

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 18, Chapter 7 continued

We are well into Stephen's speech of Acts chapter 7, which will end in his death by stoning. His speech is essentially a recounting of Israel's record of unfaithfulness towards God, and being stubbornly resentful towards God's prophets, beginning with the Patriarchs. His words are not meant to defend himself (something the accusers were expecting); they were meant to turn the tables to accuse his accusers. The discourse is also meant to remind the members of the Sanhedrin, as well as the angry men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen who were the ones who dragged Stephen to the Jewish High Court and claimed that he had blasphemed both God and Moses, that the history of the Hebrews is all about their rejection of God's prophets who bring messages of warning and chastisement from the Lord, and then their bewilderment when they are oppressed by foreigners and exiled from the Promised Land.

During his speech Stephen draws intentional parallels between Joseph, Moses, David and Yeshua. This infuriates all who were present even more. But in reality Stephen was doomed nearly from the beginning of his acceptance of Christ because of his background and his nature. Stephen was an outspoken, bold and fearless man who today we would probably label as a fanatic. He was also a Hellenist Jew, which meant that his first language was Greek. While this was the norm outside of Judea, in Jerusalem it was frowned upon by the Holy Land Jews, even though Greek was heard everywhere throughout the holy city. It seems all but certain that he was also a Samaritan; a people group that were despised and rejected by the mainstream Jewish community. Now as a Believer in Yeshua as Messiah, he was part of a small minority faction within Judaism; one whose reason for existing (worshipping the deceased carpenter's son from Nazareth as the Jewish Messiah) was not accepted as legitimate by most of the rest of Judaism. Stephen was a pariah to Jews, to Judaism, to the Temple and to the Synagogue, and he seemed to have gone out of his way to speak his mind to anyone that would listen. He was about to pay the ultimate price for his uncompromising stance on Yeshua.

Let's re-read the last half of Acts chapter 7.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 7:35 – end

Remembering that the reason for Stephen's trial is that he supposedly blasphemed Moses, Stephen reminds his accusers that their forefathers as captives in Egypt did not want to obey Moses even after all the miracles and signs he performed there. In fact, a few weeks after their escape from Egypt (and their tyrannical Pharaoh) many of the Hebrews began turning their hearts back towards Egypt. Stephen refutes the charge against him of being opposed to Moses by declaring that Moses was ruler and ransomer of Israel. Of course, unless Stephen was naïve, he full well knew that the charge against him was not that he was actually against Moses the man; it was that Stephen questioned the Traditions of the Elders (Oral Torah) that the Synagogue insisted is what Moses taught. In Christian terms, Stephen challenged the

doctrines of the local church.

Stephen makes a comment in verse 37 that quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, obviously making the point that Stephen's Master Yeshua is the one being referenced. Let's read the entire passage in Deuteronomy to understand Stephen's point.

Deuteronomy 18:15-19 CJB

¹⁵ "ADONAI will raise up for you a prophet like me from among yourselves, from your own kinsmen. You are to pay attention to him,

¹⁶ just as when you were assembled at Horev and requested ADONAI your God, 'Don't let me hear the voice of ADONAI my God any more, or let me see this great fire ever again; if I do, I will die!'

¹⁷ On that occasion ADONAI said to me, 'They are right in what they are saying.

¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I order him.

¹⁹ Whoever doesn't listen to my words, which he will speak in my name, will have to account for himself to me.

First, Stephen is saying that this is a Messianic prophecy of Moses. Yeshua once said this about Moses in **John chapter 5**:

⁴⁵ "But don't think that it is I who will be your accuser before the Father. Do you know who will accuse you? Moshe, the very one you have counted on!

⁴⁶ For if you really believed Moshe, you would believe me; because it was about me that he wrote.

⁴⁷ But if you don't believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"

Yeshua is referring to what Stephen just quoted.

Second, Stephen is saying that Israel should be expecting this new prophet and understand that he is going to be in the mold of Moses more than in the mold of King David (and in the mold of King David is what Judaism generally expected, and continues to expect, the Messiah to be). Third is that this prophet Moses speaks of will be one of their kinsmen, meaning he will be a Hebrew. And finally, since God will raise up this prophet like Moses, and God will put His own words into this prophet's mouth as with Moses, then those who refuse to heed him are directly disobeying God and will be held personally liable to God for their sin.

So Stephen says that the people rejected their deliverer, Moses; and even more when Moses went up to Mt. Sinai to receive God's Word they grew impatient for his return and so during his

absence began devising other ways to satisfy their longings and desires. The Israelites began worshipping other gods, specifically making a calf god, offering a sacrifice to it, and holding a celebration over what they had made with their own hands. The result? God turned away from them.

Let's pause for a second and face something that no one in the modern institutional Church wants to hear, but sadly, it is so: this description of what the Israelites did while waiting for Moses to return is precisely what is happening to many Christians as we wait for Yeshua's return. Moses came because God sent him, and Moses redeemed God's people. Christ came because God sent Him, and Christ redeemed God's people. Moses ascended to the top of Mt. Sinai, and there to be with God to receive God's Word directly from God. Christ ascended to the true dwelling place of God, Heaven, to receive God's Word directly from God His Father. Moses and Messiah Yeshua both promised they would return after a time of being with the Father.

But the people of Israel grew restless and tired of waiting, and decided that Moses was perhaps not going to return, or had been indefinitely delayed. They wanted answers and solutions now. They began to doubt Moses so they slipped back into their old ways, and determined that their intellect and their ability to craft their own solutions with their own hands was the right way to go. They found a willing religious leader to go along with them in Moses' brother, Aaron. The result was that they worshipped a god who was not their god (it wasn't even real), even though they were confident that they **were** worshipping their god. Christianity during the 2000 years Christ has been gone has grown impatient. God's Word has grown old and tired among many followers, and so Christians by the millions have slipped back into their old ways, no longer trusting God's Mediator, Yeshua, and by association also not His Word, the Bible. Instead some of our religious leaders have used their own intellects and agendas to fashion new doctrines and ways made with their own hands and minds that are pleasing to their followers.

Slowly these new doctrines have caused the Bible to be whittled down from its original. Early on the Old Testament was severed away by the Roman Church as irrelevant to Christians; today many denominational leaders warn that merely reading the Old Testament is dangerous to our faith. Thus it is common practice in our time that a Bible contains no Old Testament (especially for new Believers) only the New. Inevitably the New Testament has also been whittled down with the argument that really all that matters is our salvation in Christ; anything and everything beyond that is secondary or optional. How we live our lives after our salvation is not that important; only that our ticket to Heaven has been validated. On this earth our only real duty is to "love", in whatever way we choose to define love. So mostly only the Gospels matter along with perhaps a few select passages from Paul's writings. Thus a "Bible" that consists only of the Gospels is now common and is often what is handed out to new prospects by evangelists. Imagine the message that sends to those who are seeking God.

The result is that too many Christians now worship a god and a savior that bears little resemblance to the God and Savior of the Scriptures. Long ago I taught you that there are only 2 ways for us to know God: His name and His characteristics. When Believers no longer know, or care to know, God's characteristics beyond love and mercy, and don't think that we have

any obligation to learn His Word or to obey His commandments, we are worshiping a god that is a product of our intellects and that is just as false as the calf god that was fashioned by human hands out in the Wilderness. That a substantial group of the Israelites bought in to the manmade calf god was a proof to themselves that it must be right and true. That many, perhaps a majority of Christians have bought into the newer manmade definitions of God, of Messiah, and of His Word means to Believers that it must be right and true.

God used the smallest and least prominent of the tribes of Israel, the Levites, to rid Israel of the calf worshipper leaders and to restore truth. God is in process today of raising up the smallest group of Believers who long to learn His Word, to rediscover God's written truth, to reinstitute God-ordained appointed times and worship practices, and to obey His commandments. The history of the Israelites perfectly parallels the history of Christianity.

If you think this is not the case then consider the next Scriptural quote by Stephen, which is taken from the Book of Amos chapter 5:25 - 27. And by the way, if you were to compare this quote by Stephen as it is presented in Acts to what is found in Amos in the CJB, you will find distinct differences because the CJB is based on the Masoretic Hebrew Bible. The quote we find coming from Stephen's mouth in this passage in Acts is taken from the Greek Septuagint. This once again points up how the Synagogue differed from the Temple, as the vast majority of the Synagogues were Hellenist.

So that we can all follow along, I'll re-quote exactly what Stephen is recorded to have said in **Acts 7:42** and **43**:

42 So God turned away from them and gave them over to worship the stars- as has been written in the book of the prophets, 'People of Isra'el, it was not to me that you offered slaughtered animals and sacrifices for forty years in the wilderness!

43 No, you carried the tent of Molekh and the star of your god Reifan, the idols you made so that you could worship them. Therefore, I will send you into exile beyond Bavel.'

This is what the prophet Amos told the Israelites was their history and their condition; to say that Amos's listeners didn't much like what they heard is a monumental understatement. Thus few believed what God's prophet Amos said about Israel and to Israel. Why didn't they accept it? Their answer would have been: "When did we gather to together in the worship place of Molekh?" "When did we worship the god Reifan?" That is, Israel didn't feel that they were worshipping other gods; they sincerely believed they were worshipping their god Yehoveh; but in fact the god they worshipped was the god that they imagined. Therefore Yehoveh sent them away from Him. The same thing is happening today in Christian places of worship around the globe (thankfully not all, of course). So the question for Believers is: will you react as the crowd did when Peter stood before them and indicted them for believing false doctrines of men and rejecting the true Word of God, whereby they repented and wanted to know how to change? Or will you react as do the Sanhedrin and the Synagogue members when Stephen indicted them, and they hardened their hearts and minds and demanded that yet another of God's prophets, Stephen, who brought them this Word from God be killed?

Starting in verse 44 Stephen's address shifts a bit to the matter of the Temple. This was yet another accusation from the Synagogue; that is that Stephen was supposedly speaking against the Temple claiming that Yeshua would destroy it. The narrative of the Temple moves us into the time of King David, yet another Messianic figure well recognized by all Jews. The saga begins with the Wilderness Tabernacle, a tent. God ordered Moses to have this tent made exactly after a pattern that Moses was shown. After Moses was replaced by Joshua, Joshua had the tent brought into the land and placed at Shiloh. It remained there until King David (not for the entire time, as it was moved to Nob leading up to David). And Stephen says that David sought God's permission to build a Temple, a dwelling place for the Lord, but that his son Solomon was the one who actually built it.

Stephen again points up something that the Jews did not want to hear: God did NOT ask for a Temple, did not SEEK a Temple for Himself, and only essentially showed mercy to David by allowing David's son to build a Temple because David so badly wanted to. In verse 48 Stephen once again brings up the issue of manmade things being used to worship God. Stephen says that God does not live in places made by human hands. Oh my; that is NOT what the Sadducees and Temple authorities believed and neither did those from the Synagogue. Never mind that Stephen goes on to quote the truth of Holy Scripture from Isaiah 66:1 and 2:

^{CJB} **Isaiah 66:1** *"Heaven is my throne," says ADONAI, "and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house could you build for me? What sort of place could you devise for my rest?"*

² ***Didn't I myself make all these things?***

God well knows the way humans are wired. If you erect a Temple or a Shrine, it will often become more important than the one in whose honor it was built. We love to build grand religious edifices because they make US proud! We seriously think we are doing something for God when we construct monumental showplaces and call them holy sanctuaries. How often I've heard Pastors and Elders at church building meetings speak about the need to spend big and make things especially beautiful because we want to give to God our best. But the "best" that God wants from his worshippers is the best of the fruits of the spiritual gifts He has given to us to use to benefit others and God's Kingdom; not the best most lavish buildings that money can buy.

So often we unconsciously think that God is more present in a Church or synagogue building than anywhere else; and the more grand a building is the more present He is. But as is pointed out again and again in Holy Scripture, nothing made with human hands is perfect enough for God to entice Him to dwell there, and neither can humans ever build a structure that contains God. Even when it comes to sacrificial altars God doesn't want anything fancy, because humans not only cannot perfect that which God has already created, all we can do is to defile what He has already made when we try to modify it and make it better according to our standards. Very early on in God's Torah commandments He speaks of this principle.

Exodus 20:21-22 CJB

21 For me you need make only an altar of earth; on it you will sacrifice your burnt offerings, peace offerings, sheep, goats and cattle. In every place where I cause my name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.

22 If you do make me an altar of stone, you are not to build it of cut stones; for if you use a tool on it, you profane it.

The stones as found lying around on the ground are more preferable to the Lord than cutting, polishing, ornamenting and fitting them together to make a beautiful altar. Why? Because God's creation is perfect just the way it is. Our attempts to enhance these things, and then use them to honor God, are in vain. So Stephen's point is that the Temple building is held in much too high of regard. It is not something that God wanted in the first place; it is merely something that He allowed for the sake of King David and Solomon and for Israel. But His allowing it came with cautionary warnings as we just read in Exodus. Nonetheless, Solomon built a Temple so grand and so lavish and expensive that foreigners traveled to Jerusalem just to view it. And who do you suppose got the praise for that Temple? Solomon! Which is exactly what he hoped for.

So the Temple had taken up a life all its own. The building was what mattered to the Priesthood, the Sadducees, and to most Jews. It was a national symbol and a point of pride. What went on in that building was secondary. In fact, we need to remember that the only place in the Temple that God's presence ever showed up was above the Ark of the Covenant. Well, ever since the destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylon the Ark had gone missing. When Nehemiah and Ezra built the new Temple, there was no Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies; and it remained empty right up through the time of Christ and until the Temple's prophesied destruction by the Romans in 70 A.D. That's right: the Temple had not held the Ark of the Covenant, and presumably God's presence had not been there, since the Babylonian exile and subsequent return.

So Stephen is telling them that the magnificent Temple wasn't God's idea, it was a human idea. But King David didn't care; he wanted a Temple for his God just like the other kings had Temples for their gods. And then as Stephen's speech builds to its crescendo, he let's them have it with both barrels. 'You stiff necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You oppose the Holy Spirit. You do the same things your wicked fathers did.'

But as bold and offensive as all that was, Stephen then goes all in; 'your fathers killed those who told in advance about the coming of the Righteous One (the ***Tzaddik***, meaning the Messiah), but YOU were the ones who actually murdered the prophesied Righteous One when he arrived! Yet you claim to be the ones who receive the Torah but you don't keep it'. Stephen's life was over. He had bashed the Synagogue and the Temple authorities and they weren't about to take this humiliation lying down.

Most of what Stephen said doesn't need any explanation; however notice he says that "you claim to be the ones who received the Torah". Obviously it was Moses who received the Torah 1300 years earlier and not these people he was talking to. No; as we have discussed Stephen was using standard Synagogue language and thought processes when he uses the word

“Torah”. The religious leaders (Rabbis) of the Synagogue were said to be “receiving the Torah”, but what they and Stephen were referring to was Oral Torah, Traditions of the Elders, which they saw as divine and on par with the original Torah of Moses as given on Mt. Sinai. Stephen’s words demonstrate the lack of distinction in the minds of the Jews in that day between manmade doctrines versus the God-made Torah of Moses: Genesis through Deuteronomy. We have precisely the same condition among so many Believers today in Christianity, and much of Messianic Judaism. It can be difficult to untangle long held and cherished doctrines, customs and traditions from the actual Word of God. And attempting to do so, and speaking about it, often brings great anger and dissension. That is why there weren’t very many prophets of God that we hear of in the Bible, and it’s also why their lives were rarely pleasant. Humans of all ages and eras want to hear what we want to hear; and want to believe what makes us comfortable. Only sometimes are God’s Believers on an actual search for the truth; most of the time we search to find a leader or congregation that will validate what we have predetermined that we prefer to believe.

Starting at verse 54, we see Stephen’s demise. Grinding or gnashing of teeth is a Biblical idiom that speaks of deep upset, anxiety or frustration and we are told that this is the emotional condition of those who heard Stephen’s speech; they couldn’t stand to hear one more word. With Stephen now knowing for certain that he had but minutes to live, the Lord gives Stephen a peace that passes understanding. And God does this by filling Stephen with His Spirit such that Stephen’s face radiates and he is given a glimpse into Heaven whereby He sees Christ standing at the right hand of God. While Stephen’s statement is reminiscent of Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, it doesn’t precisely mirror either one. Yet, it is clear to me that Stephen’s purpose is not to necessarily directly quote Scripture but rather to describe what he saw as a fulfillment of those 2 Scripture passages. And since Son of Man was a well-known epithet that Yeshua liked to call Himself, there was no further room for doubt among those present: Stephen was claiming that Yeshua was in Heaven with God. No segment of Judaism at this time, other than for Yeshua’s followers, believed that a human being (including Jews), even in spirit, could ascend to Heaven and be in God’s presence. This went against all Jewish doctrines.

This was the final straw; all restraint vanished. Verses 57 and 58 briefly describe the stoning of Stephen. Since stoning has proved to be the standard form of execution used among the Hebrews all during the Biblical period, let’s explore it a bit to understand it better. The Old Testament gives us 18 cases in which capital punishment is called for; among these are for immoral sexual behaviors, blasphemy, incest, profaning the Shabbat, murder and idolatry. When we read that Stephen was rushed outside the city to be stoned, it reflects the laws about stoning and executions in general. In the Mishna, section Sanhedrin part 6, is the detailed information about stoning. Now while the Mishna was admittedly not created until around 170 years after Stephen’s stoning, there is ample evidence to suggest that these same rules we’re about to hear applied during the New Testament era. I’ll quote just a few parts of this Mishnah so that we learn how this procedure took place.

“When sentence of stoning has been passed they take him forth to stone him. The place of stoning was outside, far away from the court, as it is written bring forth him that hath cursed without the camp (Lev. 24:14). One man stands at the court (the Sanhedrin) with

a towel in his hand, and another is mounted on a horse.....near enough to see him. If one in the court said, 'I have somewhat to argue in favor of his acquittal', that man waves the towel and the horse runs and stops him from being stoned..... The place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses knocked him down.....if he died that sufficed.....if not a second witness took a stone and dropped it on his heartif he died that sufficed. If not, he was stoned by all Israel, for it is written the hand of the witness shall be first upon him to put him to death and afterward the hand of all the people (Deut. 17:7)."

So the idea is that first the condemned is to stand at an elevated place, and then is pushed off that place by one witness such that hopefully he lands on his head and dies. If he is only injured and not dead, then a second witness must take a large heavy stone and throw it down on his chest with the idea that it would break some ribs and make him unable to breathe. If that doesn't do the trick, then everyone else in attendance of the stoning must cast stones at him until he dies. Pretty brutal. Witnesses are those who make the accusations at the trial, and give testimony against the accused. In our case, we are directly told that the witnesses were false; they were liars. Thus by causing the unjust death of an innocent person, the Law was that false witnesses were now murderers and themselves subject to capital punishment, which included permanent separation from God.

Our verse says that the crowd rushed Stephen outside the city; this complied with Torah Law that neither execution nor burial could occur "inside the camp" (in this case the city limits of Jerusalem) because death causes ritual impurity. So we have here an authentic account of stoning accomplished according to the Law.

But here we are also first introduced to Sha'ul, Paul, with but a slight mention. Most Bible versions say that the witnesses (the executioners) laid down their coats at Paul's feet. It is hard to be certain, but it appears that Paul is playing some kind of official role at the execution (possibly as an officer for the Sanhedrin), and he was not merely a random or convenient person to hold and guard the outer garments of those doing the stoning. In Acts 22:19 and 20 Paul admits his participation in this event.

Let's be clear; some Bible commentators try to make this an illegal execution. That is not true. We are specifically told in Acts 6:15 that everyone in the Sanhedrin was present as they saw the glow in Stephen's face as he made his case. So while perhaps not every i was dotted or t crossed from a technical legal standpoint, this execution was legal and fully sanctioned by the Jewish High Court with the High Priest Caiaphas officiating. It was by no means a citizens' lynching.

Chapter 7 concludes with Stephen shouting almost the same words as Christ did as he was nearing death: "Lord forgive them for they know not what they do". But before that he commends his spirit to Yeshua as the rocks pelted him knocking him into unconsciousness.

We are told not that he died, but that he fell asleep. While saying "fell asleep" to describe one's death is not unusual in the Bible, it is always used in the death of a righteous person. It is my personal conviction that the reason "fell asleep" is used instead of "died" is a view to

the possibility of resurrection.

Let's close with this wonderful hope that is available for all who trust in Messiah Yeshua, taken from 1st Corinthians.

1Corinthians 15:51-58

51 Look, I will tell you a secret- not all of us will sleep! But we will all be changed!

52 It will take but a moment, the blink of an eye, at the final shofar. For the shofar will sound, and the dead will be raised to live forever, and we too will be changed.

53 For this material which can decay must be clothed with imperishability, this which is mortal must be clothed with immortality.

54 When what decays puts on imperishability and what is mortal puts on immortality, then this passage in the Tanakh will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory.

55 "Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin; and sin draws its power from the Torah;

57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Yeshua the Messiah!

58 So, my dear brothers, stand firm and immovable, always doing the Lord's work as vigorously as you can, knowing that united with the Lord your efforts are not in vain.

Death is final for the unsaved; but death more resembles a peaceful "sleeping" for the redeemed in Messiah. Death is its own end for the non-Believer; sleeping is temporary with an awaking when it is over. Stephen, indeed, merely went to sleep.

We'll begin Acts chapter 8 next time.