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# Title: Delivered by Angels

**Text: Acts 6:8-8:3**

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**Introduction** In the providence of time and in this moment of our own redemptive history, God has seen fit for this proclamation to be delivered on this particular morning. I have been considering this text for some time, and in fact, had scheduled to consider this passage even before Pastor Russ had decided to begin a series on Exodus. We will be hearing echoes of this passage throughout the course of study in Exodus. My prayer this morning is that our study this morning will orient our minds and hearts towards Christ even as he is expounded in the pages of Exodus.

Let us stand together as we read God's word together this morning. Beginning in Deuteronomy 33, verse 1 through 5. This is what God's Word proclaims to us:

Deuteronomy 33:1-5 "This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the people of Israel before his death. 2 He said, "The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand. 3 Yes, he loved his people, all his holy ones were in his hand; so they followed in your steps, receiving direction from you, 4 when Moses commanded us a law, as a possession for the assembly of Jacob. 5 Thus the Lord became king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together.

Luke 2:8-14 "And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

These passages mark two glorious events in redemptive history. The first is the giving of the law to Moses at Sinai. Not only are we told elsewhere in the book of Exodus that Moses face radiated with the shekinah glory of God, here in Deuteronomy 33 we are told that when Moses came down with the law for God's people he was accompanied by angels. It is a story not as familiar to those of us who are Gentiles. But the second passage we know by heart.

What a glorious occasion indeed was that night in Bethlehem. What an entrance into history. What other child has been accompanied by thousands of holy ones into this world? In this angelic moment on a Bethlehem hillside with shepherds, there is a brief glimpse into an intrusion of heaven into time and space. Reminiscent of what we learned in the book of Genesis, here is the Lord of the Ladder who descends with angels to earth to take

his place among men as He promised He would do. The angels are no longer ascending and descending but they have stopped to give praise and to announce the good news that Bethel is now obsolete. God has a new house; The Messiah has been delivered by angels to dwell among those on whom He has favor.

Yet, all is not glorious in the Savior's arrival on earth. The Messiah is born in a manger. It won't be long before mom and dad are in a flight for their lives and His to Egypt. All male children his age in Bethlehem are brutally massacred as a result of this glorious scene. Life is disrupted and so it will be for the rest of His life on earth. He is the Son of Man who has no place to lay his head. He is the one who has come, ironically, not to bring peace but a sword, "to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother". The peace spoken of by the angel on that Bethlehem hillside on that first Christmas morn comes with a price, ultimately the price of His life on the cross.

This intrusion of heaven into time and space has its climax not in the Shepherds worshipping the baby but in another glorious event years later. Just as the angels announce Christ's birth at night, two men in dazzling apparel at the dawn of the first day of the week will announce to frightened women "He is not here, but has risen." And when Christ ascends to His throne in the heavenlies as the exalted and resurrected savior he does so with two angels on the ground announcing to his followers that the good tidings of great joy is not only for all people, but will be spread to all people beginning in Jerusalem.

As Christ ascends, the Holy Spirit descends on the New Creation in an upper room, sent from Christ himself. Just as the Spirit had been poured out on Christ, now the Spirit is poured out on His people, even as it had been promised in the Law and the Prophets, which those disciples on the road to Emmaus now knew oh so well. In the wake of the Spirit breathing life into the church, three thousand are added to the number of the small band of followers that had been meeting in the upper room.

Yet all is not glorious in this new beginning. It isn't long before the church is in a fight for her life. Christ reigns from His throne in the heavenlies, but as He promised, the sword continues on earth below: those who hated him, now hate those who bear His name. There is rising opposition to those who believe Christ has risen from the dead and has ascended to His throne. Some who are Christ's witnesses have already spent time in jail. Angry words have been exchanged between the apostles and the same Sanhedrin that has already killed their leader. They have been beaten. And it's only a matter of time before the rising tension boils over and blood is spilled. The end of Acts 5 tells us that the apostles rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

Which brings us to our text this morning; Acts chapter 6 beginning with verse 7:

## **Stephen (Acts 6:7-10)**

Acts 6:7-8:3 "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became

obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

In spite of all of the opposition being leveled at the young church, the church was flourishing. As the word of God in the gospel increased, the number of Christ followers increased. God's activity in time and space did not end with Christ's ascent to his throne. The good news that had been proclaimed by Christ continues and increases with Christ in the heavenlies, and as it does so, God's dwelling place among men is on the increase. As Luke records it, the activity of God's salvation of His people is actually picking up speed. And where God is active, there are His instruments who are His means for accomplishing His activity.

The growth of the church in the midst of increasing opposition also created some problems for the new church. Seven men were chosen to address those problems, and one name that rose to the top of this new group was Stephen, a man, Luke tells us, is "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit". Some believe that Stephen was among the original 70 followers of Jesus Christ, which would have made him an eyewitness to most of Christ's ministry as well as his death, resurrection, and ascension. Stephen not only serves the church with his hands and his feet as he was appointed to do, but preaches and teaches the Word well.

More than once in this passage, Luke draws our attention to the exceptional Stephen. He is "full of grace and power", doing "signs and wonders" among the people. It's interesting that this is the language Luke uses to describe Christ (Acts 2:22). As Stephen engages what is probably his own synagogue with the claims of Christ, his Spirit given ability to proclaim and defend the gospel is such that his detractors were left embarrassed and speechless.

Stephen, then, is a rising star in the early church. There is no one like him. As Theophilus reads Luke's account he probably begins to think Stephen is God's choice for spreading the good news around the planet. But all is not well. Just as Christ's proclamation of the word in the synagogues invited enemies, so too Stephen's proclamation and wisdom in His handling of the word attracted the attention of opponents. The pattern that unfolds throughout the book of Acts is as the Word of God increases and as the number of the church increases the opposition to the church and her "Christ is risen" message increases. And as the opposition increases Christ further expands his kingdom. And this is precisely what is about to happen.

## **The arrest and the charges (Acts 6:11-7:1)**

Verse 11 of chapter 6:

11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people and

the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. 7:1 And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

The opposition to the infant church and her “Christ-has-been-exalted” message is escalating. In chapter 2, the apostles, within the descent of the Spirit in His life-giving breath, are mocked as being drunken men. In chapter 4, the religious leaders were “greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” The apostles were arrested and jailed and threatened with punishment. In chapter 5, they were arrested, and the leaders wanted to kill them but did not do so. Instead, the disciples were physically beaten and threatened again. And now, we find them not only arresting Stephen, but setting up a trial with false witnesses on dubious charges. Where have we heard this before?

It hasn't taken long... no more than a year or so... and the religious leaders who thought they could rid themselves of Christ now find themselves again at a boiling point with Christ's followers who are preaching the very same message He preached.

And what we see in these verses and what follows in the following chapters is a church that is very much aware that it is tracing Christ's footsteps, even his steps to the cross, even to the point of mimicking His story! Luke is painting a picture here of redemptive historical *déjà vu*. And as we'll see, Stephen himself will be doing the same. Unable to trap Christ with his own words in the courts of public opinion, the Sanhedrin found false witnesses and held an illegal trial. Unable to counter Stephen's preaching and teaching, the Sanhedrin, that very same Sanhedrin, and the very same Caiaphas set up false witnesses against Stephen in what came to be its second invalid trial involving Christ and his followers.

Notice the charges. Stephen is charged two counts: attacking God and his temple and attacking Moses. Both amounted to blasphemy. At least one of the charges is virtually identical to Christ's in his trial. Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the trial tell us that two false witnesses came forward and said, “This man said, I will destroy this temple of God made with hands, and build one not made with hands three days later.” Which is precisely what Jesus had said in John chapter 2 (19,21). Christ though was not speaking about the physical temple but of himself, God's new temple that would replace the old. It was Christ who dared to say, “one greater than the temple is here.” (Matthew 12:6) Such talk was heresy in the ears of those who stood to lose the most in the transition from the shadows to the reality of Christ himself.

The other charge involved Christ's relationship and teaching to the law. Christ said he had come to fulfill the law. Further, in his correction of Mosaic interpretation, he single-handedly had wiped away hundreds of years of scribal tradition and legalism. Again, such teaching was heresy in the ears of those who stood to lose the most in the reality that one greater than Moses has come.

Christ not only taught that He himself was all that the temple and the law anticipated, His life, death, resurrection and ascension had accomplished all that that the temple and law had foreshadowed. Moses and the temple found in The Messiah their ultimate God-intention. Christ rose and ascended as the New Temple and the New Torah. Stephen and the apostles had the benefit of witnessing Christ's fulfillment of His own teaching in the resurrection and ascension, as well as the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in the establishment of Christ's temple on earth made without hands. This became their proclamation. Christ, the new and better Moses, the new temple, the new torah, has risen and ascended.

The upshot is that while the witnesses were false in their motive and in their implication that Christ and Stephen meant to denigrate God and Moses, their witness wasn't all fabrication. They proved they at least had heard Christ and Stephen rightly.

Is it any wonder then, that the one who now stands accused of denigrating Moses and the law has a face that looks like it has just descended from Sinai with a set of tablets in his hand? We are told in Exodus 34 that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Moses with unveiled shining face proclaimed God's law to His people. Now we have God's servant, Stephen proclaiming the One who is better than Moses, who is the fulfillment of the law, and the establishment of the new temple made without hands. And in a miraculous display of affirmation in an adverse courtroom, Stephen reflects the Shekinah glory of Christ as God gives his awe-inspiring stamp of approval for all to see.

Brazen and unfazed by the obvious Moses figure in the room, Caiaphas says, what do you have to say for yourself? And again, this question is reminiscent to the question he put to Christ after hearing from the two false witnesses. But this time there is a marked contrast to Christ's trial. Stephen, full of grace and power, full of the Spirit and with wisdom does not stand silent in the courtroom. The Sanhedrin, in the glow of the shining face has no choice but to listen to what Stephen is about to say.

## The Defense

### Abraham's call (Acts 7:2-8)

2 And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' 4 Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. 5 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. 6 And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. 7 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' 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 twelve patriarchs.

Stephen responds to the question from Caiaphas with a sermon for the ages. Not only does Stephen defend the new temple, the new torah, and the worship that is in Spirit and in truth, he proclaims and models Christ and His gospel for the infant church and for us. Make no mistake, Stephen is not looking for acquittal. He well knows the fate of the last Defendant to stand before this angry mob on precisely the same charges. Before it is over, Stephen will stake his own life on the truth claims of that last Defendant.

Stephen responds to the question by giving the Sanhedrin a lesson in redemptive history. Here's where we find out \*why\* those who challenged Stephen in the synagogues "could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke". Like the apostles, he displays a mastery of the Old Testament that not only confounded his critics, but in the wake of their inability to respond, angered them to rage. To their consternation, Stephen schools the Sanhedrin on their own history.

Stephen responds to the charges with an appeal to five major figures in Old Testament history who represent four major historical periods. His charge was that he wanted to destroy the temple, where God presence resided. Stephen responds that in calling Abraham, God's presence was with Abraham long before there was a temple, long before there was a nation, and even before Abraham left Mesopotamia for the Promised Land. There was no temple, no law, no land, no sacrifices, no nation and yet Abraham enjoyed God's presence. Stephen recounts Abraham's history as one of a nomad resting on God's promises of His presence, a possession, and a people. Abraham was a man of constant motion looking for the city whose builder and maker is God, with no inheritance and no Son. Land was not of the utmost importance to Abraham. Pointing away from possession of the land, Stephen reminds his hearers that Abraham had nothing from God but a promise and a presence. Even though he had no land and no temple, Abraham was a worshipper, because God is a God whose worship is not tied to a land, nor is not tied to a building. Before there was a holy land or a holy temple there was a holy nation, Abraham and his offspring.

The second figure Stephen appeals to is Joseph. Verse 9: This is what the word of God proclaims to us...

### **Joseph's rejection (9-16)**

Acts 7:9 "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him 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. 11 Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. 13 And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. 14 And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. 15 And Jacob went down into

Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, 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.

Stephen not only continues his defense of the gospel, but he now begins his descent into the valley of the shadow of death. It's one thing to defend oneself against the charges. It's quite another to return the indictment back onto the judges and jury in the process.

At this point I begin to wonder aloud, do you know what you're doing, Stephen? Is this really what you want? Did you kiss your wife and hug your kids before you were led into the Sanhedrin? The turn Stephen takes here is more than rash statement made in the heat of the moment. This has clarity. This has comprehension. This has composure. And it is calculated. Stephen has begun his own indictment. And when he is done, the church and the history of Christianity will never be the same. Before a court that smells blood, Stephen uses as his defense God's orchestration of redemptive history.

Stephen first of all points out that Joseph was rejected by the patriarchs. Foreigners did not reject Joseph. Joseph's own flesh and blood rejected him. The ancestors of anyone with an interest in Stephen's trial rejected Joseph. Stephen is speaking of a common history here. And he is going to use that common history against the Sanhedrin. Stephen can still hear Christ who lamented in Luke 13, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" The Jewish people rejected Christ as Messiah, but that rejection came with a long history of rejecting God's messengers, going all the way back to Joseph. It's interesting that Stephen interprets Joseph's rejection this way. Do you remember what Joseph's brothers said to him? "Here comes this dreamer... let's throw him into the pit and see what becomes of his dreams". Joseph's brothers rejected him because Joseph was a messenger from God, proclaiming the message that someday Joseph would be their ruler and their redeemer. Those dreams were not passing fancy but revelation from God to which God expected an allegiance.

Joseph suffered as a result of that rejection. Joseph was sold into Egypt as a slave. Joseph is rescued out of the suffering and exalted as ruler and redeemer, despite the best efforts of his brothers to thwart God's purposes. Joseph's brothers ended up suffering themselves. His brothers suffered famine and as a result The Sufferer becomes their savior.

All the while, God was with Joseph! God's presence continues to dwell with Joseph in Egypt because communion with God is not tied to a land and it is not tied to a building. And in that regard, Stephen's mention of Shechem is not mere historical footnote in a so-called rambling diatribe. Shechem was the place where Abraham first built an altar in worship to the Lord in what later would be the Promise Land, long before there was a tabernacle or temple. Shechem was known as a sanctuary of the Lord, even though it had no temple, had no tabernacle, and was not Jerusalem. In answering his critics, Shechem becomes reinforcement that communion with God is not tied to a building or to a city.

The third historical figure to whom Stephen appeals is Moses. Beginning with verse 17, this is what God's word proclaims to us:

## Moses' call and rejection (17-43)

17 “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt 18 until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. 19 He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. 20 At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God’s sight. [First Joseph. Now Moses. Stephen has drawn parallels between Joseph and Christ and now he is already drawing parallels between Moses and Christ. Christ was born, Luke tells us, and grew in favor with God and man. Verse 20 continues...] And he was brought up for three months in his father’s house, 21 and when he was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. 22 And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. 23 “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit **his brothers**, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. 25 He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. 26 And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ 27 But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him [Moses] aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? 28 Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ 29 At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

The first thing we see about Moses here is that, like Joseph, Moses is rejected by “his brothers, the children of Israel”. Pastor Russ has already dealt with this passage and I commend it to you. We will not linger here. But, as Pastor Russ noted last week, while Stephen does not necessarily condone Moses’ killing of the Egyptian, it is quite clear that he places the “thrusting aside” of Moses the day after his intervention as an example of Israel’s history of rejecting God’s messengers.

Hebrews tells us that Moses renounced the treasures of Egypt and placed himself under the reproach of Christ. Moses, like Joseph, visited “his brothers” and seemingly expected them to recognize the obvious in his renunciation of Egypt’s treasures and intervention on their behalf. Moses knew what Israel should have recognized and acknowledged: he was to be their divine deliverer. Yet, Moses flesh and blood would have none of it and as a result, Moses suffered exile as a result of his rejection, and Israel suffered another 40 years of horrendous slavery. Stephen continues his lesson in redemptive history: verse 30:

30 “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. 31 When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. 33 Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 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.’ 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. 36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ 38 This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

Like Joseph, Moses is rescued from his suffering to save a suffering people. God delivers his people through a ruler and redeemer who, though rejected by the people has been exalted and sent by God to be His representative with His congregation.

All the while, God was with Moses. Just as God was with Abraham in Ur and Joseph in Egypt, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush in the wilderness far away from the Promised Land. There was holy ground outside of Jerusalem. The hallowed ground on which Moses stood was not tied to a plot of land or a building. There was no temple in midian. Yet there \*was\* holy ground.

And if the Sanhedrin had missed the connection from Moses to Jesus, Stephen, whose face is shining like Moses, draws the connection for them by quoting Moses from Deuteronomy 18:15 who spoke of another prophet to come for a people who were no longer interested in hearing God’s voice at Sinai. The interesting thing about Stephen’s quote is that he doesn’t finish the sentence because he doesn’t have to. Deuteronomy says “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers”. The rest of the verse says “it is to him you shall listen. I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” Peter quotes this same verse to this same court in Acts 3. By now, the point has been made, by the apostles and by Stephen to this Sanhedrin. Moses predicted one greater than himself was coming, one from among their own nation, and God was going to require of the people acknowledgment of and obedience to His messenger.

Moses’ implication as he speaks to the people in Deuteronomy 18 is that the people will have to listen to the One greater who is coming because they have not listened to him. And that’s Stephen’s next point.

39 Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 40 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.’ 41 And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: “ ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 43 You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’

Despite the authority given to Moses by God through the burning bush, despite God's redemption of His people from Egypt through Moses, despite the giving of the law through angels, the people rejected Moses again, and by implication in the word "oracles", the law of Moses which had been received on Sinai. Their rejection was \*so\* thorough, they wanted to go back to their enslavement and their idolatry in Egypt. Just as they thrust Moses aside 40 years earlier, they did so again at Sinai.

Their heart attitude reveals itself in their longing for a tent when they didn't have one. Even though God was to be worshipped at Sinai without a temple and without a tabernacle, the idolatrous people insisted on idolizing a location for worship. The indictment continues. Even when Israel had no temple, they insisted on putting the worship of God into a box. They wanted a God they could see. They wanted a "worship" that they could "manufacture" and "feel". From the beginning of their nationhood, the posterity of the Sanhedrin had been idolaters.

And again, Stephen is linking the Sanhedrin to their ancestors in a way that most surely will bring him harm. As Stephen starts in on the heart of the matter in the charge against him of blaspheming God in what they considered a lack of respect for the temple, he points out past idolatry to ground the Sanhedrin's current idolatry of the Jerusalem temple. Stephen notes Israel's idolatrous history of plagiarizing the temples of false gods just so they could satisfy their own idolatrous desire to have a building to worship. Worse, Stephen points out from the prophet Amos that their later idolatry was God's judgment for their earlier idolatry. The earlier gave rise to the later, and by implication, to the Sanhedrin (and on this point -- do we hear echoes of Romans 1 and God giving a people over to idolatry?). Stephen's point has been made: God's abandonment of an idolatrous people has as its just reward the very idolatry of the Sanhedrin. In making his point, Stephen anticipates his own rejection in highlighting the rejection of Moses.

Stephen's defense is that even though Moses was God's chosen ruler and redeemer of His people in leading them out of Egypt, even though Moses, God's spokesman, had a shining face after coming off of Mount Sinai with a law that had been written by God and delivered through angels, and even though God's shekinah glory-presence was among his people, Moses, the law, and true worship were rejected by the forerunners of the Sanhedrin. Moses himself spoke of One who was coming who would far surpass Moses. This one, who would be a ruler and redeemer and who would dwell in the congregation, would also be rejected.

Stephen, the one whose face is shining like an Angel, is charged with blasphemy against God and his temple and Moses. Does this sound like one who has been defacing the name of Moses? Does this sound like one who has dishonored the temple? In giving parallels to Joseph and Moses, Stephen is showing that it is his accusers, not he, who have rejected Moses and the temple.

And in furthering his point about the nature of true worship and the temple, Stephen appeals to two figures who represent the glory of Israel and its temple at its peak: verse 44:

## David and Solomon (45-50)

44 “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. 45 Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 49 “ ‘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? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?’

In the course of the history of redemption, God finally gave Israel a tabernacle which became his sanctuary. Even then, although God’s presence with Israel was symbolized in the tabernacle, it was a movable tent. The irony is that even as Israel is displacing the nations within the land, David is eyeing a dwelling place for God which would ultimately be, not just for Israel, but for all of the nations.

While David wanted to build a dwelling place for God, he was told that his son would build a house for God. It *was* Solomon who built a house for God, but even Solomon, at the dedication of the temple said “will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built”. And it was Solomon’s prayer that from the temple God’s name would be glorified throughout all of the earth. Solomon rightly understood that God could not be contained in a building. The ultimate temple could not be made by human hands, even as God’s presence filled Solomon’s earthly temple.

And Stephen does not believe that Solomon’s temple was the ultimate fulfillment of that promise or that prayer. David and Solomon, indeed the entirety of the tabernacle and temple system in the Old Testament, pointed forward to something better, something ultimate. Israel, in its idolatrous desire to worship something that could be seen, had deluded itself into thinking that Solomon’s temple and even Herod’s temple in Jerusalem was the final product.

Stephen makes his final appeal to the esteemed prophet Isaiah who asks in Isaiah 66, “what is the house you would build for me and what is the place of my rest?” Contrary to the practices of Stephen’s immediate audience, Isaiah and the rest of the Old Testament did not portray a God that could be shackled to a building. In fact, the Old Testament taught just the opposite. Any attempt to confine God in a building such as the temple amounts to idolatry.

In invoking that text, Stephen drives home his indictment of his accusers because the statement in Isaiah 66 begins a prophecy of judgment that is rendered by the Lord from the temple against those who have desecrated his temple and have cast true worshippers, those who are contrite and tremble at his word, out of the temple. That sound coming from the temple, Isaiah says, is the sound of the Lord rendering recompense against his enemies. That sound coming from the temple is against the Sanhedrin and its contempt for the temple and the one to which the temple pointed the true temple of God, Christ

himself. In rejecting the true temple of God, these men were no better than those who had worshipped the golden calf.

Stephen, answers the charges! Stephen, whose face shines like Moses at Sinai, has shown the Sanhedrin to be anti-law and anti-Moses, because they, like their forbears, have killed God's messenger of whom Moses and the law spoke, just like they wanted to do with Moses. He has shown the Sanhedrin to be anti-temple because they believed the temple to be the end product and have cast out the true temple of God, made without hands, Christ. God cannot be restricted to any one building or land. His presence cannot be localized.

Stephen's defense of Christ and his church against the Sanhedrin is a defense for all-time. The grand theme coursing through the veins of this sermon will energize the church's proclamation through the rest of the book of Acts and into early church history. But Stephen is not done. Having finished his defense, the defendant becomes the prosecutor. What happens next catapults the church out of Jerusalem and into the world with the gospel. Like the prophet Moses, whose blazing likeness he bears, Stephen emphatically places his audience the Sanhedrin into the Old Testament text and into the gospel story with unmistakable clarity and prophetic accuracy. His words carry the weight of the radical assertions that have him there in the first place: Christ is the New Temple and the New Torah.

## **The indictment (51-53)**

51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Stephen again is quoting Old Testament text. Notice that it is no longer "our fathers", but "your fathers". If they have any problems identifying with their idolatrous ancestors, Stephen gives them no wiggle room to guess. It was God who first labeled the disobedient Israelites as stiff-necked. Moses, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel equally described their generations as having uncircumcised hearts and ears. The Old Testament is full of examples and allusions to the murderous treatment that prophets received at the hands of Israelites bent on their perverted worship.

It is not Stephen who had disparaged the temple or blasphemed Moses and the law. All through the Old Testament, disobedient and idolatrous Israel had obstinately rejected God's will for their worship. Before the original tablets were even off of the mountain they were broken in two because, in their desire for worship that they could see, they had rejected the law before it was even handed to them.

This law, represented by the 10 commandments, had been delivered in a blaze of shekinah glory on Sinai. In his last words to Israel, Moses says in Deuteronomy 33, the passage we read earlier that the law had been delivered in glory by angels. This is no ordinary law. This is a covenant that had been written by God's finger in the Shekinah glory

of Sinai, delivered by angels, and proclaimed by Moses with a shining face. It was through this law that God ruled his people as their king.

Yet Israel, as Stephen has articulated, rejected Moses, the law, and God in his glory. Historically, Israel had no room for Moses. They wanted delivered from the Egyptians, but they were not interested in the deliverer. They wanted a temple, but only as long as they could confine God to a box as their captors had done with their own gods in Egypt. They wanted a covenant, but they did not want a law that convicts of sin, driving them to place their faith in a future Messiah and his provisional sacrifice. They wanted a king, but they did not want a king exercising God's authority over them. They wanted idols. They wanted Egypt. And they wanted freedom not only from slavery but from God.

And the Israelites wanted a deliverer but they did not want a Messiah. Stephen shows that the Moses the Sanhedrin thought they thought they held in high esteem preached Christ, the One they had already crucified. Not only had they killed the prophets, but they killed the One of whom the prophets preached. Moses and the prophets spoke of Christ and were killed for it, meaning any pending martyrdom for Stephen would have much precedent.

Stephen, the prosecutor, hands down his indictment. There, before the Sanhedrin with shining face, Stephen places himself within the story of Sinai. Stephen, the one who does signs and wonders like Moses, emphatically proclaims the obvious elephant in the room: "My shining face is a witness against you. In rejecting me, you have rejected Moses and the law." The indicted becomes the indicter. But there's more. There is so much more. Stephen isn't merely referencing Deuteronomy 33. He is not merely placing himself within the story of Sinai.

Luke has already provided the backdrop: 8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory (the shekinah glory) of the Lord shone around them. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Stephen is placing himself within the story of Bethlehem. Something or someone greater than the Torah has been delivered by angels. And as the disobedient Israelites rejected what had been delivered by angels, so too, disobedient Israelites, including this Sanhedrin, had rejected the fulfillment of the law which had been accompanied by angels to Bethlehem. Into the Old Testament line of martyred prophets, Stephen places the baby delivered by angels to be the new Torah. It is that baby, who is both Law and Lawgiver who would be martyred. It is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the Righteous One who numbered himself with the transgressors and made many righteous. It is the Righteous ruler and redeemer that Zechariah says would come riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey that has been betrayed and murdered. Surrounded by a heavenly host giving praise to God, the New Torah had been delivered and subsequently rejected, just as Israel had done to so many prophets who had proclaimed the Messiah's coming.

Stephen's defense is at its conclusion. The charges are in tatters. The Sanhedrin has been upstaged. Stephen has used the very Old Testament that is prized by the Sanhedrin to

show that the charges are without merit. And he has sealed his own doom by not only affirming Christ's claim to be the new temple and the law's fulfillment, but also by masterfully using the sacred scriptures in proving Christ's point. In rejecting the Messiah, the Sanhedrin and the Jews rejected the very law and the very Old Testament they claimed to honor. In rejecting Christ, the Sanhedrin identifies themselves with the disobedient Israelites that rejected Joseph and Moses and killed the prophets who spoke of Christ.

But Stephen's indictment, effective as it has been, has not yet reached its climax. Verse 54.

## **The vindication (54-56)**

54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

Stephen's end is inevitable. If his goal was to draw parallels between himself and Christ, then he has accomplished that goal and the Sanhedrin will make sure of it. His effect on his accusers was the same as Christ's had been: rage with a mob mentality.

One must wonder as the crowd seethes under its own indictment: Will no one come to Stephen's defense? Is there no one who will make a statement on his behalf against these charges? If the Sanhedrin thought Stephen stood alone in their courtroom, what happens next proves them to be dead wrong. Verse 55:

55 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. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

We now know why Stephen's face has been shining like Moses' did on Mount Sinai. Stephen was not alone. This is no mere vision. At the end of his defense Stephen sees the exalted Christ standing at the right hand of God. Standing? Has not Peter already stated in Acts that Christ is seated? Christ is standing because it is the Advocate who stands in defense of the accused. Stephen has already referred to this advocate as The Righteous One, a designation that denotes Christ's role as a mediator on behalf of His people before the Father. Stephen saw what John the Apostle wrote about when he said "we have an advocate, Jesus Christ, the Righteous. Stephen has been confessing Christ to the Sanhedrin. Now Christ confesses the preacher full of grace and power who had been doing signs and wonders among the people.

The turn of events against the Sanhedrin is complete. They've accused Stephen of blaspheming the temple and Moses only to have his face shine like Moses'. They've accused Stephen of denigrating the temple and Moses only to have Stephen use the Old Testament to prove who the real idolaters are. Their so-called regard for Moses was mere sentimentality.

And now Christ is here as heaven breaks into the invalid trial. This is no longer the Sanhedrin's courtroom. This courtroom belongs to heaven. Stephen's shining face should have been a tip-off that this trial was, all along, coram deo, before the face of God in the courtroom of heaven. It hasn't been Stephen on trial, but Christ on trial... again. At the end of Stephen's defense of the gospel, Stephen (unlike the popular phrase attributed to

Martin Luther) does not say “Here I Stand”, but “There Christ Stands”. Christ invades the Sanhedrin’s courtroom standing as an advocate for his defenseless child, Stephen and does so in a way reminiscent of the holy of holies in shekinah glory. The Sanhedrin has been trumped. Regardless of what the Sanhedrin will do, Stephen cannot be condemned because He has been vindicated by the Righteous One in the courtroom of heaven. Stephen’s vindication is from none other than the One who had been delivered by angels and had been rejected and martyred himself by the same Sanhedrin. In one great display of vindication, Christ the advocate, says “this son is mine”.

In spite of the in-breaking of heaven, in spite of the Shekinah glory on Stephen’s face, the Sanhedrin boil over into a blind rage. We aren’t told whether they could see what Stephen saw, but certainly they know full well the implications of what he is saying. The Sanhedrin, fully aware of the Old Testament texts, and their implications of damnation and judgment, know exactly what Stephen is saying. Verse 57:

### **The execution (57-60)**

57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 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.

The execution is almost anti-climatic. Christ was killed for claiming to be the new temple and the fulfillment of the law as the Messiah who had been promised. By now, Stephen has drawn such close parallels between himself and Christ that his execution is almost to be expected. In another piece of irony, the murderous Sanhedrin prove themselves to be sons of the disobedient Israelites, just as Stephen had argued. Like Moses, like all of the other prophets, and like Christ, Stephen is rejected. With shining face, Stephen has spoken the New Torah to the people and has been brushed aside.

Stephen’s last words testify to his close parallel to Christ. Both statements, “Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” are also on the lips of Christ as he hung on the cross. Just as Christ forgave his killers, so also Stephen forgave his killers.

In saying that Stephen fell asleep, Luke’s words about Stephen’s death are a dramatic contrast to the violent death that he suffered. Not only is Christ standing in defense of His own, Christ, the Righteous One, stands to receive Stephen into the heavenly temple made without hands.

Much is made of Stephen’s martyrdom. And rightly so. Yet in these verses there is a subtle detail thrown in meant to grab the attention of Theophilus and the early church. A new name is introduced into the story, almost as an afterthought, but it is not. Stephen had been the rising star of the early church. In God’s upside down way of doing things, it would not be the one we might expect God to use to light the world on fire for Christ in the wake of Christ’s ascension into heaven. But the mantle is passed, so to speak, from

Stephen to another rising star. Yet this rising star is within the ranks of the Pharisees. Saul will inflict much harm on the early church. But the man who would come to influence Christian history like no other will never forget this incident. Not only does Paul bring up Stephen in later testimony, the accusations against Stephen became foundational for all of Paul's theology. Coursing through his preaching and writing are the temple made without hands, Christ as fulfillment of the law, and following in Christ's steps to the point of martyrdom. The Sanhedrin may have been able to kill the messenger. But they were powerless to stop the message.

## **The aftermath (8:1-3)**

1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Saul's anger matches that of the Sanhedrin. One wonders what his role in the trial must have been. Whatever the case, Stephen's death becomes the gasoline on the fire aimed at the young church. While Stephen is mourned, the church is burned.

The irony here could not be more stark. The Jewish leaders had tried and executed one of the best of the young church because he dared suggest that God dwells in a temple made without hands...that God's Shekinah-glory-presence is not confined and cannot be confined to Jerusalem. In the wake of Stephen's death, persecution against the infant church pushes God's indwelling presence away from Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria and later the uttermost parts of the earth.

What are we to make of Stephen's defense of the gospel and subsequent martyrdom?

Stephen's sermon is a proclamation of the gospel from the Old Testament. Scripture supports Stephen's understanding of Christ as the new temple made without hands and as the fulfillment of the law. Those who reject Christ as the true Messiah are in reality rejecting the law and the rest of the Old Testament.

Moses preached Christ. One has not truly preached Moses until one has preached Christ from Moses. As we read and study Exodus in the coming weeks, we will and must see Christ on every page, at every turn.

As the church grows from Jerusalem to the rest of the world, it carries with it the message that Christ fulfilled the law, not only delivering us from the law's curse, but making us accountable to Him who is the Law, Lawgiver, and Judge. Christ's fulfillment means that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism. Stephen's message is an important point given that half the New Testament is dedicated to bolstering the early church against Judaizers who would attempt to impose Old Testament law in the New Covenant. Even as Gentiles gladly received the good news of the gospel, the Jews increasingly rejected it. Ultimately, when the Jews disobediently refused to acknowledge their true Messiah and His salva-

## **Conclusion**

tion, they were rejected by God, inviting divine judgment (Acts 13:46, Luke 13:34, 19:41-44, 21:20-24, 23:28-31). Thus, the life of the church occurs in divine fulfillment of scripture.

Before we are too hard on the Sanhedrin, we must see ourselves in their place. Outside of God's divine initiative in Christ, we are no better than they. If we had had the chance, we would have stoned Stephen. We would have crucified Christ. Outside of Christ's gracious and loving work on our behalf even when we were still sinners, we would be gnashing our teeth at the suggestion that the law cannot save us. We would be pushing aside any notion of a deliverer, preferring instead, to stay in comfortable Egypt with gods fashioned of our own hands. We know these things are true because we see remnants of such thinking in our own lives, giving rise to the need for confession.

What began as mockery at Pentecost, culminates in the death of Stephen because the progress of the gospel is always accompanied by opposition. The early church and those of us who follow in her legacy can and should expect to be martyred for naming Christ's name. What the Sanhedrin did to Christ, they did to Stephen and many other of Christ's followers. We can expect no less. Being a victim of injustice should not surprise us. Persecution and suffering are divinely ordained instruments for us to share in Christ's sufferings, to conform us to Christ's image and to move the gospel beyond current boundaries.

The purpose and mission of the church is to bear witness to the Christ who died, rose, and ascended in glory (Acts 1:8). In being raised from the dead, Jesus had been declared to be the true Messiah and the source of His people's salvation as had been promised in the Old Testament. To preach Christ is to preach Him as the One in whom all that the Old Testament foreshadowed and promised is fulfilled. Christ, as the new temple and fulfillment of the law, supersedes the shadows that pointed forward to his coming. The temple, the law, and the rest of the Old Testament shadows found their divinely ordained fulfillment and completion in Christ himself.

We have an advocate that not only mediates on behalf of his people but dwells with his people. We are not alone as we face an accusing world. Christ has come to dwell among his people, his temple and in doing so gives us a judicial standing before God and before the world that is not our own. In dwelling with his people, Christ bears witness to his people as their representative to God on their behalf.

Saul ravaged the church, not knowing he was accomplishing the divine initiative for this temple made without hands to cover the earth. In a twist of divine irony and grace, the murderous vehicle by which the temple made without hands in was scattered beyond Jerusalem, will later say in a letter to the Corinthians and for the whole world to hear that "we have a building from God, a house made without hands, eternal in the heavens." This temple made without hands is first and foremost a heavenly dwelling. It's what Stephen saw as Christ, His advocate, invaded the courtroom. What is true in heaven is visible here on earth even this morning in the gathering of God's people. In that same letter to the Corinthians Paul also said "we are the temple of the living God. And as God said, " I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Christ walks among his people this morning. May we

be willing to lay down our lives in order that Christ, Emmanuel, God's dwelling with man, will be taken to the ends of the earth, beginning in our own backyards.