

STEPHEN TELLS THE STORY

Acts 7:1–8:3

One of the great arts of Christian theology is to know how to tell the story: the story of the Old Testament, the story of Jesus as both the climax of the Old Testament and the foundation of all that was to come (not a random collection of useful preaching material with some extraordinary and saving events tacked on the end), and the story of the church from the first days until now. Sometimes a story is the only way of telling the truth. In this Scripture we see Stephen telling the story to an unfriendly audience under life-and-death circumstances.

OPEN

When has a story—a book, a movie, an account you heard—upset you, and why?

STUDY

1. Stephen has been called before the Jewish elders, scribes and high priest, accused of speaking against four holy centers of Israel's faith—God, Moses, the temple and the law (see 6:11, 13–14). *Read Acts 7:1–16*. Stephen could have waved the charges away as obviously false, or he could have avoided them and used the opportunity to speak about Jesus himself. What does he begin to do instead?

2. What high points in the story of the Jewish people does Stephen bring out in 7:1–16?

Much of Stephen's speech does not seem to be a direct answer to the charges made against him. Instead of a head-on rebuttal of the charges, he has chosen a kind of outflanking movement. Tell the story *this way*, he is saying, and you will see what I am saying about Jesus and how it relates to everything else that matters. Stephen starts with Abraham because it is with Abraham that the story of the Jewish people begins; and it is with Abraham that Genesis begins the story of *how the world is to be set right*.

3. Stephen has been accused of going soft on Moses and his law; very well, he will go back to the story of Moses and see what it says. *Read Acts 7:17–53*. What main points of Moses' life does Stephen choose to emphasize?
4. How does Stephen suggest in his retelling that it wasn't him who rejected Moses but the ancestors of the Jews who actually rejected him?
5. The question of the Holy Land looms large in Stephen's speech even though it's not been mentioned in the charges laid against him. Glance through Acts 7:1–53. Which geographical areas are emphasized (and which are not) in Stephen's story of God's work in the people of Israel?
6. Why would this have upset his accusers?

7. Having dealt with Moses and the question of what is really holy land at length, Stephen quickly discusses the temple in particular in 7:44–50. What challenges does he bring to the way the Jews would have understood the central role and significance of the temple for Israel?
8. Stephen's speech suddenly stops being a careful historical account of the early days of Israelite history and draws swiftly and shockingly to its close in a burst of denunciation. Of what does Stephen specifically accuse them in 7:51–53?
9. In particular how are they similar in this way to their ancestors in the portrait he has painted in this chapter?

Wherever God reveals himself to be the savior of his people, bringing about plans which, though they seem new and surprising, are nevertheless the fulfillment of what he had said long ago, that place becomes holy. Stephen is saying that the holiness of what God has done and is doing in Jesus himself is now substantially upstaging the holiness of their own homemade, handmade system and building.

10. As we consider our own traditions and think of them lovingly since they “prove” that we are in the right place in our worship and witness, perhaps sometimes we need to allow the story to be told differently and to see whether we ourselves might be in the wrong place within it.

How might we be putting too much emphasis on our “holy” buildings and institutions while neglecting what God is doing outside our “manmade” structures?

11. *Read Acts 7:54–8:3.* How is Stephen's death reminiscent of the death of Jesus?
12. What was Saul's part in the killing of Stephen and its aftermath?

When Stephen says, “I can see heaven opened” (7:56) that doesn't mean he could see, far up in the sky, a small door through which a distant place might just be visible. It was more like what happens when you've been standing on a mountain in thick cloud and suddenly a great wind sweeps away the cloud and you can see not only the crags and peaks all around, but far away in the valley the streams and trees and villages below. All these things had been there all the time, but you can only see them when the mist lifts. Now Stephen sees the heavenly court suddenly superimposed on the earthly one. The human judges were condemning Stephen to death, but the heavenly court was finding in his favor. This, again, from Luke's point of view, is itself part of the meaning of the whole scene. The temple was supposed to be the place where heaven and earth met. Stephen is demonstrating that heaven and earth in fact come together in Jesus and his followers.

13. How do you respond to what Stephen saw as he faced death?

PRAY

Pray that, like Moses, you will yield to the call of God at the least expected times and places. Pray that, like Stephen, you will be able to see Christ in the midst of accusations and danger, and that you will be able to forgive people who wrong you.¹

¹ Wright, T., Larsen, D., & Larsen, S. (2010). [*Acts: 24 Studies for Individuals or Groups*](#) (pp. 41–45). SPCK.
