reveal that God’s work is not confined to the geographical land of Israel (vv.2-16); (2) God’s presence had always been with His people even outside Jerusalem and the Temple, and Israel had repeatedly rejected the deliverers whom God had sent (vv.17-43); and (3) God’s dwelling among His people was not confined to the Jerusalem Temple (vv.44-50). Having shown his Sanhedrin hearers their lack of proper biblical understanding of the Scriptures, Stephen concluded his speech by charging that they were the guilty ones (vv.51-53). On that note, his hearers were extremely enraged. They dragged him out and stoned him to death (vv.54-60).

#### **COMMENTARY**

##### **God’s Working with Abraham and the Patriarchs**

Stephen began by relating that the “God of glory” appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he went to live in Haran. The term “God of glory” was used to show that he was referring to the same God whom they worshipped.<sup>1</sup> The thrust of Stephen’s

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 40:35 And **Moses** was not able to

argument at this initial stage was to highlight that the worship of God has not been confined to Jerusalem or the temple only. Just as God had been with Abraham in Mesopotamia and later in Haran, He was with Isaac, Jacob and the twelve patriarchs (v.8). God also had said to Abraham that his descendants would become slaves in a strange land (Egypt) for four hundred years, after that God would deliver them (v.6). The patriarchs were jealous of Joseph. They rejected and sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and through him, God delivered His people from famine and suffering. Stephen's point was that God was active not just in "this holy place"—the temple and Jerusalem—but in Egypt as well.

### **God Came to Moses in the Desert of Midian**

Stephen's next account about Moses is the longest part of his argument. He narrated the life of Moses in three periods of forty years each. First, Moses was born in Egypt. He was nourished by his parents for three months. After that, he was raised in Pharaoh's palace where he learned all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was "mighty in words and deeds" (v.22). When he was forty years old, he purposed in his heart "to visit (Greek, *episkeptomai*)" his brethren who were slaves in Egypt (v.23). It was not merely a visit to "go and spend some time" with them, but also to look and see what he could do to help them. At that visit, he saved one of his compatriots by killing an Egyptian taskmaster. He thought that his fellow Jewish brethren would understand that God had chosen him to

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deliver them, but they "thrust him away" (v.27). The word "thrust away (Greek, *apothoomai*)" means to "repudiate, reject, refuse." Moses fled to the land of Midian, where he married and had two sons. This started his second period of forty years. During that time, he tended his father-in-law's sheep. At the end of the forty years, the angel of the LORD (Yahweh or Jehovah) appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush in Mount Sinai. When he drew near to the burning bush, God spoke to him. God identified Himself as the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. God told Moses to take off his shoes for the land where he stood was holy ground (v.32). Stephen placed emphasis on the holiness of the place where Moses stood. The import is that where God is, the place is holy ground. God appeared to Moses in the land of Midian and revealed to him that God would send him back to Egypt to save His people (v.34). Stephen repeated what he had just said so that his hearers could not miss. He emphatically reiterated that this same Moses whom they had said, "Who made thee a ruler and a judge", was the one sent by God to be a ruler and a deliverer of Israel (v.35).

This began the third period of Moses' life and work. Stephen changed "judge" (Greek, *dikastes*), to "deliverer or redeemer" (Greek, *lutrotes*). This is significant. The role of judges in Israel was not merely as an adjudicator but also as a deliverer of the people from their enemies. Here Stephen stressed the deliverance aspect thus showing that Moses was from the same line as Joseph. God appeared to Moses in the desert of Mount Sinai. This demonstrated indisputably that God was with Moses outside "this holy place",

that is, outside Jerusalem and apart from the temple. Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, with signs and wonders. He led them through the Red Sea and the wilderness for forty years.

This is the same Moses who said to the “church” (that is, the community – “called out ones” – of God’s people) in the wilderness that God would raise up from among them a prophet who would be like him and that they should obey him (v.37). God spoke to Moses in Mount Sinai and gave him the oracles to be handed down to the present generation. Stephen then pointed out that their forefathers rejected Moses and caused Aaron to make gods in the form of a golden calf and worshipped it. God in judgment gave them over to their idolatrous worship of Moloch and Remphan, which were the Ammonite and Phoenician gods respectively (v.43).

Stephen has demonstrated that God had progressively appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia and Haran, then later in Canaan, and to Joseph and to Moses in Midian, Egypt and in the desert of Sinai. All these appearances of God were made outside Jerusalem and the temple. Moreover, Stephen showed a high regard for Moses and the oracles, which God gave to them through him. Stephen’s accusers had used “this” scornfully to refer to Jesus (6:14), and their forefathers also used the same to dismiss Moses who was late in coming down from Mount Sinai (v.40). But Stephen used “this” to refer to Moses for a different intention (vv. 35, 36, 37, 38, 40), that is, to show that Moses whom God sent as their deliverer performed great things. There is no question that Stephen did not speak ill of Moses.

### **God’s Dwelling Is Not Confined to the Temple**

Stephen affirmed that their fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness. God was the originator of the tabernacle. He designed it in detail. The tabernacle was then brought in “with Jesus” (that is, Joshua) into the land, which was occupied by the Gentiles whom God drove out. The tabernacle was in the land until the time of King David, who desired to build a temple for God. The temple was later built by Solomon, David’s son. Once again, Stephen contrasted the tabernacle, which originated from God, and the temple, which originated from David, a human being. While there was nothing wrong in the idea of building the temple, God approved of it and even blessed David, but Stephen asserted “the Most High” does not live in man-made temples. Stephen used Solomon’s own words. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon prayed and said (1 Kings 8:27): *“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?”* Then Stephen quoted the words of prophet Isaiah who declared (Isaiah 66:1): *Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?”* God had made all things. Stephen’s argument is quite clear that “the Most High” could not be confined or contained in a man-made structure. Stephen proved that where God is, that is holy ground.

### **Stephen Charged the Sanhedrin for being the Guilty Ones**

Having built his case, Stephen suddenly turned against those who sat

in judgement of him. In presenting his argument, he had used the phrase “our fathers” to refer to their ancestors (vv. 1, 11, 12, 15, 19, 39, 44, 45). He identified himself with them. But now he distanced himself from them. He accused them (vv. 51-53): “ye stiffnecked . . . ye do always resist the Holy Ghost as *your* fathers. . . . Which of the prophets have not *your* fathers persecuted? . . . ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.” Stephen was direct and assertive. His hearers were like their ancestors who had grieved the Holy Spirit. They had rejected the “Just One”, none other than Jesus, their Messiah, now betrayed and murdered. Stephen further charged that they were the ones who had received God’s law and had not kept it. They were the ones who had spoken blasphemously against Moses and the Law and against the temple.

When they heard Stephen’s charge, they “were cut to the heart” (v.54). They were gnashing their teeth in a frenzy of rage at him. But Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked steadfastly up to heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God (v.55). In many passages, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 10:12). But here, Jesus was standing. Jesus was standing to help His suffering servant. While his accusers stood up before the Sanhedrin to accuse Stephen, the Lord Jesus Christ stood up to be his Advocate par excellence! And as Stephen saw the glory of God and exclaimed, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God”, his enemies could take it no more. They shouted loudly to drown his words, shut their ears, dragged him out of the city, and

stoned him to death. As they stoned him, Stephen called upon God and asked the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit. With his last breath, he cried out, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” With that, he fell “asleep” and woke up in heaven!

### PRACTICAL VALUE

These last words of Stephen show that he is like the Lord Jesus Christ. He prayed a similar prayer for his enemies. He showed a demeanour of calm, hope and kindness that faith in Christ Jesus imparts. In Stephen, we see the fruit of the Spirit fully manifested—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (Galatians 5:22-23). Stephen is true to his faith in Christ; he was prepared to seal his faith with his blood. He gives us a glimpse of his personality and character.

Stephen’s use of Scriptures is instructive. He understood the Scriptures and applied them appropriately to the situation he was in. He believed in the authority of the Scriptures. While his opponents knew the Scriptures, they seemed only to know them academically, whereas Stephen saw them as living words and truth that could save him here on earth and beyond. This was because Stephen’s faith was matched by his actions. Is the message of the gospel of Christ manifested in our daily lives?

Stephen’s knowledge, use and understanding of the scriptures revealed that he knew how to decipher the Word of truth. If we want to teach others, we must also know, understand and correctly interpret the Word. AMEN.

### DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Daily Readings

**Monday:** Acts 7:1-16; Romans 4:11-17.

**Tuesday:** Acts 7:17-43; Hebrews 1:1-2; Hebrews 3:1-6.

**Wednesday:** Acts 7:44-50; Hebrews 9:24-28.

**Thursday:** Acts 7:51-53; 2 Corinthians 10:5.

**Friday:** Acts 7:54-60; Luke 12:8; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58.

#### Discussion Questions

1. What point was relevant to Stephen's defence when he spoke about God's dealing with Abraham (vv.1-7)?

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2. What are the parallels between Joseph and Moses and the Lord Jesus Christ?

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3. What was Stephen's understanding about the Temple (41-50)? How should this affect our understanding of our "temple" today in the NT era?

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4. What different charges did Stephen make against the Jewish leadership in the Sanhedrin? What are the positive lessons for us?

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5. What can you say about Stephen's character and life from this chapter?

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6. Was the prayer of Stephen answered by God? Can we pray the same kind of prayer today for our enemies?

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