

The Defense and Death of Stephen

Acts 7

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Message Transcript

But we want to get into Word of God with our time remaining this morning, I've only got about an hour and a half to two hours left. So we want to look at Acts chapter, don't worry, I'm joking, we want to look at Acts chapter seven. Chapter Six had 15 verses, that's my kinda chapter. Chapter Seven has 60 verses, that's, that's my nightmare. We have our work cut out for us, I have decided to take a more Wednesday night kind of approach to this chapter, and try to tackle, don't laugh, please, try to tackle it all at once. Because I feel like that is the best approach to tackle it all at once, just as it was delivered all at once. But to squeeze all of the juice out of this chapter, we're looking at an eight week study probably with me, maybe 10, it would be a long one. So what we're going to have to do is, for my part, I'm going to be concerned with hitting the high points of what Stephen is saying in this chapter. And if you are interested in squeezing all of the juice out of this, because Stephen is making major points, but in all of this, he's making a ton of little minor points as well. And I hate to say this, but if you're one of our Sunday morning crew that does not attend on Wednesday night, you may be missing out on a lot of those little minor points. So what I want to do is, as I handle my part, this morning of hitting the high points, I would like to encourage you to squeeze the juice out of these stories that Stephen is going to give us by going home sometime and beginning a quest through our studies, namely Genesis and in those studies, we have covered all of this, everything that Stephen is going to talk about in this chapter with one exception, we've covered it in I don't want to say excruciating detail, exhaustive detail, so there's plenty of juice there to squeeze out of it. That's going to be up to you. But let's start with the charges here. The charges against Stephen were presented before the council in chapter six verses 11, 13, and verse 14. The charges are number one, blasphemy against Moses, that's found in verse 11. Number two, blasphemy against God that is also found in verse 11. Notice who they put first there, notice the order. I don't think that was a mistake. I think they meant that. Number three, charge number three, blasphemy against the temple that is verse 13. And then charge number four blasphemy against the law also, verse 13. Now that third charge blasphemy against the temple, it is a two part charge. And that is given to us in verse 14, we read it last week, he was being charged with teaching that Jesus would destroy the temple itself and of course, everything that it stood for, namely, the system of worship there in the temple. Those are all very serious allegations. If he's convicted on just one charge, it is a death sentence. And Stephen knows that, he knows what is at stake. As he opens his mouth to speak in chapter seven. The false witnesses, they have come forward and said their piece, the charges have been nailed down. And now we come to the part of the trial where Stephen gets to give his defense against those charges. His defense which is honestly nothing less than a sermon, is found entirely in chapter seven. He will not speak beyond this chapter because he will not survive beyond this chapter, at least not physically. He will not get to see the results of what he is laboring for here in chapter seven. If he did, I'm not sure that that would be much of a consolation to him. Because most of the Sanhedrin as you likely already know, are not going to be moved at all not an inch, not a flinch. By the testimony of Stephen in chapter seven. It's like a porcupine to them. Many fine points, but very painful to grab a hold of. If there is good news in Stephen's investment here in this chapter, it is that at least one guy, at least one guy is going to take to heart some of the things that he says in this chapter. And Stephen is going to have a major lasting eternal impact on one guy in this chapter, and that is, of course, Saul of Tarsus. Again, I can't confirm that Saul was attending those synagogue meetings where these arguments between Steven and the synagogue begin to erupt, but I can guarantee you that as of chapter six, verse 13, as the council is in place, Saul of Tarsus is present and

accounted for he would later become known as Paul the Apostle, he becomes converted eventually, Acts chapter nine. But as a Sanhedrin member, he is definitely certainly present for this trial. And after his conversion, you're going to see the effects of Stephen's sermon in the life of Paul, it becomes part of Paul's theology. You're going to see, guilt that comes from the life of Paul never leaves him, he will always live with the guilt of what happened to Stephen, and of course, the other Christians that he was responsible for martyring. And he would get to the point where he would make the statement that he felt himself unworthy to be an apostle, because he had persecuted the church. And so that's always going to be a part of his spiritual DNA.

Stephen does have an impact on Saul, not at first, after this, Saul is going to drive himself mad. And he is going to be rabid against Christianity for quite a while. But as we find out from Jesus in Acts, chapter nine, when Jesus strikes down Paul on the road to Damascus, to persecute more Christians, Jesus said to Saul, it is hard for you to kick against the goads. You know, that means a goad is a sharp stick, that you poke an animal within the side, when it's not listening to your direction. You know, when you're pulling that oxen to the left with the strap, and it's not responding, it's trying to go right stubbornly and persistently, you poke it with the goad, you're telling it, knock it off, and go the direction that I'm taking you. Well, that's what Jesus said to Saul, which means what? That when we read about the conversion of Saul, in chapter nine, that was not the beginning of the conversion of Saul. Jesus made it very plain in that chapter, Saul, I've been trying to lead you for quite some time now, you've been kicking against my direction, therefore, I've been poking at you, and prodding at you to steer you away from the wrong direction and point you into the right direction. So the work of Stephen begins its effect in this very chapter. Either way, I want you to know whether we see results or not, whether people get saved when we share the truth and the gospel or not, God's word is always worth sharing. Always. How God uses what you share in the lives and in the hearts of people, that is God's work, but whether or not you share, that is your work. So be sharing God's truth, and trust the Lord to do his thing with the truth that you share to others, whatever that might be. Verse one, and the high priest said, are these things so? Are the charges true? If not change our minds. And that is exactly precisely what Stephen will seek to do. Only probably not in the way that you're thinking. He is not interested at all in telling them whether or not the charges are so, what he's interested in is convincing them that the truths that he's been sharing are so. So Stephen will not try in his defense to get himself off and out of the charges. He's not going to try to win the trial and be pronounced innocent. If he was interested in that, it would have been easy enough, all he'd have to do is throw some flattery in their direction, these guys love flattery, backpedal a little bit, be very apologetic, things like deepest apologies your Holinesses, I apologize for getting a little too amped up and maybe taking things too far. I promise I'm going to dial it back, and can you recommend some good rabbis that I can learn from so that I can be more like you? Getting off on the charges would have been very easy for him to do. But again, he's not interested in winning the trial, he wants to win their hearts. So what he does is he uses up all of his defense time to convince them of this major truth, he'll address all those charges, but mainly to convince them of this major truth that Jesus, in fact, indeed, is their Promised Messiah. To do that, Stephen is going to call a bunch of witnesses to the witness stand. Now the witnesses, he calls to the witness stand, they're all dead. But the witnesses of their life will speak volumes and become powerful witnesses for what Stephen is trying to convey to this council. His witnesses will be Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and even Isaiah, those are going to be the Old Testament, Jewish witnesses that he will fall back on in order to build his defense in this chapter. So up steps Stephen, and just picture it like this: Stephen saying I would like to call my first witness to the witness stand, and that would be Abraham, the very father of our Jewish nation. Verse two: And Stephen said, brothers and fathers, acknowledging them as religious leaders, brothers and fathers hear me, the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, living in Ur of the Chaldeans, before he lived in Haran, verse three, and said to him, go out. Now notetakers, you might

want to underline those two words, go out. He said to him go out from your land, and from your kindred and go into, you might want to underline that too, go out and go into, the land that I will show you. Verse four: Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father, and that would be Tara, after his father died, God removed him from there into this land, in which you are now living, Israel at that time, known as Cain, excuse me, Canaan. Verse five: Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession, and to his offspring after him, though he had no child, verse six, and God spoke to this effect, that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, that's Egypt, who would enslave them and inflict them for 400 years, verse seven, but I will judge the nation that they serve, said God. And after that they shall come out and worship me in this place, the land of Israel. Now quickly, if you're following me in your Bible, flip back to Acts chapter six, because I want you to specifically look at verse 14. One of the charges against Steven was that he was teaching that Jesus would change the customs that were delivered by Moses. And if we're being honest, there wasn't much that Stephen really could do to defend himself against that accusation. The other accusations, sure, the accusation of blasphemy against Moses, God, the temple and the law, those were all patently false or brought forward by false witnesses. But what they say in verse 14, it's tough to really deny that that's the kind of stuff that Stephen is teaching because it's actually true. That because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, that means there is no longer a need for the sacrificial system. And because Stephen can't deny that allegation, the only thing that he can really do here is argue that there is a good biblical precedent for their God to call them out of something old and bring them into something new, to call them out of something lesser and bring them into something better. In fact, Stephen says the history of our very nation began with that right there. God called Abraham out of something lesser and into something greater. He called Abraham out of the old and into the new. So Stephen's point is this, God is doing very much that same thing through the person of Jesus Christ, he is calling us out of our old customs that didn't get us nearer to the Lord anyway. And he's calling us into a whole better system. Jesus said it was a system that would burst the wineskins. If you tried to bring the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, into the New Testament way of life, Jesus said, it wouldn't work, it would destroy the whole thing. This was something new that Christ was doing. And Stephen says, It's okay for the Lord to do that, to call us out of where we are, and into where he wants us to be. You know why that's okay? Because He's God, and we're not. He calls the shots. So it's a great point that Steven has made.

You would think that these guys would be relieved. I mean, when you sin, you no longer have to take and slit a lambs throat or kill a cow. This, should be good news to them. It should be a major relief to them, that Jesus, their Messiah, their Savior, laid his life down for their sins on the cross. And now they are free to just love God from a position of forgiveness. But you know this about the religious leaders, about these Old Testament Jews, they loved their worship system. They love the sacrificial system. It would be kind of like today, taking a rosary away from a Catholic, it would be like taking holy underwear away from the Mormon. It would be like taking a certain flag away from a certain church group. They wouldn't know what to do with themselves because they have invested and entangled their faith in all the wrong things. They've put it in stuff, they've put it in systems, they built it upon traditions, and all of that stuff has torn them away from a sound faith in God. Verse 8: And he gave him the covenant of circumcision, and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the 12 patriarchs. Now, the fourth charge against Stephen was that he had blasphemed the law. That's in verse 13. And to that end, Stephen raises a very interesting point that Abraham's relationship with God wasn't based in any way, on the things that their relationships with God were based on. Abraham did not have the same things that they had. Abraham started, he launched this entire way of life for the patriarchs. So you got to get back to the basics in a situation like this. What was Abraham's relationship with God like?

Well, Abraham had no law. Abraham had no scriptures to read. He had no temple or even tabernacle to worship in, he had no system of worship, and the very sign and seal of the old covenant, which was circumcision, Abraham wasn't even circumcised until he was a very old man. So all of these things that they glory in as religious leaders, all of these things that they build their faith around, Abraham didn't have any of that. But you know what, Abraham did have? A relationship, a real relationship with God. James, chapter two tells us that Abraham was the friend of God, how did he get that? How did that work? Here's what it was: Abraham's entire relationship with God was based on faith. And you don't have to wait to get to the New Testament, the book of Hebrews to tell you that. It does, but you don't even have to wait, because all the way back in his story Genesis chapter 15, verse six, we are told point blank, that Abraham believed the Lord. That's faith, Abraham believed the Lord. And that's what God credited to him as righteousness, didn't have the law, didn't have the scriptures, didn't have the temple, didn't have a system of worship, but by faith, he believed in what God spoke to him. And God said that right there is good stuff. That's righteousness. That's what I'm looking for. Abraham was not saved by the law. And the truth of it is, nor were any of those Old Testament saints. Because the law was never meant to be a set of rules whereby a person could achieve salvation, Paul tells us, the law doesn't have that kind of power. The law does not have the power to save, it never did. It has only ever had the power to condemn.

So the Jewish patriarchs started with this, faith in God is what saves. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, the Old Testament Jews allowed the law to take the place of a personal relationship with God by faith. It was as if they didn't even know their founding father Abraham at all, as if they completely missed what Abraham modeled for them. He was not a man of law, he was a man of faith. Abraham's claim to fame, the book of Hebrews, chapter 11, his claim to fame was faith in God. So you see what Stephen is doing here? Hopefully, Stephen was trying to call the Sanhedrin back to the starting block, which was a faith based relationship with God. You guys, so revere your biological link to Abraham. But ask yourself the question, WWAD, what would Abraham do? Here's what Abraham would do. He would by faith, believe in the Messiah, that God had sent him in the person of Jesus Christ. And at this time, Stephen says, Thank you, Abraham, no further questions.

And I would like to call my next witness to the stand, Joseph. Verse 9: And the patriarchs, Joseph's 11 brothers, jealous of Joseph sold him into Egypt. Now there is not a better type of Christ in the Old Testament than that of Joseph. It is almost unbelievable how closely the life of Joseph runs parallel to the life of Christ. Let me just point out some highlights here. God chose Joseph to be a deliverer of Jacob, or Israel, his wife, and his 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel. And God chose Jesus to be the Deliverer, capital D, for the nation of Israel. Joseph's, biological brothers rejected him, Genesis chapter 37, verse eight, and Christ's Jewish brothers rejected him, Luke chapter 19, verse 14. Joseph's brothers delivered him up out of envy, Genesis, chapter 37, verses 11 and 18. And the brothers of Jesus, the first century Jews, delivered him up because of envy as well, Matthew chapter 27, verse 18. Joseph was sold for 20 pieces of silver, Genesis chapter 37, verse 28, and Jesus was sold for 30 pieces of silver, Matthew chapter 26, verse 15. Why 20 pieces of silver for Joseph? Why 30 pieces of silver for Jesus? I don't know, I guess inflation from Old Testament to New Testament. You didn't think inflation inflation was a new human crisis, did you? That's the best I got. Reading on in verse nine: Just look at these parallels how deeply they run between Joseph and Jesus. But God was with him. Verse 10: and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh king of Egypt who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. The brothers of Joseph rejected him, but who received him? Gentiles, the Egyptians received him and made him ruler over Egypt. And Jesus, what about Jesus when he was rejected by his Jewish brothers who did receive him? Gentiles? Yes, after this initial New Testament first era of the church, the church would always be predominantly populated by gentiles, non Jews. It is the

Gentiles after this first era passes from the historical scene that received Jesus and make him ruler over their salvation. Verse 11: Now there came a famine, throughout all Egypt, in Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. Next up after the rejection of Joseph was hardship, famine, for Israel, or dare I use the word tribulation, and a Pray tell after the rejection of Jesus, by and large by the Jews, what is next up on the prophetic calendar for the nation of Israel? You should know this. We just studied the book of Revelation in here on Sunday mornings. It's the tribulation period, also known as the time of Jacob's trouble or the time of Israel's trouble. Verse 12: But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit, that might be worth underlining. Verse 13: and on the second visit, that might be worth underlining as well, on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. Verse 14: and Joseph sent and summoned Jacob, his father, and all his Kindred, 75 persons in all. Verse 15: And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. Verse 16: and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. Now, for those that know that story, Joseph's brothers were visited, I should say it this way, Joseph's brothers visited Joseph, twice, when he was the prime minister over Egypt, the first time they did not recognize Joseph. If you go and listen to our study, from Genesis there, you'll find out why the first time they did not recognize him as their brother Joseph, but the second time, Joseph revealed Himself to them, and then they recognized Him that second time. Likewise, Jesus is predicted to pay his Jewish brothers a visit two times, we refer to that as the first coming of Jesus, and the second coming of Jesus.

And here's exactly what took place. The first time that Jesus came to the Jews in his first coming, they did not recognize him as the Messiah. But the Bible predicts for us that in the second coming of Christ, all of Israel is going to be saved. In other words, once again, the nation of Israel is going to recognize Him as Messiah, the second time around. Zechariah 13, Verse six tells us that when they do see Christ in the second coming, they will ask him, What are these wounds, and he will say to them, the wounds that I received in the house of my friends. So what Stephen has done here is he has revealed both a National Jewish tendency and an end time prophecy, all in one pop. As far as the national tendency of the Jews is concerned, here's what Joseph has, or pardon me, Here's what Stephen has revealed. He has revealed that the nation of Israel is slow to recognize God's delivers. They never get it the first time around. They catch on the second time around. The prophecy being just that, that God knew this was going to happen, He knew that by and large, the Jewish nation would reject Him in His first coming as the babe in Bethlehem. But that when he came the second time, as the lion of the tribe of Judah, the nation of Israel would recognize Him as Messiah, and as a result, the nation would be saved. So table that for just a moment, we're going to come back to that. But now Stephen says thank you, Joseph, you can have a seat.

I would like to call my next witness to the stand. And that's going to be Moses. Verse 17: But as the time of the Promised journeyer, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until there arose over Egypt, another king who did not know Joseph, he dealt shrewdly with our race, the Hebrews, the Jews, and forced our fathers to expose their infants. That is, he demanded that the Hebrews self disclose the birth of all Jewish males, so that they would not be kept alive. This was pharaoh's mandatory, full birth abortion of all Jewish males. It started out as being a mandate to be carried out by the hands of the Jewish midwives. When they refused because of their love for God and their people, it ended up being death by drowning in the Nile River. Verse 20: At this time, that's a loaded phrase, at this time when Israel so desperately needed a deliverer, Moses was born. And he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, verse 21, and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was 40 years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the Jews,

the Hebrews, the children of Israel. So he leaves the palace that day, and heads down to the fields of labor, where his Jewish kin are working to see what the conditions are like for his kinsmen. Verse 24, and seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man, a Hebrew, and avenged him by striking down the Egyptians. Folks, that day, Moses picked a side, he chose to surrender up the position and the possessions of Egypt in order to choose the side of his own race, the Jewish race. Verse 15: He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, oh, it should have been so obvious to them. Look at what God has set up here. God has put Moses in this elevated position in the nation of Egypt, who we are subjected to. Isn't it obvious what God is doing? God raised up that man, Moses, and put him where he put him, so that God could use Moses to set us free from our bondage? Well, that's what Moses supposed the nation of Israel would realize, but they did not understand. Verse 26: And on the following day, he appeared to them, to Hebrew men, as they were quarreling, and tried to reconcile them saying, men, you are brothers, why do you wrong each other, but the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Interesting statement. Because what did the majority of the first century Jews say about Jesus in Luke chapter 19, verse 14? We will not have this man Jesus to rule over us. Verse 28: You want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian where he became the father of two sons. So God has sent Israel Moses as their deliverer and in His first coming to the nation, what does the nation do? They reject God's deliverer. Verse 30: Now when 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness, not just an angel, but the angel of the Lord, a Christophany, a pre incarnate appearance of Christ, in a flame of fire in a bush. Verse 31: When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, of course, because it is not every day that a flaming Bush strikes up conversation with you, that does tend to get your attention. And as he drew nearer to look, there came the voice of the Lord: I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and of Jacob, and Moses trembled and did not dare to look, But then the Lord said to him, take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning and I have come down to deliver them. And now Come, I will send you to Egypt. I love that. The Lord says, Moses, I am going to deliver the Hebrews from their bondage, by the way, I'm going to use you to do it. So get moving. I like that. Verse 35: This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge, this man God sent as both ruler and Redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for 40 years. So did you catch what happened there? Concerning Joseph, national tendency, they did not recognize him the first time, they recognized him the second time. Concerning Moses, they rejected him the first time and received him, albeit somewhat sluggishly throughout the years, the second time. Joseph's Story establishes the national tendency of the Jews to be slow to recognize God's deliverer, as Moses's story establishes the national tendency of the Jews to flat out quickly reject the deliverers that God sends to them. Unless you Gentiles, you non Jews, are tempted to get up on your high horse, let me knock you down before you even get up there. Because if the tendency of the Jewish nation is to miss things the first time around, but then catch on the second time, compare that with the Gentile tendency, what is the Gentile tendency? The gentile tendency is to be altogether heathens, and have no interest whatsoever in the things of God, that is the natural disposition of a Gentile. So if you are here this morning, as a Gentile, a non Jew that has believed in Jesus as your savior, deliverer, and Messiah, you ought to thank God for the grace that He opened up your heathen eyes so that you could see, that he opened up your heathen ears so that you could hear truth and believe it, that he opened up your heathen heart and saved it by His grace. It is a miraculous act of God's grace to save heathen Gentiles. And I don't think that half of it is going to be known on this side of eternity. Verse 37, this is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. Ooh, great verse, great verse and the New King James Version, adds

the phrase, him shall you hear. Now, it's not in the ESV, because the older manuscripts don't include that last phrase, here at verse 37. But it is, of course, found in the original texts that Stephen is quoting here. That would be Deuteronomy, chapter 18, verse 15, where Moses made the statement. Therefore, it is a prophecy from Moses, and they may not have known who Moses was talking about at the time, but post Christ, we know that Moses was predicting Jesus. So what a powerful point for Stephen to land on right here, just as Peter did in his Acts, chapter three sermon to be able to say, you guys revere Moses so much, you hate Jesus so much, and yet Stephen says, it was actually Moses that first predicted that God was going to send you the deliver. That deliver is Jesus, your boy, Moses said that. So you accused me of blaspheming Moses, the truth is, you're not even listening to the words of Moses, because he told you that Jesus was coming and Jesus has come and you've rejected him. Who's anti Moses now, Sanhedrin? Verse 38: This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel again, that would be Jesus pre incarnate appearance. We spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers he received the living oracles to give to us the law. Verse 39: Our fathers refused to obey Him but thrust him aside. And in their hearts, they turned to Egypt saying to Aaron, make for us Gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they had a cow those days. As they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands, but God turned away and gave them over to worship, the host of heaven, the Fallen host of heaven, by the way, demonic spirits. As it was written in the book of the prophets: did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the 40 years in the wilderness, oh house of Israel, you took up the tent of Moloch, an Egyptian false God, and the star, the insignia of your god Rephan, another Egyptian false god, the images that you made to worship and I will send you into exile and beyond Babylon. Now, Stephen here could once again be addressing the charge of blasphemy against the law, or he could be directly addressing the charge of blasphemy against God. He's kind of killing two birds with one stone here. Stephen educates them on their Old Testament Jewish track record by saying, Look, guys, if we're being honest, at no time, in our nation's history, have we been very good at all, in obeying the law and honoring God. Remember, when Peter stood before the council, they were trying to decide whether or not they should turn Gentiles into Judaistic converts and make them live according to the law. Remember what Peter said, Peter said, Guys, we've never been able to keep the law anyway. Our fathers failed at it, we fail at it. And Stephen is reminding them of that here. Our track record as a nation is that we aren't very good at listening to God and honoring him in any way. The Law of God was first spoken audibly to them by God, you realize that right? It did not start with the two tablets of stone that God first thundered that law out from heaven so that they all could hear it. Now afterward, it's true, God did call Moses up the mountain, to take that law that he had audibly told to the whole nation, and get hard copies of it on two tablets of stone. So Moses is up there on the mountain top of Mount Sinai for 40 days, trying to write down, carve out everything. But actually it was the Lord writing it, pardon me the first time. Second time, we're not so sure. But the Lord was giving him the law on two tablets of stone. And before he could even get down the mountain. The people had already created for themselves, an idol, a false God to worship, they had no excuse. It wasn't that the law had not reached them yet, and that they preemptively made the mistake of turning from the one true God to an idol. The truth is, God had already told them the second commandment, make no graven images or likenesses. And they had already violated that law, they had already broken one of the big 10.

So this is a moment of candor, here from Stephen to say, Look, guys, our people have never been really all that good at keeping the law and honoring God. But you know what, we're really good at making idols. So am I blaspheming Moses, God, the temple and the law? Or are you still breaking the second commandment by creating idols to worship? Has the temple become an idol to you that you're worshiping instead of God? Has the law become that? Has it taken place of a faith based relationship between you and the Lord? Is it about stuff that we're idolizing? Or is it about our relationship with God? And Stephen says, Thank you, Moses. But

stick around here at the witness stand, because I'm going to call three more witnesses to join you, David, Solomon, and Isaiah.

Verse 44, our fathers had the tentative witness in the wilderness, that would be the tabernacle, which is the mobile version of the temple, its first iteration, if you will. Just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to to make it according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn, brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it wasn't until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands as the Prophet says, and this is Isaiah here, Isaiah chapter 66, verse one, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? I'm just not going to fit in the temple. I'm too big for that. You catch Stephens drift here of what he just said in verses 44 through 50. Stephen is now addressing their third charge that he has blasphemed the temple and here's what Stephen says, Stephen says, you might want to check your history. Because as biblical history holds it, God did call for the building of the tabernacle. And three times he said to Moses, Moses, make the tabernacle exactly, and I mean, exactly as I say, Take no creative license. Don't deviate from the instructions that I give you, make it exactly as I tell you to make it. But now search the Scriptures to see if you can find the same thing about the temple. Is there anywhere in the Old Testament where God says, Okay, it's time to make me a temple? God never ever called for the temple. God called for the tabernacle, the tent. He never called for the temple, the temple was David's idea. As the nation became comfy and blessed, David looked at his situation and through that evaluation, he said, Lord, something isn't right here. I'm living in a nice house and you're dwelling in tents. We still just got that old drab unimposing and unassuming tabernacle for you. We need to turn that cloth and skin tabernacle into a brick and mortar temple. That's what we need to do. And so David said, Lord, I'm going to build you a house. I'm going to build you a temple, brick and mortar temple, and God said, no, no, thank you. Not interested. Besides David, you can't do it anyway, you're not a man of the cloth. You're a man of war. There's too much bloodshed that happened on your hands. You can't be the one to build me a temple. But of course, David being a man that would not take no for an answer, he found the closest thing that he could get to building God a temple, what did he do? He went out and he had all the work done. He was building the temple, he just wasn't putting it together because the Lord told him not to. He had all of the stones cut, he had every item of the temple built so that by the time his son Solomon became his successor as king over Israel, all Solomon had to do is take all the pieces like you know, stone a, okay, this goes in the corner. Stone b, c, where's c? You got c? Bring c. All he had to do was put it together. So it was really Solomon, technically, that built it. But is it really? And is it really, honestly, what the Lord wanted? Stephens Point, look, the temple isn't even of God. God did not call for the temple at all. Here's all that the temple is: It is a meeting place between God and His people. And if we ever make the temple the thing that we're focusing on, then we've got it all wrong. It's never about the facility. As much as I love this building, and everything we've done to it, it is never about the facility. It's what happens in the facility, the people of God come together in the house of God, whatever and wherever that is, to be in the presence of God and experience Him in a corporate setting. Stephen is calling the Sanhedrin to recognize that the temple is of little significance if God isn't meeting them in the temple. And now, with the history lesson complete, Stephen being done calling witnesses to the stand, he now launches into his closing statements. He's now going to make application of all that Old Testament history that he just buzzed through with them. So picture Stephen, calling the worship team up and say, in closing, I would just like to say this: verse 51, You stiffnecked people! Well, he's not as good with this closers as I am is he? You stiffnecked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you haven't had the flesh cut away from your heart or your hearing, you're very carnal, you will always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did so do you. Which of the prophets did your father's not persecute? And they

killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, Jesus, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. Boy, can you tell that Stephen has been trained under the tutelage of the apostle Peter? He sounds just like him here, you killed him, you kill the Christ, He came to you and you killed him. Verse 53, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. Now when they heard these things, they were blessed and converted. Sometimes I like to read it the way it should read. When they heard these things, they were enraged. And again, that word means to be sawn through the heart. They were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him, but he full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Don't feel bad for Stephen, please. The position of Jesus as of Mark chapter 16, verse 19, when He ascended, is that he is seated at the right hand of God. That's his position. He told his enemies in Mark chapter 14, that you're going to see me seated at the right hand of the Father. That is his usual position in heaven. You know why that is? Because he's done with his work. The priests in the tabernacle, and in the temple, they were always standing, there were no seats in the tabernacle or temple for the priests to sit down. And that's because their work was never done. It was always ongoing to serve the nation. But Jesus once and for all, completed our salvation, He cried out on the cross, It is finished, and he resurrected and ascended to sit at the right hand of God the Father because the work of salvation was done. And only this one time, in the New Testament, will you read about Jesus, not seated at the right hand, but standing at the right hand of the Father, you know what he's doing? In my best estimation, he is giving Stephen a standing ovation, for laying his life down as a witness. The word witness comes from the Greek word martyros which is where we get our word martyrdom. Not always are our witnesses also martyrdoms, but there is no greater witness than martyrdom, to lay down your life for your cause. This is Christ standing up to welcome Stephen home and say, Good job. Thank you for giving your life as a witness.

Verse 56: And he said, Behold, I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, worship team come on up. Verse 57, but they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witness laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, and as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Now, there's a lot I would like to talk about in those final handful of verses 56 through 60. But we're going to pick that right up, we'll talk more about those verses next Sunday. If you would stand with me. And I just want to close with this.

You stiff necked people, no, no, I'm sorry. Let me close with this. It is your tendency, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, to resist and reject, to deny and to run from all of the work that the Lord would do in your heart and in your life. That is your tendency. That is my tendency. It takes an incredible move of the Spirit of God in our lives to break that tendency, and stop that cycle. And much of that begins right in the heart that is pounding in your chest. The brain that is sending signals to your very body to draw the line in the sand, and say, That is not how I'm going to go down. That is not how I'm going to be known. I am going to resist my natural tendencies. And I'm going to start opening my eyes wider than ever before my heart larger than ever before, so that I don't miss what God wants to do in me and through me. If you make that determination and commit that to the Lord in prayer, he will honor that. You cannot possibly carry that out to any great deal of success, you will fail at that, you'll go right back to resisting and rejecting and ignoring and just not getting it. But when you commit that kind of decision to Christ in prayer, he'll look down from heaven, and he'll say, got it. And I'll be the one that helps you do it.

So maybe some of you need to make that decision today, Lord, I am so done. With how I have ignored you, and placed you on the backburner of life, and pursued my own interests and my own passions, apart from the only one that really matters, and that is my eternal spiritual passion for you. Maybe you need to make that

decision today. Maybe you have made that decision. And to that, I would say, Praise the Lord for that, that he has done that work in you. But he needs to continue it, doesn't he? So I'm going to pray for every one of you, in regard to this concern, regardless of where you are on that spectrum, I believe that's what the Lord would have us to pray about this morning, Would you bow your heads and close your eyes and join me in that?

Lord, we cannot do this without you. Without you, this is no different than what those first century Jews had; a religious system of worship, stuff that we admire that perhaps inspires us in some way, convincing us that we're somehow spiritual and okay for eternity. But with you the things we're speaking about this morning, the things we are desiring, you can and you will bring it to pass you will work that work in and through us until the day that we see you face to face. Help us Lord, pour Your spirit out upon us, minister to our hearts. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.