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Acts 6:1 - 7:60



Acts - Steve Gregg

In Acts 6-7, Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church, is appointed along with six other men to oversee the physical needs of the growing church. Stephen gives a powerful sermon, focusing on the history of God's involvement with and revelation to Israel, criticizing the Jewish religious establishment, and affirming the universal scope of God's activity and revelation. Stephen is ultimately accused of blasphemy against the temple and is stoned to death, but not before seeing a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The story highlights the challenges faced by the early church and the importance of utilizing the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the benefit of the body of Christ.

Transcript

All right, let's turn to Acts chapter 6. It's quite a shorter chapter than the ones we've been looking at, fortunately, which means we will hopefully get into chapter 7 and through it too. 7, unfortunately, is a very long chapter. It's probably the longest chapter, 60 verses, so it kind of compensates for the shortness of chapter 6. Chapter 6 and 7 are really the story of Stephen.

Stephen's the first martyr of the Christian church, but there will be thousands more to come. Stephen was, he gave a very long sermon, which is what makes chapter 7 so long. It contains his sermon.

But chapter 6 introduces him in the context of a larger group to which he was a part, a group of seven men who were chosen for a special task in the church. Now Stephen and Philip were two of those men, and they went beyond that special task. I believe they probably performed that task very adequately.

But God used them beyond their original assignment as well, as we shall see. And Stephen, one of these men, is the focus of chapter 6 and 7, and then Philip, another of these men, is the focus of chapter 8. Once you get past that, we get into the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and he becomes, of course, the primary focus of the rest of the book. But we've been reading about the apostles and all that they did.

We read that they bore witness to the testimony of Christ, the resurrection of Christ.

They did signs and wonders. They got arrested.

They got freed. It's all about the apostles. The apostles were the main, frankly, the only official ministers of the church in the early days.

But the church, as is inevitable in a community of people that's growing so large, began to take on a number of functions. Not only did they have to convert people and disciple people and feed people, but there was a growing need for the distribution of the goods to the poor. And Luke has twice previously told us that this was an important feature of the early church.

But now we find that the size of the church and the small number of persons running the church, namely 12 apostles, it just got to be overwhelming. And the needs of the poor began to be a problem. Not that it was a problem the church didn't want to handle well.

It's simply a problem that was hard to administrate with so few men in charge. And so for the first time in church history, we begin to see a division of labor, a distribution of responsibilities in ministries of different kinds. Paul would later speak about this as under the metaphor of the body of Christ.

There are some people who are a hand or a nose or a foot or an eye or an ear. These have different functions. They are gifted differently.

Like a body has different parts that are designed and made capable of doing different things that other members of the body cannot do and don't do. So we begin to find that in the body of Christ, it's not just the apostles. It's not just the 12 superstars and the peasants, you know, the thousands and thousands of peasants who have nothing to do.

But rather, as it was later understood in Paul's day, when Peter wrote his epistle, 1 Peter, he sees that there is a tremendous division of labor and that every person in the body of Christ has something to do. Not everyone's going to be an apostle or a prophet even. And Paul actually says that in 1 Corinthians 12, are all apostles or all prophets? No, they're not.

There's a whole bunch of other gifts too. But everyone has a gift. That is, the Holy Spirit has chosen each person for a task and has given that supernatural anointing to perform that task so that when all the members of the body are doing what they are assigned to do, then, of course, the whole body is functional.

Whenever you have a body that some of the members are not functioning, you've got paralysis. You've got incapacity. And so that was beginning to happen here because there was only really one group of ministers of any kind.

And they were busy, very busy. And the things they were busy about were the things that were arguably, initially, the most important things. Get people converted, get

people disciplined.

But now there were more mundane needs that needed to be met. Human beings, Christians, have two sets of needs. We have the need for spiritual nurture, but we have the need for physical bodies to be maintained as well.

There are physical needs of the church and spiritual needs of the church. The apostles have been trying to cover both bases. And the meeting of physical needs had to do with helping the poor by redistributing money that was donated by the rich.

But the apostles, therefore, were not only preachers and teachers and prisoners as they went to jail and things like that. They were also the administrators of everything. And that just wasn't working out.

It turned out they didn't do all things well. It's the latter responsibilities, taking care of the poor, making sure the physical needs of everyone were met, that they really kind of dropped the ball about. And that's what we read about in chapter 6. Now, Hebrews and Hellenists are contrasted in these chapters.

Hellenist comes from the word for Greek. But this is not referring to Greek people because the Gentiles were not yet evangelized at this point. Bible scholars are fairly much in agreement that the Hellenists were the Greek-speaking Jews.

And the Hebrews refers to the Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, which is also sometimes called Hebrew. And so it would be largely the Palestinian Jews, the ones whose parents and grandparents had lived in Israel for centuries, or at least for generations, who were the Aramaic local speakers. And the ones referred to as the Hebrews here.

But the Hellenists would be people whose either themselves or their parents or grandparents perhaps had immigrated from other lands, from the Diaspora. They were people from the Diaspora who spoke Greek because the kingdom of the Romans was a Greek-speaking kingdom. Because Alexander the Great, who had ruled the Greek Empire before the Romans were there, had taught everyone Greek and made them learn Greek and speak Greek.

So if you lived outside of Israel, or even if you lived in Israel, you would know Greek. But if you lived outside of Israel, you probably wouldn't know Aramaic. And if a Jewish people from a Gentile land who spoke Greek would move to Israel, they wouldn't necessarily learn Aramaic because they wouldn't have to.

Everyone knew Greek. It's like when I was in South America, I was hoping to learn a little bit of English, but I was in an English-speaking enclave. And we just spoke English all the time.

I didn't learn a word of Spanish. I kind of wished I would have. But when people speak the language you already know, we're pretty lazy about learning a language that we don't need to use to communicate with people around us.

And so even Greek-speaking Jews moving to Palestine, where the Palestinians spoke Aramaic, the Palestinians also spoke Greek. Everyone did. So there were Jews in Israel that didn't know the Hebrew language.

They had their own synagogues, of course, because the Palestinian Jews met in synagogues that where the liturgy was done and the scriptures were read in Aramaic. Whereas in the Greek or the Hellenist synagogues, these were Jews whose ancestors had come from other lands and who were Greek-speaking. So the liturgy was in Greek.

And this was not a big cause of division necessarily. That is, the Palestinian Jews, the Hebrews, did not necessarily look down with great criticism on Greek-speaking Jews. They were, after all, Jews.

They weren't like Samaritans, after all, or Gentiles. They were Jews. They worshiped the same God.

They were circumcised. They were Jewish by ancestry. But they did kind of have a cultural divide there because they met in separate synagogues, spoke different languages.

And in all likelihood, the Hellenistic Jews had certain Greek customs that their ancestors had brought with them, whereas the Hebrews would be more strictly followers of the Pharisaic teachings and so forth. In any case, when Jews in Jerusalem were converted, there were Hellenists and Hebrews among them. So the church was made up of both of these groups.

And the Hebrews, a complaint was lodged against them. The Palestinian Jewish Christians in the church were complained against because there seemed to be favoritism shown to them, to their widows, when the distribution to the poor was being made by the apostles. And the Hellenists felt like their widows were being neglected or at least not given the same degree of care.

Now, it's totally unlikely that this was delivered on the apostles' part. It seems it'd be wrong to think that the apostles, because they were Palestinian Jews, deliberately showed favor to Palestinian widows. It's more that, in all likelihood, the apostles were simply not keeping track of things well enough.

And by default, things were not being done equitably. And it was brought to their attention. And they didn't like the fact that it wasn't being done equitably.

They wanted to fix it. They had a good intention. It says the Hellenists made this

complaint because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

Now, serving tables is not really what they were supposed to do. But to make sure there's food on people's tables was, you know, the object of the distribution. And, you know, serving tables, they're not saying it's not a good work.

But it's not our work. Jesus appointed us to be witnesses of his resurrection. That's what we're trying to do.

And we shouldn't leave that duty to do this other. Even this other one seems to be neglected. We can't really give more time to it because Christ has given us another assignment.

So we need to appoint others to take care of this part that we're not doing well. We recognize our limitations here. And so we need to find people who can concentrate on this part that we are not doing well.

Stephen and Philip, the first two on the list, were probably named first because we're going to get more information about them. They actually were very significant in other ways besides taking care of the distribution. They both became preachers.

Stephen became an apologist. Philip became Philip the Evangelist. Both of them, like the apostles, did signs and wonders, which is something that you don't find very many people in the Book of Acts doing.

In fact, as far as I know, only the apostles and Stephen and Philip, and we might say Ananias who healed Saul's blindness, only those people are recorded doing signs and wonders. There may have been many others who did, but we're not told of them. And Stephen and Philip were among those exceptional ones who, in addition to doing administrative work, they also did preaching work and miracle work.

They were like junior apostles in a way, but they were not assigned to be that. They were assigned simply to make sure that the bookkeeping was done right and that the food was distributed fairly. And they apparently were competent in that area.

And the requirements for doing that was a man had to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Now, a lot of times a church will make a man, you know, the bookkeeper, the accountant, or give them some responsibilities without any concern about whether that person is filled with the Spirit. If he happens to be a competent accountant or something like that, well, he's the man for the job.

Is he filled with the Spirit? Who cares? Why do you need to be filled with the Holy Spirit to keep books? To do administrative work, why do you need to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Because what they were doing was ministry. It was the work of the body of Christ. It was a different kind of work of the body of Christ than what the apostles were going to

be doing.

But the body of Christ has many jobs to perform, and only God can do God's work. Only the Holy Spirit can qualify someone to do the spiritual work of the body of Christ. And we do find that Paul later in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 lists gifts of the Spirit, that he says each person has a gift of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has distributed them according to his will. He lists nine gifts in chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, all of which seem to be, well, most of them seem to be speaking gifts. In Romans 12, he lists quite a few gifts, of which many of them are not speaking gifts.

The gift of giving, the gift of helps, the gift of administration, the gift of leadership. These are gifts that aren't particularly have to do with talking, helping, giving, leading, administrating. These are like practical things that minister to the physical needs of the body.

The gifts that have to do with speaking minister to the spiritual needs, because man should not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And so as the preachers would preach the word of God, the spiritual feeding of the church addressed the spiritual hunger and need of the church. But there were still people who had physical needs, and there were others who had gifts of helping and giving and so forth that met those needs.

All of those are called charismata, gifts of the Spirit or gifts of grace, more literally, in the Bible. And they are all among the kinds of gifts that God has distributed. And everybody in the church has one or another of these gifts.

Some might have more than one, but everyone has at least one if they're truly a part of the body of Christ. Now, Peter also speaks about the gifts. This same Peter who's making this arrangement at this time in Acts chapter 6 wrote a letter later on about gifts.

I mean, part of it was about gifts. It wasn't primarily about that. But in 1 Peter chapter 4, verse 10 and 11, this is important to our point, 1 Peter 4, 10 and 11, Peter says to the Christians, As each one of you has received a gift, minister it.

The word minister means serve. That's an old English word that means serve. Serve with it.

Use it to serve. You have a gift, use it as a means of serving. To one another as good stewards of the manifold.

Manifold means many-faceted, many-sided. Grace of God. What he's saying is the grace of God distributed to the church manifests in various ways.

There's many manifestations of the grace. Each gift of grace, the word charisma, which

is the word that's used in Scripture for the gifts of the Spirit. The literal meaning of charisma is gift of grace.

God gives grace to you to enable you through the Spirit to minister, to serve. He says now you need to be a good steward of that grace that's been given to you. As you've received a gift of grace, use it to serve.

And thus be a good steward of that which is entrusted to you of the grace of God. Then verse 11, he breaks it down. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.

That is, let him speak as one who's speaking by the power of the Spirit, like a prophet. If anyone serves, again ministers means serves, which is in contrast to speaks. You have gifts, you might be a speaker, you might be a server.

There's two categories of gifts. Those that involve speaking, those that involve serving. The speaking ministers to the spiritual needs of the church directly, the serving to the more physical needs.

He said if anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone serves, let him do it as of the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified. Now the seven men chosen in Acts chapter 6 were chosen to serve.

But Peter says if your gift is in serving, do it as of the ability that God supplies. In other words, even if you're doing a practical, mundane kind of service in the physical realm, if you do it for the glory of God, if you want to do it to the glory of God, it's going to have to be done by the power that God gives you, which is from the Holy Spirit. That's the gift that God gives you.

Now you might say, well, I'm pretty good at fixing cars. Is that a gift of the Holy Spirit? Well, it's probably a natural ability. But if God happened to guide you into a situation where you are fixing cars for Christian widows and Christian single moms, and if you're doing it as a service to the body of Christ, then that's a gift of serving.

The ability itself might be a natural ability, but your use of it as a function to minister to the body of Christ becomes a spiritual activity. And if your gift is hospitality or your gift is fixing things, building things, showing mercy is one of the gifts, like a nurse or someone caring for somebody who's in need, those kinds of things, there are natural abilities to do those things. People who are not Christians do all those things, and sometimes they do them quite well.

But only when it's done as the gift that God has given you to do. It doesn't mean you're doing supernatural things when you're turning the wrench or the pipe wrench. It means that the Holy Spirit is guiding you, enabling you, making this into a spiritual offering that you're doing for the spiritual and the needs of the body of Christ.

And when somebody really does have a gift in those areas, you can very often tell, because even though all they're doing is sweeping a floor or cooking a meal or something like that, it's a blessing. It's more of a blessing than some other people doing the same thing might be. It's like the Holy Spirit, it's an anointed service offered, and it's really a spiritual offering.

You can tell, for example, some people definitely have a gift of hospitality. Some people don't. Now, a person who doesn't have a spiritual gift of hospitality might be in the position to have to host people in their home, and they may try very hard to be very hospitable.

But somebody who doesn't have that gift, it often feels awkward. They say make yourself at home, but you don't feel like you're at home. There's something about it different.

It's not really their gift. They can do it, but there's no spiritual blessing in it. There's no special grace in it.

And so the men who were to do this service of distributing food to the poor, that's just a serving kind of a gift, although two of them got involved in preaching too. But even though it's only serving, they had to be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Wisdom being probably the competence to do the job well.

But this filled with the Spirit is first, the first priority, because everything that's done as a ministry has to be done through the Holy Spirit's agency, even if it's a practical service offered. And so the apostles, and we'll concentrate on what we're supposed to concentrate on. We'll concentrate on the Word of God and prayer, and we'll delegate to these men.

So we have the first division of labor to be officially set aside. We usually call these seven men the deacons. Now, actually, the New Testament never calls these men deacons, really, though there's nothing to forbid it.

The word deacon is from the Greek word diakonis. Obviously, deacon is just an English form of the Greek word diakonis, which means a servant. Diakon is just an ordinary word for a servant.

And so a deacon is someone who's been set aside as a servant to the church. In a sense, everybody's supposed to be a servant, but they are serving in a gift of serving, like these guys. So although they're not called diakonis, deacons, we usually think of them as deacons, and probably properly so.

We see them as the counterparts of the apostles, in that the apostles now are devoted to the spiritual nurture of the church, and the deacons to the physical needs of the church, or the seven. We could say the seven, because they're not called deacons. In other

churches later on, we read in the pastoral epistles that churches had elders and deacons.

And it seems that the elders were the ones who were to teach and administer the spiritual needs of the church, and the deacons to the physical. So in a sense, what later churches had in the elders and deacons to cover these two categories of serving, the Jerusalem church had the apostles and the seven. There were also elders, because eventually the apostles spread out and ministered in other areas, and the church in Jerusalem had to be governed still by elders until the time that Jerusalem fell.

But here we have the beginnings of differentiation in the body of Christ of services, and the requirement that the Holy Spirit be the qualifier in any case, even if it's just practical service. Now the five guys I said we don't know much about, well, we don't. Most of them we know nothing about, but one of them, the last one mentioned in verse 5, Nicholas, a proselyte from Antioch.

Well, we know something about him, he was a proselyte, he was not born Jewish. He was a Gentile who had been circumcised and therefore is accepted by the Jewish community as a Jew, and rightly so. But we know something else about Nicholas.

This is not from the Bible, but from the church fathers. At least two or three of the church fathers mentioned Nicholas as one who at a later time in life had a following who were heretical. Now whether he became a heretic and started a heretical group, or whether he didn't become a heretic, but people who followed him later branched off into heresy and still retained his name on their group, we don't know.

What the church fathers point out is that there is a group called the Nicolaitans, named after Nicholas. And we know in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus twice mentions the Nicolaitans in the church of Ephesus and the church, I believe, of Thyatira. One group has the deeds of the Nicolaitans, one has the doctrines of the Nicolaitans, and in both cases Jesus said, I hate them.

Not the Nicolaitans, I hate their deeds and I hate their doctrines, he says. They apparently were a form of Gnostic heretic because they were, it seems, teaching it was okay to fornicate and to eat meat sacrificed to idols. And that would be a form of antinomianism, or anti-law is what antinomian means.

Kind of a greasy grace kind of a message. Some churches today basically give the impression if you just believe, just say a sinner's prayer, it doesn't matter what you do after that, you're in, you know, you're saved by grace, it doesn't matter how you live. And so in these churches people fornicate without shame, they get drunk on weekends without shame, they live carnal lives without shame.

And if you confront them and say, well, I'm under grace, I'm cool. Well, of course, this is not Christianity. This is what in Gnosticism is called antinomianism, which means no anti-

law, *nomos*, Greek word law, anti-law, antinomus.

Anyway, whether Nicholas, one of the seven, became an antinomian or whether people who simply followed him later themselves drifted into it, we don't know. But at a later time when Revelation was written, there was a group called the Nicolaitans, apparently antinomians. And Jesus said he hated their doctrines.

He hated their works. As you read Revelation 2. And they were apparently named after Nicholas. OK, but we don't read that in the Bible.

That's I mean, we don't read about Nicholas's later life. We just have his name here as one of the seven. The focus then comes to be on Stephen in the rest of this chapter and throughout chapter seven.

And then later in chapter eight, the focus is on Philip. So these guys who were chosen to serve also, you know, they were Renaissance men. They could serve well and they could preach well.

And in case of Stephen, he could defend the gospel. Well, he was an apologist and they worked miracles, which is not an everyday thing that everyone did. So, I mean, these are very special men.

So Stephen then comes front and center in verse eight. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. And there arose some from what is called the synagogue of the freedmen.

We're told they were Cyrenians, Alexandrians and those from Cilicia and Asia disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him, seized him and brought him to the council. So the same council that before whom Peter and the apostles had stood twice, now Stephen is brought in to the same group, to the Sanhedrin. And they set up false witnesses who said, this man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us. And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. Now the statement that his face looked like the face of an angel has got to be a reminiscence that comes from Paul.

Luke got most of this information from his companion, Paul. And Paul was here. He hasn't been mentioned yet, but he will be.

And Saul, as he was then known, was at this council meeting. And he got to hear this speech that Stephen gives, which is the next chapter. And he got to see his face.

And certainly, you know, Paul in his later life never forgot and never ceased to be ashamed of the fact that he was a persecutor of the church. Even when he wrote the pastoral epistles, he said, I'm not worthy to be an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. In 1 Corinthians 15, he said, I'm not worthy to be an apostle, you know, because I persecuted the church.

Paul was very much affected after his conversion with the sense of responsibility he bore for having persecuted the church and approving of those who were put to death for Christ, as he later testified. And he must have reflected long, and Luke and he on their long ship rides and long walks from town to town. Luke must have heard Paul talk many times about the impression Stephen made upon him.

And when we hear Luke say his face is like an angel, he must have heard Paul say that many times. Certainly, he got that information from Paul. And the people who oppose Stephen, his main opponents, are said to have been particularly those of a particular synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen.

Now, freedmen, as we know, refers to people who were once slaves and were freed. It was not uncommon for the Romans, when they conquered land, to take slaves with them back to Rome, but some of them were later freed. Some were sold and others were freed.

And so, some Jews, no doubt, had been taken to Rome in the days of Pompeii and the early conquest of Israel by the Romans. Some of them were set free, and either they or their descendants had come back to Jerusalem, and they had a synagogue for people who had that kind of background. And so, there's a Synagogue of the Freedmen.

And this Synagogue of the Freedmen had attendees. There were lots of synagogues in Jerusalem, by the way. You should understand, Jerusalem would have had probably scores of synagogues.

This particular one must have been where Stephen attended. And Stephen, by the way, himself had a Greek name. In fact, all of the seven had Greek names.

It's interesting because they were selected in order to redress a perceived injustice where the Hellenists seemed to be not getting a share break in the distribution. So, seven, all of them happened to have Greek names. They were probably all Hellenists.

We don't know if they were, but they could have been because a Palestinian Jew could have a Greek name too. Andrew and Philip, among the apostles, were Palestinian Jews, but they had Greek names. But Stephen's name was Greek.

So was Philip, and so were the others. And he was probably a Hellenist Jew, and he probably went to this. This was a Hellenistic synagogue.

And that he was there, we don't know if Stephen was a freedman himself, whether his parents had been slaves or whether he had been a slave before. This is not—we're not given information, but he's in dialogue in this synagogue, which is the Synagogue of the Freedmen. And these people come from—well, they're Cyrenians, Alexandrians.

They're from Cilicia and from Asia, Asia meaning Turkey, Asia Minor. Now, Cilicia is particularly interesting here because Cilicia is where Saul of Tarsus is from. Tarsus, Paul's hometown, was in Cilicia.

There were Jews from Cilicia in this synagogue debating with Stephen. Was Saul one of them? He might have been. This might have been Saul's own synagogue.

He was a Cilician. And here he is, here's Stephen debating with these people. You know, Stephen—I think Paul's contact with Stephen may have been far more than just hearing him give a speech in the Sanhedrin.

I think that Saul may have locked horns with Stephen and been worsted by him because they could not resist the spirit and the wisdom with which he spoke. Saul was no fool. Saul was a brilliant rabbi himself, and so were many others.

But remember how Jesus, at age 12, was able to baffle the religious teachers in the temple. That same Holy Spirit that Stephen had was able to do the same thing with even probably Saul. We can't be sure that Saul was among them, but he was a Cilician.

And that's one of the ethnic groups that faced Stephen here. Stephen is accused of blaspheming Moses and the temple. Now, the temple and Moses were considered sacred persons and places in Judaism.

So whenever you insult something sacred, that's called blasphemy. It says they hired false witnesses to say that Stephen was saying in verse 14 that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, meaning Jerusalem and the temple, and change the customs which Moses delivered to us. Now, what's interesting is that Jesus did that.

The temple was destroyed. Jerusalem was destroyed, and the customs of Moses were changed. The early church eventually gave up all the temple cultist stuff, and the church does not follow Jewish customs.

At least it's not required to. So in a sense, what they said Stephen said turned out to be true things. Now, did Stephen say them? We're told these were false witnesses, which gives us the impression maybe Stephen didn't say them.

He's accused of saying them, but they were false witnesses, or maybe he didn't say

those things. On the other hand, where did they get these things? These things happen to be true statements. If Stephen had said them, he could well have said them prophetically, because they were prophetically true.

So I've always wondered, why are they called false witnesses? Did Stephen not say this, and therefore they're lying about what he said? Or are they false witnesses because they're twisting what he said? Remember, the Bible says that false witnesses were hired by the Sanhedrin against Jesus when he was on trial. Now, what did they say? They said, we heard him say that he'd destroy the temple and raise it up in three days. Well, that's not a complete fabrication.

Jesus told them, you destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days. It was a twisted testimony. It wasn't entirely fabricated of whole cloth.

Jesus had said something like that. But the fact that they rendered it as they did renders them false witnesses, according to Scripture. He didn't say exactly that, but he said something a lot like that.

And it's very possible that that's what we have here. Stephen probably said something a lot like this, but they were putting an evil spin on it. That Jesus is going to come and wipe you guys out.

Well, in a sense, he did, but it was really going to be the Romans. And it's possible that this is a slight perversion of what he said, but with a germ of truth. We don't know for sure what Stephen was saying.

We only say they heard him say this. And they probably heard him say something not very different than this, but not quite like it either. I don't know in what ways they would have changed it.

But the council looked at him, and he looked like he had the face of an angel. I don't know if that means like his face was shining or if he just looked innocent and pure or what. But it certainly made an impression on somebody who told Luke about it.

And it must have been such an impression that of the few things were told about Stephen, Luke felt he couldn't leave that part out. The way his face looked. Now, in chapter 7, So Stephen is given an opportunity to give a defense of himself.

But like the apostles, when he's on trial, he doesn't defend himself. He preaches. He condemns the council.

He turns it around on them. He takes a lot more time doing it than Peter did in the earlier trials. What Stephen does is he recounts Jewish history.

Now, his hearers would be familiar with this history. But the Jews love to hear their

history recited. The truth is when Paul gave his longest recorded sermon in this Pisidian Antioch synagogue in Acts 13, he recounts Jewish history going back to Abraham too.

I mean, the Jews like to be reminded of their unique history. They were a unique people. They're proud of it.

Yeah, let's hear about Abraham's story again. Let's hear about Moses again. Let's hear about David again.

And so, this is what Stephen does. But he's doing so with a purpose. He's not just entertaining them, regaling them with great stories of their heroes in the past.

He's making two very specific points related to the accusations that are made. What we will find is that two themes are woven throughout his narrative. He's telling history, but he's emphasizing two important themes.

Let me read this for you, and we'll see what they are. And Stephen said, And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. That is, Abraham in his lifetime did not inherit the land in the sense that God promised.

It would be his descendants who would do so. He did own one small piece of property that he had to purchase. He purchased the cave of Machpelah because when his wife Sarah died, he needed to bury her somewhere.

So he bought this cave, which became the burial place for himself and his wives and concubines probably, and also for his son Isaac and his wife Rebecca, and also for Jacob and Leah. Rachel was not buried there because she died near Bethlehem and was buried near Bethlehem. But for three generations, the main men and their wives were buried in this one cave, Machpelah.

That's the only part of Canaan that Abraham ever owned, and he had to buy it at a high price, actually. But he didn't receive an inheritance in the land as God promised him, not in his lifetime. And it says in verse six, But God spoke in this way that his descendants would sojourn in a foreign land, meaning Egypt, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them for four hundred years.

And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge, said God, and after that they shall come out and serve me in this place. Then he gave them a covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day.

And Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs. This takes us pretty much most of the way through the book of Genesis, at least to the story of Joseph, which becomes the next portion that he wants to focus on is Joseph. He starts with Abraham.

He says that Abraham was spoken to by God before he left Mesopotamia, before he

came to Haran. It says that. The God of glory appeared to our father Abram when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.

Now if you read the story in Genesis 12, actually the end of 11 and the beginning of 12 of Genesis, Genesis 12, 1 says that the Lord spoke to Abram and told him, leave your father and your kindred and go to the land, and Abram went. But he was in Haran when this happened, when he left, because chapter 11 of Genesis tells us that he and his father had left together from Mesopotamia. They had settled in Haran for some years until Terah, his father, died.

After he died, Abram left and went to Canaan, as God told him. But you wouldn't know from reading Genesis alone that the command to leave his father and go to the land had occurred before they came to Haran. Stephen tells us that.

But it makes sense, because in the Hebrew, the past tense and the past perfect tense are the same form of word. You can't distinguish between them in the Hebrew language. So when it says in Genesis 12, 1, the Lord said to Abram, it would be, the Hebrew would read exactly the same way if it meant to say the Lord had said to Abram.

That is, back when he was in Mesopotamia, God had said to him, leave your father. But he didn't. He took his father to Haran.

But after his father died, he then obeyed this word that the Lord had given him. This is how Stephen understands it. But moving on to the next part of his story, verse 9. And the patriarchs, this means the 12 sons of Jacob, who were also, of course, the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

They were envious, and they sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him, and he delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of the pharaoh king of Egypt. And he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

Now a famine and great trouble came over the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time, Joseph made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.

Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, 75 people, so that Jacob went down to Egypt and died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem, which is to Machpelah, and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. Now, this brings us exactly to the end of the book of Genesis.

He passes over much of Genesis with just the story of Abraham and the promises made him in the circumcision of Abraham and of Isaac. And then he brings it quickly to Joseph and focuses on Joseph. And it's through Joseph that the Israelites came to reside in

Egypt, which, of course, is where they later became enslaved.

And this is a very important point, that they left the land of Canaan and went to Egypt for a long time. And then it says in verse 17, But when the time of the promise drew near, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt, until another king arose, that is, another pharaoh arose, who did not know Joseph. This man dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies so that they might not live.

And at this time, Moses was born and was well pleasing to God. And he was brought up in his father's house for three months. But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son.

And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in word and deed. Now, most of what Stephen said so far, we could get right from the story of Exodus about Moses. But to say he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians may be a deduction.

It is not stated in the book of Exodus. But after all, he was raised in the royal family of Egypt, so that he would get an education such as a royal heir might receive is something that Stephen might justly speculate about. Or he might have been basing it on Josephus' account, because Josephus wrote the antiquity of the Jews also.

And when Stephen says that Moses was mighty in word and deed, Josephus says, from what sources he knew this, we have no idea. But Josephus says that Moses, when he was in Pharaoh's house and grown, became a commander of Pharaoh's southern armies. So that Moses is said by Josephus to have a military, a background in military leadership in Egypt before he left Egypt and before he led the children of Israel.

That may be true, and it may be what Stephen is basing this on. You know, he was mighty in word and deed. Now, we know that when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, Moses claimed not to be mighty in word.

In fact, he claimed to be a poor speaker, and he may well have been. This is 40 years after he left Egypt. His self-image was somewhat deflated, much less self-confident than he had been 40 years earlier.

And he might, in fact, have been a poor speaker and not confident. But I think it came back to him when he confronted Pharaoh. But the point is, Moses was not born a stutterer.

He was early on pretty strong in action and in his words. And it says in verse 23, Now, notice it says that when Moses struck that Egyptian, a story we read about in Exodus, Stephen tells us something that Exodus does not tell us. That Moses did this as a self-appointed deliverer of his people.

Now, Exodus doesn't tell us what was going on in Moses' head at this time. Even if he identified himself as a Jew at this time or an Israelite in his own mind. We're just told he went down, he saw a man being oppressed, and he struck the Egyptian who oppressed him.

But Stephen says, yeah, he was already thinking of himself as a deliverer of his people. And he thought they would recognize this when he did this. But they didn't recognize it.

He says in verse 26, The next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and he tried to reconcile them, saying, Men, you are brethren. Why do you wrong one another? But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday? Then at this saying, Moses fled and became a sojourner in the land of Midian, where he had two sons. And when he was, when 40 years had passed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame, in a fire, in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai.

When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight. And as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abram, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And Moses trembled and dared not to look.

Then the Lord said to him, Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them.

And now come, I will send you to Egypt. So 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. He brought him out after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness years.

Now, it's interesting that Stephen is going on so long about Moses. He talks briefly about Abraham and the patriarchs. He talked about Joseph somewhat.

And now it goes on and on about Moses. Remember, he's charged with blaspheming Moses and the temple. It seems clear that he's quite on Moses's side.

He's speaking very sympathetically of Moses as God's appointed leader. It's the Israelites that had trouble with him. It's the Israelites that pushed him aside and said, Who made you a judge and ruler over us? This is part of Stephen's message to his accusers.

He continues in verse 37. 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.

This quotation clearly from Deuteronomy 18.15 was also given by Peter in his second sermon. In Acts 3, he quoted this verse also about Jesus, the prophet, like Moses. This is

he who was in the congregation of the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him in 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 Moses, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. This is when Moses had been on the mountain a long time and they weren't sure if he was still alive up there.

And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets. Now, this is a quotation actually from the book of Amos chapter 5, verses 25 through 27.

He quotes Amos 5, 25 through 27. Amos said, God said, Did you offer me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during the 40 years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? Yes, you took up the tabernacle of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, images which you made to worship, and I will carry you away beyond Babylon. Now, the first part of this quote, God seems to be asking Israel rhetorically, Did you offer animal sacrifices to me when you're in the wilderness? Well, I think they probably did.

I mean, the sacrificial system was established at the beginning of their 40 years of wilderness wanderings. There's no evidence that they didn't follow it for those 40 years, although maybe they didn't. They might have neglected it, but the Bible doesn't tell us so.

But maybe what he's saying is, when you were offering those animal sacrifices in the wilderness, were you really doing it to me? This is something that we find also in the book of Zechariah. When the people come and ask Zechariah, Should we still fast to the Lord? And the Lord says, When you fasted, did you fast to me? In other words, you were doing the thing, but were you doing it to me? Did you have other motives? Did you have other gods in mind? Even yourselves, were you just doing it selfishly? But then when the prophet goes on to say, You sacrificed to Molech and things like that. Well, they didn't probably do that in the wilderness.

But in the time of Amos, in the subsequent history, after they'd come out of the wilderness and had set up as a nation, they did these other things too. And so they're threatened with being taken into Babylon as they had come out of Egypt. Now, our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness.

As he appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land of possessed by the Gentiles. That is, Canaan, 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 God, for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built him a house, not David.

However, the most high does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says. And he's quoting here from Isaiah chapter 66, verses one and two. Heaven is my throne.

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 these things? OK, now he's going to end it. You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.

You always resist the Holy Spirit. 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, you who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.

Now, Stephen didn't get any further before his courtroom erupted into fury over what he said. Again, he's not mincing words any more than Peter did when he was born. He said, you murdered him, you murdered him, you're murderers.

Here, he's on trial for what? Working miracles? Claiming that Jesus rose from the dead? How big a crime is that? The people accusing him are murderers. He's putting them on trial. And what are the themes I said that he wove through his story? You followed Abraham's time, Joseph's time, Moses' time, it brings up to David's time in Solomon building a temple, and the prophets after that that made denunciations of the Israelites.

What's the common theme throughout this? Well, two things. One, he was accused not only of blaspheming Moses, but the temple. Well, why would it be wrong to speak against the temple? Even Jeremiah had done that.

In Jeremiah, the Jews wanted to kill him because he said the temple was going to be destroyed. Stephen was accused of saying that Jesus was going to destroy the temple. And so they were treating Stephen like the generation of Jeremiah's time treated him.

Now, Micah had predicted that the temple would be plowed like a field. And he did that before Jeremiah's time. And when a crowd was trying to kill Jeremiah because he said God was going to destroy the temple, someone spoke up in his favor and said, you know, Micah the prophet said basically the same thing.

And, you know, they didn't kill him for that. So Jeremiah got spared. Stephen didn't.

But Stephen's point here is, so you're accusing me of saying the temple is going to be destroyed. And that bothers you because it's a holy place because God dwells there. But God doesn't dwell there.

And the point he makes throughout his story is that God does not dwell exclusively in the

temple. There may be times when he did dwell in the temple, but that's not his exclusive home. If you look back over the story Stephen tells, at the very beginning, in verse 2, he says, the God of glory appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia.

That's Babylon. What was God doing there? He was finding a man, a man of faith to call and make promise to. But God was in Babylon, not Jerusalem.

At that time, Jerusalem was a pagan city. There was no temple of Solomon there. God didn't live in the temple.

He lived in Babylon. In fact, he lived everywhere because once Abraham came into Canaan, God was with him there too. God is where his people are.

He's not in buildings made with hands. And that's what Stephen summarizes by saying in verse 48, however, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands. He quotes Isaiah to prove that this is known even by the prophets.

But again and again, he makes the point that these men of God, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, they were outside of Israel in every case when God appeared to them. God was not confined to Jerusalem or its temple. He appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia.

And it says in verse 9 that Joseph was sold into Egypt, but God was with him. Oh, in Egypt, a pagan land. God was in Egypt.

He was in Mesopotamia. Why? Because he had men there that he was with. But he was not in a house made with hands.

As you go through, you see in verse 29, when Moses fled, became a sojourner in the land of Midian. Well, that's where it was when in the next verse, the angel of the Lord appeared to him. God appeared to Moses in Midian.

That's in Arabia. That's an Arab land. So God appeared to Moses in Arabia.

He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia. He was with Joseph in Egypt. And he even told Moses in Arabia, the place where you stand is holy ground.

Take off your shoes. That's in verse 33. What is Stephen saying? You guys are all obsessed with this house, this temple in Jerusalem, as if that's somehow where God lives.

God told Moses that Arabia was holy ground when God was there. You think of Jerusalem as the only holy place. These pagan lands are holy ground if God meets with man there.

God is not confined to the temple. And it says in verse 36 that he brought him out after he'd shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and the

wilderness. These are all places outside of Israel where God was working signs and wonders for his people.

Obviously, he was present. And then, of course, he gets down to verse 48 and says, because God doesn't live in temples made with hands. The real objection to Stephen by his critics was that he didn't make as much of the temple as they did.

He thought it was dispensable. He felt it could be destroyed. They didn't think so.

That's blasphemy. They said, well, why do you think that's where God lives? Abram met him in Mesopotamia. You know, Joseph met him in Egypt.

Moses met him in Arabia. So one of the themes he's bringing out again and again here is that God isn't in Israel. Or if he is, it's not the only place he is.

Now, the other point he makes throughout this whole thing is he points out that the Jews have a history of rejecting God's messengers. And, of course, he states that outright in his closing statements in verse 51 and following. You always resist the Holy Spirit 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 have now become the murderers. Now, this is a point he made throughout the whole story, because he talks about when God called Moses, or no, before the time Moses, when God called Joseph.

In verse 9, he says, the patriarchs became envious and they sold Joseph in Egypt. Well, Joseph became their deliverer. He became their savior.

But he was sent by God. And yet they rejected him and sold him into slavery. In verse 25, when it says, Moses supposed when he killed the Egyptians that they would recognize that God sent him to deliver them.

It says, they did not understand. And it actually mentions verse 27, they pushed him away and said, who made you a ruler and judge over us? Well, he was the ruler and judge that God sent, but they didn't receive him. They pushed him away, Moses.

And then, of course, it says in verse 39, it talks about Moses as whom the fathers would not obey but rejected. And in their hearts, they turned back to Egypt. So, we see that the story of Israel that Stephen tells is a story of perennial rejection of God's messengers by the Jews.

Which he says, that's what you're doing right now. You're rejecting Jesus. This Moses that you think I'm blaspheming, he's the one who said there's another prophet that God would send and you have to listen to him.

And Jesus is that prophet, is what he's implying, and you're rejecting him. So, you're the

ones blaspheming Moses, not me. And you're the ones making too much of the temple, not me making too little.

God lives lots of places, not just in the temple. Now, very quickly, the last verse is 54. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. And Jesus, standing at the right hand of God, and said, look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord.

And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul, of whom we will hear more later, a great deal more. 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, Lord, do not charge them with this sin. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. He was suffering a violent death.

By the way, stoning is a horrendous way to be killed, unless the first one hits you squarely on the head and knocks you out and kills you. Because they had these stones, they'd throw a guy off a precipice first. If the fall didn't kill him, then the witnesses against him would be the first ones to throw stones.

They'd try to hit him with big stones. One big stone falling on you. I don't know if you've ever been hit in the head with a rock.

If so, it's probably not a big rock. But it hurts. If you have a big rock, it'll crush your bones, crush your chest, crush your head.

And the guy would get pelted with these rocks. If it's a merciful situation, he'll die with the first blow, but it didn't usually happen. But it says Stephen fell asleep, a very gentle suggestion that God took him gently.

And before he did, he gave him tremendous encouragement because he saw Jesus. And Jesus was standing at the right hand of God. Now, other places in the New Testament say that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God.

It's often pointed out Stephen saw him standing there. Apparently, Jesus rose to his feet in honor of his approaching martyr. And Stephen prayed and said, Lord, receive my spirit, which is what Jesus prayed on the cross.

He said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And Stephen also prayed like Jesus when he said, do not lay this sin to their charge. Jesus said, Father, forgive them.

They know not as they do. Stephen was filled with the spirit of Jesus, and his responses to his persecutors were very much the same as Jesus.