

ANTIOCH BIBLE CLASS

LESSON SUBJECT

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE OF CHRIST

SCRIPTURE TEXT: ACTS 7:1-60

MEMORY VERSE: ACTS 7:60. "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep".

INTRODUCTION:

In the previous chapter deacons were selected to look after matters pertaining to the daily ministrations of needs in the church. Stephen was one of them which were chosen, who was full of faith and power. Chapter six closes with false accusations being raised against Stephen and his faith in Jesus and the resurrection. He was brought before the high priest, who questioned him about the things they were accusing him of.

This set the stage for Stephen to give the most compelling and dramatic testimony concerning God's plan throughout the history of those very people, showing why this Jesus which they had rejected was the Christ. His defense of Jesus as the promised seed of Abraham was so precise and true, they must either acknowledge Jesus, or turn in mortal wrath upon Stephen. Unwilling to acknowledge their gross error, they violently jumped on Stephen, drug him out of the city and stoned him to death. Thus, Stephen became the first martyr for Christ. He would not be the last. According to Dr. Adam Clarke, this occurred when the church was about 4 to 5 years old.

Almost as a footnote, the text preserves for us a bit of information that would almost be trivia, if it were not for the connection it makes of one of the greatest of all apostles. Verse 58 says, --- "and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul". Stephen died not knowing of the powerful conversion and world-changing work of Paul. There is no telling how deep an impact Stephen's testimony and death had on the conversion of Paul. And that is so often true in the testimony of every life: we never know who is looking on and listening to our testimony and will be impacted forever. Moreover, we may never know the great work they may do for Christ, when you thought your life was a failure.

DAILY SCRIPTURE READINGS AND THOUGHTS

MONDAY – ACTS 7:1-8. THE CALL OF ABRAHAM.

SCRIPTURE.

V1. Then said the high priest, are these things so? 2. And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken: The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran. 3. And said unto him, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. 4. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. 5. And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child. 6. And God spake on this wise, that his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years. 7. And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God; and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place. 8. And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.

COMMENTS.

Stephen begins his defense, not by proclaiming his innocence of the charges, as he surely was, but by taking their own sacred history, which they knew so well, and crafting a defense, not of himself, but of God's great plan of salvation. He delineated Abraham's life from his call in Mesopotamia, through his journeys in their own land of Palestine. He reminded them of the promise to Abraham; of the bondage that would come to his offspring, and their deliverance. He underscored the covenant of circumcision and the gift of his son Isaac. He was laying the foundation by which he would declare Christ to be the true promised seed of Abraham. Abraham was the father of the faithful.

TUESDAY – ACTS 7:9-16. JOSEPH, AN INSTRUMENT IN GOD'S HANDS.

SCRIPTURE.

V9. And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt; but God was with him. 10. And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt: and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. 11. Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance. 12. But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. 13. And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren, and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh. 14. Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls. 15. So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he and our fathers. 16. And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulcher that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem.

COMMENTS.

Stephen's defense continues with the story of Joseph, who, at the young age of only 17, was sold into Egyptian slavery by his brothers. What followed would be about 20 years of loneliness, false accusations and imprisonment. But God was still dealing with him by the power of dreams. He was able to interpret Pharaoh's dream, by which he was vaulted from the prison to the palace overnight.

By becoming the ruler of Pharaoh's house, Joseph was restored to his family and became their provider in Egypt. Through all of the amazing events in his life, he was an instrument in God's hands, whereby God fulfilled his promise to Abraham that they would dwell in bondage for four hundred years. It was a link in the story of the great Hebrew history that Stephen's audience could not deny.

WEDNESDAY – ACTS. 7:17-34. MOSES THE GREAT DELIVERER.

SCRIPTURE.

V17. But when the time of the promise drew nigh which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt. 18. Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph. 19. The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live. 20. In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months. 21. And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son. 22. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds. 23. And when he was full 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 him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian: 25. For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them, but they understood not. 26. And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, sirs, ye are brethren, why do ye wrong one to another? 27. But he that did his neighbor wrong thrust him away, saying, who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? 28. Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday? 29. Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Midian, where he begat two sons; 30. And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sinai an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush. 31. When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord came unto him. 32. Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold. 33. Then said the Lord to him, put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground. 34. I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them, and now come, I will send thee into Egypt.

COMMENTS.

God had told Abraham that the captivity of his people would be 400 years and that time was hastening on. Stephen, in his outline of Israel's history, notes this and then declares the birth of Moses. As the chosen deliverer of God's people, Moses had a colorful life. First he was put in a basket in the river, then found by Pharaoh's daughter and adopted by her. He was brought up literally on the palace grounds and taught the Egyptian lore and possibly could have become Pharaoh. Moses believed that he was to be God's deliverer (V25). Even he was not anticipating 40 years in the Midian desert, watching over sheep. God, in his own time, not because Moses was 80 years old, but because the time of deliverance had come, appeared to Moses in the burning bush. Thus began one of the greatest stories of deliverance that the world has ever known.

THURSDAY – ACTS 7:35-50. MOSES, THE LAW, AND THE TABERNACLE.

SCRIPTURE.

V35. Thus Moses, whom they refused, saying, who made thee a ruler and a judge? The same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush. 36. He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years. 37. This is that Moses which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me: him shall ye hear. 38. This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us. 39. To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt. 40. Saying unto Aaron, make us gods to go before us; for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. 41. And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto 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, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness? 43. Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon. 44. Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen. 45. Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of david: 46. Who found favor before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. 47. But Solomon built him an house. 48. Howbeit the most high dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet. 49. Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? Saith the Lord or what is the place of my rest? 50. Hath not my hand made all these things?

COMMENTS.

Next Stephen covers the span of Israel's history from their deliverance from Egypt, their journeying and also their murmurings along their way for forty years. He especially emphasized their idolatry in making a golden calf to worship instead of the Lord. He took note of the tabernacle they built, which, he says, our fathers brought in with JESUS (V45), into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drove out. And he did not overlook David who wanted to build God a house, but instead it was the will of God that Solomon should be the one to do that. There is special significance in his statement (V48) that God does not dwell in man-made temples. The point is that God desires to dwell in the hearts of men.

FRIDAY – ACTS 7:51-60. THE VIOLENT MADNESS OF FALSE RELIGION.

SCRIPTURE.

V51. Ye stiff necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears; ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. 52. Which of the prophets have not your fathers' persecuted? And they have

slain them which shewed before the coming of the Just One: of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murders: 53. Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. 54. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. 55. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. 56. And said, behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. 57. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord. 58. And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. 59. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he said this, he fell asleep.

COMMENTS.

Stephen now directs his message to those who are questioning him. Don't forget that all Stephen has declared to them, came about because they had falsely accused him and had him before the elders. Stephen knew very well what their motive was: they planned to kill him. When he had finished describing all of their history, and how it was filled with disobedience, idolatry and rejection of God, he then included them in the disgraceful aspects of that history. Withholding no words, he accused them of "murdering the just one". "You have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it". They were cut to the heart and were in raging madness. They drug Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death, while he prayed for their forgiveness. History shows that false religion can be the most unreasonable, violent and tyrannical motivation known to man.

SUMMARY

It has been 4 to 5 years since the founding of the church. Add to that the 3 ½ years of the ministry of Christ, and you have about 8 years of the boiling, seething madness of the Jews religious hypocrisy against Christ and the message of the gospel. It was bound to boil over at some point; if not with Stephen then someone else. Stephen cut straight to the heart of the problem and defended Christ unflinchingly and without compromise. If you study the New Testament you will be hard pressed to find one single compassionate, good and righteous thing the main body of Jewish religionists ever did. Not one time did they ever show any gratitude or compassion at the multitude of miracles Jesus performed which so blessed so many people. Their problem was pride, jealousy, hypocrisy and blindness to their own law. Stephen, a good, decent, holy man lost his life because of it. But God saw it all, and worked on the heart of Saul; converted him and used him mightily to counteract this "spiritual wickedness in high places".

QUESTIONS.

1. What was Stephen accused of?

2. **What were his accusers guilty of?**

3. **Explain the statement that Stephen's face "shone like an angel".**

4. **Why were the Orthodox Jewish leaders so upset about Christ and the resurrection?**

5. **What other lessons can be learned from this great story?**