

It is true that in many essential things the death of Jesus was absolutely unique. He alone bore the penalty of sin. He alone endured the wrath of God. He alone was offered as a sacrifice, and to make atonement. None of his people can share in these things at all. Jesus died for Stephen's sins; Stephen died merely as a witness to him. In both cases the glory was all Christ's. But this being so, there is much that the Holy Spirit wants us to notice. As Christ was condemned at his trial, he spoke of the right hand of God, and his being there. As Stephen was condemned, he spoke of the same. As Christ spoke such words, they condemned him for blasphemy. Stephen was the same. As Christ hung on the cross, he commended his spirit into his Father's hands (Luke 23:46). Stephen likewise prayed for the same (verse 59). As Christ was murdered, he prayed for the forgiveness of those who killed him (Luke 23:34). Stephen did the same (verse 60). It is no coincidence that Luke recorded these things in both cases. He wants us to make a special note.

Christ-likeness is the great goal of every true child of God. It ought to be our highest aim, for which we use all of our strength. It should be the destination we always have in front of our eyes. It is the great work of the Christian - to be renewed in the image of Christ. Stephen was reaching that goal, as he was taken to be with his Lord. He was like Christ in his life, and so like him in his death. This is the only sure route for us. If we would leave a good testimony in our last moments, we must seek to be like Christ in all things every day. If we want to pass into the presence of our Lord, we must seek to live in his presence beforehand. If Jesus has been our friend in life, he will also be our friend in death. Let us take a hold of this. The hour of our own death may be sooner than we think. In any case, it can only be numbered in years, and not more. It is the destination to which we are all heading. In that moment, will our souls dwell with Christ?

Let us thirdly take to heart *Stephen's testimony about the Lord Jesus Christ*. In the hour of his death, we are told that he was "full of the Holy Spirit". He saw heaven open, and "gazed" into it. His final words testified of what he saw. What did he see? What did he say? The answer is that he saw Jesus. When he saw the glory of God, it was with Jesus at God's right hand. It was seeing this by faith that had enabled him to live so well. And now it was seeing it with his sight that enabled him to die well too.

Here is something we must hold on to at all times. The purposes of God are very deep, but the main facts are quite clear. God has not hidden them from us. He has revealed that at the centre of all things, is his Son, Jesus Christ, the Lord. He is ruling from his right hand. The purpose of the present age is that Christ is building his church. The reason why nations rise and fall is because it is somehow connected with God's Son. He has a bride that he is bringing to himself. He has been appointed to rule, for evermore. The world was made by him, and it was made for him (Colossians 1:16). If we lose sight of this, then we are losing our grip on reality. It is true that the world thinks nothing about these things. But that is why the world is going to hell. If we would think rightly, we must think much of Christ. We cannot think too much of him. We cannot think too often about him. We cannot see him as too central, or give him too much glory and praise. If we would understand the plan of God rightly, then we must sum it up in three words; Christ, Christ, and Christ. Let everyone reading these words who believes, order their lives to demonstrate that it is so.

Expository thoughts on **The Acts Of The Apostles**

Daily Bible Reading Notes

Week 5 (Chapter 7:9-60)

Grace Church Belper

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Acts 7:54-60

Acts 7:9-16

9 "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph in to Egypt. But God was with him 10 and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favour and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. 11 Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. 13 And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, 14 and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people. 15 So Jacob went down to Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. 16 And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem."

These words are some of those that led to the first martyrdom. The Holy Spirit has taken care to record Stephen's speech very fully. There is hardly a speech like it in the whole Bible. Therefore we must read it with care. We must expect it to teach us a great deal.

Let us notice firstly that *holy men are often rejected by their religious companions*. This was of course Stephen's whole point. The Son of God had been crucified by the leaders of Israel. But what of it? This was what Israel's leaders had always done. It was no sign that Jesus was not the Christ. It was a sign that Israel was rebellious, and that judgment was near.

Stephen begins at the start of the history of Israel. There were twelve patriarchs, but one of them was specially favoured. Joseph was loved by his father more than the other eleven. But above that, he was especially favoured by God. He had been given dreams. He was promised that his brethren would bow down to him. But how did his brothers respond to this? They were "envious". They hated him so much, they sold him as a slave. He was taken to a far-away land. They told their father he was dead!

This was the verdict of the fathers of the tribes. But God's verdict was different. He was with Joseph. He "delivered him out of all his troubles". He raised him up. Joseph became second only to Pharaoh. He became the "governor over Egypt and all his house". Eventually, in God's providence, his brothers came to Egypt too. And there, they bowed down to him - just as God had promised. They had opposed the word of God; but God had brought it to pass. They had rejected God's chosen man; but their verdict was overturned. Joseph was, we may say, resurrected out of the pit, and appointed to rule.

Stephen's words were very clear. What Israel's first children had done, had been done again. That Jesus was rejected and crucified meant nothing. God's ways had been despised by the nation from the beginning. But God's verdict was the one that would stand. God had raised up Jesus, and appointed him to rule. Every Jew must bow down

54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 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, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 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. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 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.

Here we are standing upon holy ground. These words tell us of the death of the first Christian martyr. Here we see the first believer shedding his blood because of his faithfulness to Christ. All Scripture is given by inspiration from God, and is useful to us. But some verses deserve to be studied with especial care. Let us see what we can learn.

First of all, let us notice that *the glorious truth of the gospel will drive some to rage*. On the day of Pentecost, the crowds heard the same truths declared. They were told very plainly that they had murdered the Christ. And Luke recorded that "they were pricked in the heart" - and they cried out to be saved. Here, Stephen has preached the same things. And his hearers were "cut to the heart" - but not with sorrow, or regret, but with anger and rage. They "gnashed" with their teeth, and were furious at the one who had dared to expose them in such a way. And yet it was the same truth which had converted so many!

The way to explain this difference is not in the preacher. Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit", just as Peter was. The difference was not in the message. Both had preached Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises to the nation. Both had boldly exposed their hearers' sins. The difference was somewhere else. It was in the hearts of those who heard. For Peter's crowd, the Holy Spirit had softened their hearts, and was persuading them of the truth. But Stephen's hearers were allowed to go their own way. They were allowed to show what was really inside them. They were permitted to reveal their hatred and rage.

It will always be this way. The same gospel which leads some to weep, will drive some to rage. The same preaching, which is so wonderful to some, will be hated by others. We must not be surprised if this is so. The Lord Jesus did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). He did not come to unite the whole world, but to divide. He came to unite a people to himself, it is true. But not all people. In the world at large, there will always be two camps. Some will yield, and some will be opposed. We must not stumble because of this. Truth divides, as well as unites.

Let us observe secondly *how like the Lord Jesus Christ Stephen was in his death*. No doubt Luke was drawing especial attention to this. The servant died like his master.

Old Testament. They had been preceded by a rich stream of prophets, priests and kings. They had every imaginable outward privilege. But inwardly, they were as corrupt as can be. Their blindness was so great, that they had even become the "betrayers and the murderers" of God's Christ. Why had they done so? Because their hearts were unchanged within them.

We must consider this deeply. It was true for them, and has been true for many since. They were ignorant of real conversion. Are we? Conversion is not a metaphor. It is not another way of speaking about baptism, or coming to church. It is not a code-word for agreeing with Christian truth, or trying to live by the commandments of Christ. Conversion is a real experience, accomplished by the Holy Spirit. It is a work of grace, bringing life to a dead soul. It is a turning from darkness to life. It is a release from bondage to Satan, to Christ. In short, it changes everything, and it is essential. Unless we have truly experienced the work of the Holy Spirit and been born again, then we are still in our sins. This is not something to rush past quickly. It is the most crucial question of all. Am I really a new creature in Christ? Am I a child of God? Or am I still in my sins? Let us not make any mistake over this question.

It is necessary to ask ourselves what use we have made of our privileges. The Sanhedrin had the greatest privileges of any people alive at their time. And yet they were spiritually ruined. Have we done any better? What are we doing with the light and opportunity we have? When God is being worshipped, are we present? When the Bible is being taught, are we there to learn? As we here of Jesus Christ, do we yield to him, and obey his commands? Are we growing in understanding, and in obedience to him? We live in a land where the Bible can be read. Christ is preached. But these things do not bring us salvation. The mercy of God is not automatic. We must make right use of the means, if we would care for our souls.

Let us see finally in Stephen's words *a clear signpost for understanding of the Old Testament*. There are a great many theories about Israel, and the covenant with Moses. There are many teachings about the church, built upon such ideas. Let us note clearly that Stephen condemns the nation at large as having not believed in God. The Sanhedrin were opposing the Lord, and so had their fathers before them. The nation of Israel was not a faithful nation. They were a people who ultimately deserved to be destroyed. Doubtless there was always a remnant of believers amongst them. Doubtless at times their outward conformity to God's law was very impressive. But for all this, God's overall verdict on them was not good. Their wickedness was great, and continual. And now the time of God's patience was at an end. Upon this generation would fall his wrath for hundreds of years of sin climaxing in the murder of Christ (Matthew 23:33-39). And so it did, when in AD70 the Romans came and destroyed them. Whatever theories we hold about Israel, let us make sure they agree with these facts. Israel received the law, but it was not kept. The glory of the church is that it has the Holy Spirit. It is a people marked out by this. If any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his (Romans 8:9)! God will never need to destroy his people again. We live in glorious days. Let us give God great thanks.

to him - or face eternal death.

We must not be too surprised when we see God's ways being rejected. This is so, even if it is the most religious men who are doing it. The greatest religious privileges do not change the heart. The highest positions in the church do not guarantee that a man truly loves Christ. The blindness of man's heart is extremely great. His prejudice can never be removed, except by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was rejected by his brothers. Jesus was crucified by Israel's leaders. And his faithful followers will often be scorned and despised. Let us not be discouraged as if this were a new thing. Let us remember that God will have the last word. His will will stand in the end. Nobody who has been faithful to Jesus need be ashamed.

Let us notice secondly that *true religion is not confined to any one place or building*. This was Stephen's other point. His speech was not random. He spoke history with a purpose. He draws attention to certain things.

No Israelite could deny that the patriarchs were most important men. They were the very first descendants of Israel himself. They gave their names to the twelve tribes. And so it followed - what was not essential for them, could not be essential at all. If God did not keep them in the land, then the land was not a permanent part of God's plan. If God allowed them to go to Egypt and there to die, then the territory of Judea was only for a time. If they knew of no temple, then the temple was not the great goal and end. There was something better to come. This is hinted at in Joseph's death. His bones were carried into the land. The testimony was that he hoped for something still to come. But that was not a temple in Jerusalem!

Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple. But we may suppose that all he said was that Jesus was greater. The temple pointed to the dwelling of God. But God had now been amongst them in the flesh. The temple was a shadow, and passing away. The true temple had now come.

Let us hold on to Jesus Christ. He must be the centre and substance of our faith. We cannot rely on a place, a ceremony or any outward form. These things are only shadows. They only hinder us unless they lead us to Christ. He is the reality. He is the all.

The New Covenant has no special places, or special buildings. Such things are of no importance at all. No attention should be drawn to them. All attention should be drawn to the Son of God. He has saving power. No-one else does. Let us fix our eyes upon him. Unless we have a Christ-centred religion, we may as well have none at all. If thousands of others are satisfied to reject him, let us not join them. If they are zealous for questions of times and places, let them alone. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, and he shall be all we need.

Acts 7:17-29

"17 But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham,

the people grew and multiplied in Egypt 18 till another king arose who did not know Joseph. 19 This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live. 20 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. 21 But when he was set out, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. 22 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds. 23 Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. 25 For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand. 26 And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?' 27 But he who did his neighbour wrong pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?' 29 Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons."

Stephen has much still to say. Now he comes to the time of Moses. This is a key part of his speech. It was Moses who his enemies claimed to be so keen for. It was Moses that they appealed to in persecuting him. It was Moses that they said Stephen was opposing. What did Stephen have to say to that?

Stephen's main point is that *the people of Israel rejected their appointed deliverer*. God had raised him up at a time of great trouble. God had found him "well pleasing". He had been brought up with the highest training in the land. He was educated with the best learning available. He was "mighty in words and deeds". God gave him a calling to "deliver [his brethren] by his hand". There was nothing lacking in him at all. But what was the peoples' response? They "did not understand". They rejected him. When he sought to give them help, they asked him where he came from. They refused him as a ruler or a judge, and caused him to flee for his life.

Stephen's thrust is easy to see. What Israel had done before, it was doing again. Its leaders pretended to be jealous for Moses' honour. But they were not following in Moses' footsteps. They were following in the footsteps of those who rejected him. One greater than Moses had been amongst them. One with origins infinite and eternal had visited them. The true prophet, deliverer and law-giver had been in their midst. But they had not seen who he was. Jesus of Nazareth had come to Israel offering salvation. But they did not know where he was from. They refused him as a ruler or a judge, and they put him to death on a cross.

Stephen was perfectly sound in his beliefs about Moses. He knew what God had done. He believed God's word. He recognised Moses as much as any man of Israel. But his question to the council was a cutting one. Did they recognise Moses, as they said they did? Were they really Moses' disciples? Or were they the followers of those who had rejected him? It is one thing to honour a man of God once he is dead. It is easy to agree with him in condemning other men's sins. But it is quite another thing when he is alive,

received the law by the disposition of angels and have not kept it."

These verses are Stephen's last in his speech. They conclude his whole defence. They are the words which enraged his murderers. They are words which led to his own death. They bring an end to the longest speech which the Holy Spirit has seen fit to record in the Bible. Let us then give them our special attention.

The first thing we see in them is that *a preacher who is full of the Holy Spirit will be very bold in condemning sin*. That Stephen was full of the Spirit, there can be no doubt. It is something especially remarked upon. Those in the synagogue could not "resist the wisdom and spirit by which he spoke" (6:10). As he stood before the council, his face appeared like that of an angel (6:15). Immediately after these words we are told of his state, "being full of the Holy Spirit" (7:55). And being so full of the Holy Spirit, he was very direct and plain in exposing the council's sin. In theory Stephen was on trial. But the Spirit of God overturned this injustice. He so filled him that the tables were thoroughly turned. Stephen's defence did not end with weasel words. It ended with a stinging accusal.

The words Stephen used are "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears". To be "stiff-necked" is to be a rebel. An ox must bow to the yoke of its master. Israel ought to have bowed to its Lord. But they did not. They resisted, and stubbornly refused to yield. For an animal to behave as if it were its own owner is the highest folly. So it was with the supposed servants of God. And to be "uncircumcised" was the highest insult which an Israelite could imagine. Circumcision was the special sign which God had given to Abraham. It was the dividing line between the people of God and the world. To be without circumcision was to be a pagan. This was what Stephen accused the leaders of Israel of. Not that they did not have the outward sign. But he accuses them of totally failing to realise its true meaning. They were hypocrites, having a mark on their flesh, but being unchanged inside. The cutting away of their flesh was meant to tell them something. They ought to be converted, and quick in their obedience to God. But they were so far from this, that they had crucified God's own Son. They were not God's people at all. They did have the sign on their flesh. But God did not recognise them. Stephen refused to honour them as the real Israel of God. Is it any wonder that they were enraged?

But they were enraged by the truth. Stephen surely knew what kind of response there would be. But he was all the more bold in saying it. It is not kindness or love to hide from men their sins. It is not prudence or discretion to make light of sin. Sin is the most serious business there could ever be. It must be dealt with directly and plainly. To not do so is to play games with eternal souls. Let us not make light of these things. The Spirit-filled preacher does not. Any preacher who does, has no approval from God.

Let us see in these words secondly that *conversion is a real and necessary thing*. Stephen accused the council of having uncircumcised hearts. They ought to have yielded to Jesus - but they had not. Why not? Because their hearts had not been changed. Outwardly, they had all the religion in the world. They were part of God's chosen people. They were its very leaders! They had the benefit of the 39 books of the

God? How can a created being build something enough for his own creator? His glory fills heaven and earth! Common sense tells us it cannot be done.

The point then is clear. We are to look for the true reality in Christ. He is the eternal Son of God. He bears the exact image of God, and is the brightness of his glory (Hebrews 1:3). He alone can give an accurate revelation of the greatness of God. He only, who has been in heaven, can reveal to us heavenly things. Christ alone is the true dwelling-place of God with his people. In him alone does the fullness of the deity dwell in bodily form. If we wish to meet with God, we must go to him. If we wish the glory of God to be in our midst, then we must have him amongst us. Everything before him was a shadow, pointing forward to him. All that was before him was merely a hint of what was to come. It was when he was born of a virgin that God "tabernacled among us" (John 1:14). It is in Christ that we can truly behold God's glory. He is uncreated, having been with the Father from before time began. It is no idolatry to worship him. He is permanent; when the heavens and earth are folded up like worn clothes, he shall remain (Hebrews 1:12). To look to him is never a mistake.

If we do not have Christ, then we have nothing at all. We might have a good name. We might have a reputation as religious. We might be very regular and careful about our attendance in worship. We might live a very respectable life. We might know our Bibles, our catechisms and our creeds. We might even have the highest office in the church. But without Christ, we do not have God. Without the Son, we cannot have the Father (1 John 2:23). He who does not have the Son, does not have life (1 John 5:12). We must be completely convinced of this. If we are not, we may end up where the Sanhedrin were. The most faithful servant of God may appear before us, and we won't know it. We may think ourselves the most zealous persecutors of error, when we are opposing Christ. Let us ask ourselves then. Is our religion centred on Christ? Is the lamb all the glory to us? Do we count every service as worthless which is not focused upon him? Do we see all our works as useless and sinful, unless washed in his blood? Can our Christianity be summed up as Christ, Christ and Christ? Let us make sure that we are not like the council, thoroughly deceived.

Let us use Stephen's word to understand our Old Testaments. We might easily be confused by tabernacles, temples and priests. We can easily feel ourselves lost amongst so many ceremonies and laws. But Stephen gives us the key. The reality is Christ. Everything in some way or form, leads and points to him. Some things point to him in a way that is clear. Others lead by paths which are winding and obscure. But every road eventually leads to him. The overall meaning of the book ought to be clear to us. It is all about Christ. Is our religion all about Christ? God's purposes all are. Let us take this to heart, and feast our souls upon him.

Acts 7:51-53

51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 52 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 the murderers, 53 who have

and condemning ours.

Let us look at what kind of religion we have. Is it one of daily repentance, and daily looking to Jesus Christ? Let us search our hearts. We must not be content merely to believe the right things. It is not enough to be filled with zeal. To claim that we are following the holy men of old cannot save our souls. The danger of pride is very great. Unbelief takes her victims openly, but self-deception kills without fuss or noise. Let us not ask ourselves whether we have an interest in religion. Let us ask ourselves whether we are conscious of the saving power of the blood of Christ. Religion has turned many even into murderers; Christ alone can save a soul.

Let us observe secondly from Stephen's words *the remarkable ways of the sovereignty of God*. God's sovereignty is a subject big enough for the largest mind. There is enough food in it for a thousand lifetimes and then eternity besides. Let us notice in this passage how perfectly God's predetermined will was brought to pass - even through the evil actions of men. In the lifetime of Moses, evil men opposed him at every step. And yet God, who is not the author of sin, perfectly achieved his purposes. When he was born, there was a death sentence passed on all Jewish boys - yet he was hidden for three months. When he could not be hidden any more, Pharaoh's daughter "happened" to find him, and took pity on him. When he had received 40 years of indoctrination in Egyptian culture and learning, yet he chose to be an Israelite. When he went to visit his people, they opposed him, and he had to flee - yet in the desert, God met him. At every stage, there was either obvious or subtle danger. Yet at every stage, God was doing exactly what he had planned - preparing Moses to be a deliverer.

Let us marvel at the ways of God. He is not the originator of sin. Sinful men do exactly what they please. Yet in doing so, they perfectly fulfil God's purposes. How can we put these two things together? It is too much for our minds. Yet God's word insists that these truths do not need to be reconciled. They are already perfect friends. How striking this is! The Bible does not reveal a God who can be contained in our puny minds. His thoughts are above our thoughts. His ways are above our ways, as far as the heavens are above the earth. There is food here for the greatest philosophers. But there is also food for the simplest soul. The truths of God's sovereignty are not for our minds only. They are for our hearts. They are to lead us to bow down in worship before so awesome a God. They are to lead us to give glory to him.

Let us make a few remarks finally on Stephen's skill and wisdom in unfolding the Old Testament. He looked upon it as a book which was fully inspired of God. He found in it glorious truths to be received and believed. He understood it as revealing God's interventions in space and time, and which climaxed in Jesus, the Christ. It was not a dead book to him, but food and drink for his faith. When asked to defend the Christian way, it was here that he turned. He did not see it as giving an uncertain message, that could be twisted to fit any shape. He saw it as containing definite truths, to be received and believed.

We must ask ourselves, whether we receive the Old Testament in the same way. It is true that its times are more distant to us. Some of its customs are things we have had no

experience of. It speaks of places and peoples completely foreign to us. Yet for all of this, it is the inspired word of God. It contains solid food for the Christian's soul. It is something we must read and take to heart. It contains a story which has become our story, if we trust in Christ. It contains words which we, like Stephen, can live and die by. We will not understand all of its teachings in a day, a month or even in a lifetime. We must not be discouraged if we find much of it dark, and hard to understand. Let us only ask ourselves if we have a little more light than we did when we first began. Let us ask if we see a little further than this time last year. Let us press forward, looking in it for more of God's purposes concerning the Christ. If we search in it for Jesus, we shall never go far wrong. The Old Testament prepared for the gospel of God's Son; let us seek it out on every page.

Acts 7:30-36

30 "And when forty years had passed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. 31 When Moses saw it, he marvelled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, 32 saying, 'I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and dared not look. 33 'Then the LORD said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. 34 I have surely 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.'" 35 "This Moses whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

Stephen was accused of blaspheming against Moses. So it is Moses that he talks about most. But Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. His aim was not just to "get off the hook". He was not trying merely to wriggle away from the counsel. His aim was to declare the truth of God. His desire was to please his master, by making known the truth. So he does not only show them that his beliefs about Moses were Scriptural. He tells them what kind of men they were too. They pretended to be concerned for Moses. But they were walking in the steps of those who rebelled against him. God had raised up the true Saviour and deliverer - Jesus, the Christ. Just as the men of Israel had rejected Moses, so now they had crucified the Son of God. Stephen was making one thing clear - there was a higher court, in which Israel's leaders were on trial. Let us read these words with care.

Let us notice first of all *the great patience of God*. Moses had been appointed to be Israel's deliverer. He had been trained and raised up in Pharaoh's house for forty years, before his time came. Then, he went to visit his people - but had to flee. But God had not finished with preparing Moses yet. Another forty years of preparation remained. Now he must spend time in the wilderness. But he would not encounter God, or the burning bush, for another third of his lifetime. He would learn to be a stranger, a wanderer and an outcast.

have rebelled, he will receive us if we repent today. But that offer will not go on forever. One day, there will not be mercy available any more. Let us turn to him whilst we may, and praise him that he was ever so patient with us.

Acts 7:44-50

44 "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, 45 which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46 who found favour before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built him a house. 48 However the most high does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 'Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. What house will you build for me? says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? 50 Has my hand not made all these things?'"

These are Stephen's final words covering Israel's history. We must expect to find them especially helpful in understanding his speech. Where has he been heading? He was accused of blaspheming the temple. His Jewish way of answering the accusation might seem strange to us. He retold history, which we would not do. But to Jewish hearers, the points he underlined would be noticed and marked. His climax now speaks directly about the temple. It is the making explicit of what he has been hinting at before. Let us see what we can find.

Stephen's words tell us that *every outward thing before the coming Christ was merely preparation, and not permanent*. God had a dwelling with his people. But at first it was not a temple. It was the moving tent, the "tabernacle of witness in the wilderness". It was not a lasting home. Even when it was announced to Moses, it was not presented as the reality and fullness. It was "a pattern" of something "that he had seen". There was a heavenly reality, to which the tabernacle only approximated. It was only an "example and shadow of heavenly things" (Hebrews 8:5). There was a great reality to come, when Christ himself should tabernacle on the earth.

This tabernacle was not a fixed dwelling place. As it symbolised something better to come, it had no fixed home. It moved around in the wilderness. It was brought by Joshua into the land. And it remained the sanctuary of God for many years. Through the whole time of the judges, there never was a temple at all. If the temple was the great goal of God's plan, then the nation at that time was ignorant of it! Caleb, Gideon, Samson and Samuel never heard of such a thing. It was not until the "days of David" that a temple was spoken of. And when David suggested it, God turned him down! He was a man who had "shed blood" (1 Chronicles 22:8). He could not build God's dwelling place. It was his son, Solomon, who "built him an house".

But when that house was built, the prophets told the people it was not enough. What kind of house could be sufficient for God? He is the one who fills all in all. He has created the heavens and the earth. How could they be sufficient to contain his glory, when he formed them by his own hand? What kind of temple would be enough for

Let us see too in these words *the Lord Jesus Christ revealed as a prophet*. Moses did not only promise a coming Saviour. He did not only reveal one who would be his people's High Priest, to atone for their sins. He did not only speak of a great king, who would rule his people and conquer his foes. He told also of a prophet, who would reveal glorious truth. He spoke of one who must be heard, to avoid everlasting death.

What a glorious Saviour we have. He has undertaken everything necessary to save us to the uttermost. He atones for our sins. He rules over our enemies. And he reveals to us everything we need to know, for our salvation and to live a life to his glory. We must never downplay this prophetic ministry of Christ. It is an essential role for his work as the Redeemer. Through the prophets, and then through the apostles, and then in the Scriptures recorded for us, we have a full revelation of his will for the church. What darkness we would be in without our Bibles! What questions we would be ignorant of! What truths do we know about our Lord Jesus or his gospel, except those we learnt from its pages?

Being ignorant of the perfection of Christ's work as prophet will lead us to many sad mistakes. There are many Christians who look for feelings, and signs, instead of to Christ's word. There are many who are deceived by talk of prophets and revelations today, instead of looking to Christ. He has laid a full foundation for the New Testament church in his word. There, we will find everything we need to be equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We will not be blown about by every inward impression, or false promise of a new word from God. The perfect prophet has already spoken all that we need to hear. Let us then search the Scriptures with a new energy, believing that these things are so. Let us value them more each day, and never let them go. If others tell us that we need something more, then we need not believe them. If we know what we already have, we cannot think like that.

Let us notice finally that *God's patience does not last for ever*. Certainly his patience is very great. There is nothing in human experience that we can compare it to. When we look at the long years of unbelief and sin which God has endured, we can only marvel. When we think of his perfect justice and fierce hatred of all that is impure, we can only be amazed at such a delay before judgments come. We look at the wicked, and they seem to prosper. We are amazed that lightning does not strike them from heaven! And then we remember, that we do not know what kind of spirit we are of. The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them (Luke 9:53-56). His longsuffering is waiting now, as it did in the days of Noah (1 Peter 3:20). But it will not wait forever. There will come a time when judgment shall fall - and not be held back. When God saw the idolatry of Israel, he tolerated it for a time. But eventually, Stephen says he "gave them up" (v42). They desired to go their own way. They wanted their own gods - and God eventually allowed them to do it. They crossed a line, a point of no return. God's decree was then set. Exile in Babylon would be their doom.

Let us fear of provoking God. If we are unconverted, then we must remember that God's eternal anger hangs over our heads. Everlasting punishment is only a moment away, when his patience runs out. His mercy is very great. He freely offers us Jesus, a Saviour. He pleads with us again, and again. He lets us know that however long we

What was Moses thinking at this time? Did he question that he was truly called of God? Did he wonder when God was going to ask? Did he speculate as to why he was "wasting" his time in the desert, enemy of Egyptians and Israelites alike? We cannot know. All is speculation, and uncertain. But looking back, we can see the great wisdom of God. The Israelites were themselves to wander for 40 years in the desert. They themselves must learn to wait for God. They would not enter the promised land straight away. We are told that Moses was "very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth." Surely forty years in obscurity were a large part of this! Before God would send him, he would teach him about his patience. God would act in glorious power when he pleased. Moses must learn to depend completely upon him. What glorious wisdom this was in God.

Here is a lesson for every one of God's people. God is not only planning to do things *through* his people. He is also doing things *in* them. His way is to prepare a man or woman, before he uses them. They must first learn, before they can be used. His ways may seem very strange. It may appear as if we are to have a "day of small things" perpetually. But God's timing is perfect. He sees both the beginning and the end. He has not forgotten his people. The Lord Jesus has not ceased to purpose to build his church. But he has chosen to do it in such a way as all the glory will be his. He does not intend to share the praise. His way is to use methods that make it clear that the power and sufficiency is all from him.

Let us, then, learn to be patient. Let us try to see things from an eternal perspective. We are often caught up in the here and now. We are full of impatience and unbelief. Let us learn to be quiet, and to wait upon God. He shall work. Let us look to him. Let us not lose heart because he does not act in the way we would like today. Let us not think that his promises mean nothing because they are not delivered yet. Let us learn the lesson from Moses.

Let us notice once again that *God is not limited to one location or place*. Stephen's enemies were very zealous for the temple. But Moses never heard of such a thing. He knew about a wandering tabernacle, but not at this time. When God met with him, it was through a burning bush. When he spoke with the angel of the Lord, it was in the wilderness of Sinai. There was no building. But there was the awesome and holy presence of God.

Stephen's point was clear. The temple was never a permanent part of God's plan. The greatest prophet of the Old Covenant had met God without any such thing. And now that the greater one than Moses had come, its glory had faded away. When God came to dwell amongst his people through his Son, nothing other was required.

Let us make sure then that our Christianity is something more than services, places and times. God's true dwelling with men is through the Lord Jesus Christ. If he dwells with us, then we dwell with God. If he does not dwell with us then we are unsaved, then there is nowhere in the world where we can go to meet God, except to come in repentance to him.

Let us see clearly from these verses *that the doctrine of the Trinity may be found also in the Old Testament*. It is true that it is not found there with the same clarity. There is much that is dark, and obscure. But these verses clearly show us that there is more than one person within the being of God. There is only one God; and the God who spoke at the burning bush was Jehovah, the Lord (v33). He said, "I am the God of your fathers" - the only God who truly is (v32). The voice of the Lord spoke (v31). But the same voice and the same appearance, is also said to be that of an angel, or messenger (v30). The one present was the angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. He was born as a man at Bethlehem, but had always existed before. He is God like the Father, and so may be called Jehovah, LORD. But he is distinct from the Father, and so may be described as one sent by God too.

This doctrine is very deep. But it is very precious. The Trinity is not something which Christians have made up. The very earliest revelations to God's people contained much of it. God has always revealed himself as being one, but plural too. Let us not listen to those who quibble because the word "Trinity" is not in any biblical book. The truths which it describes are to be found everywhere within the Scripture. It is a truth which is clearly revealed, and which we must never give up. Our Saviour is not only man - he is very God. Indeed, he must be. Creation is God's; only God can redeem it. A mere man could not hear all his peoples' prayers, or be sufficient to answer them. Our Saviour is divine - and it is not idolatry or blasphemy, but the greatest of wisdom, to rest upon and trust in him.

Acts 7:36-43

36 "He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years. 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.' 38 "This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, 39 whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' 41 And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. 42 Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ' Did you offer me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 43 You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship; and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.'"

Stephen is nearing his conclusion. His words are growing more direct, and more bold. His reminders of Israel's past ways are becoming more pointed. His exposure of their apostasy is reaching its height. Let us look at his words to see what benefit we can draw.

Let us see revealed very clearly *the great proneness of the human heart to idolatry*. If there was ever a people who should have been free of idolatry, it was Israel. They had been in Egypt, and seen the Egyptian gods judged. They had observed the powerlessness of the magicians to rescue their land from Jehovah's plagues. They had witnessed "wonders and signs in Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness" (v36). They had heard the voice of God at Mount Sinai. They had received the commandments written by the finger of the Almighty. They had received his "living oracles", revealing himself as the true and living God. And yet for all this, they were idolaters. They "would not obey, but rejected" Moses, God's chosen servant. "In their hearts they turned back to Egypt", having no appetite or desire for the worship of God. Despite having seen such awesome displays of power, they made for themselves idols. After only a few days with Moses up the mountain out of sight, they claimed to not know where he was. They persuaded Aaron to make their own gods for them. They "rejoiced in the works of their own hands".

Unless we know something of the human heart, we will find this impossible to understand. What had they found lacking with God? What more could he have done to prove his power and love towards them? What more should have been needed to cure them of idols for evermore? This is the very point. Without the new birth, the human heart is incurably wicked. It cannot cease loving empty vanities, instead of loving God. Its love to other things instead of its Creator goes down to the deepest depths. The greatest miracles and displays of power, as long as they are on the outside, will not remove its prejudice. A leopard cannot change its spots, and a human heart cannot lose its darkness, without a miracle of God.

Let us understand, then, the complete necessity of the new birth. Any changes without it are only temporary. They are like the ripples upon a pool of water. The depths remain undisturbed. They may indeed be very impressive ripples. But for all that it will not come to anything. We must see, then, that we cannot be content with a little outward profession. Either in ourselves or in our loved ones, it is not enough to see them starting well. Only lasting fruit will prove that a true work of God has begun.

We should not imagine that idolatry means only golden calves. The human heart is much more deceitful than that. Thousands might worship statues, but tens of thousands worship their careers, or their bank balances, their sports or their hobbies. The Israelites turned back to Egypt in their hearts before they asked for a golden calf. Idolatry is whatever has our heart, when God ought to have it. We may never go near a carved image, and yet for all this be the greatest of idolaters in God's eyes. Reader - where is your heart? As you come to the things of God - does your heart lead you, or is it dragging behind you like a heavy weight? Do you still have your "first love" (Revelation 2:4) to the Lord Jesus? Does the thought of his death still melt you to admiration and awe? Is it a delightful thing to think of serving him in any way you can? Or have the cares of this life, and the love of the world, stolen your affections away? These are searching questions. Let us make sure that we can give them a good answer.