

# Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin

## Ice-Breaker

1. As a child, who was the best storyteller you ever heard? What made that person so effective?
2. Where did your ancestors come from? Do you have any heroes in your family? Any black sheep?
3. What's the longest speech you've ever listened to? Was it exciting or boring? Why? What makes a speech or sermon interesting to you?
4. In which ways are you "just like your mother" or "just like your father"?

## Scripture Passage

Acts 7:1-53

7 Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

2To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 3'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

4"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 7But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' 8Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

9"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

11"Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. 12When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. 13On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. 16Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

17"As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. 18Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. 19He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

20"At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. c For three months he was cared for in his father's house. 21When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. 22Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

23"When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. 24He saw one of them being

mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup>Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. <sup>26</sup>The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

<sup>27</sup>"But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? <sup>28</sup>Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'<sup>a</sup> <sup>29</sup>When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

<sup>30</sup>"After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. <sup>31</sup>When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: <sup>32</sup>'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'<sup>e</sup> Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

<sup>33</sup>"Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup>I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'<sup>f</sup>

<sup>35</sup>"This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup>He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea<sup>g</sup> and for forty years in the desert.

<sup>37</sup>"This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'<sup>h</sup> <sup>38</sup>He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.

<sup>39</sup>"But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. <sup>40</sup>They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt--we don't know what has happened to him!'<sup>i</sup> <sup>41</sup>That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. <sup>42</sup>But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings  
forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?

<sup>43</sup>You have lifted up the shrine of Molech  
and the star of your god Rephan,  
the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile<sup>j</sup> beyond Babylon.

<sup>44</sup>"Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup>Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, <sup>46</sup>who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.<sup>k</sup> <sup>47</sup>But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

<sup>48</sup>"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup>"Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?  
says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

<sup>50</sup>Has not my hand made all these things?<sup>l</sup>

<sup>51</sup>"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup>Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- <sup>53</sup>you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

- b [7] Gen. 15:13,14
- c [20] Or was fair in the sight of God
- d [28] Exodus 2:14
- e [32] Exodus 3:6
- f [34] Exodus 3:5,7,8,10
- g [36] That is, Sea of Reeds
- h [37] Deut. 18:15
- i [40] Exodus 32:1
- j [43] Amos 5:25-27
- k [46] Some early manuscripts the house of Jacob
- l [50] Isaiah 66:1,2



## Bible Study

1. From 6:13-14, how would you write up the formal charges against Stephen?
2. What does Stephen's storytelling (in effect a history lesson) reveal about his respect for the Mosaic Law?
3. Why does Stephen spend the bulk of his history lesson talking about Moses? What parallels does he draw between Moses and Jesus? How does this relate to the charges against him in 6:13-14? How does the quote in verse 37 begin to turn the tables on his accusers (regarding who is really rejecting Moses)?
4. From verses 44-50, what is his point about the temple and God's presence? How is he turning the tables against his accusers once again?
5. What does Stephen mean by the phrase "uncircumcised hearts and ears" (v. 51)? In this context, what is Stephen really saying about the Sanhedrin's regard for Moses and the Law?
6. Of what does he accuse them in verses 51-53? How does his charge reveal the reason why he gave them this history lesson?
7. Considering this oppressive situation, what type of person is Stephen?



## Reference Notes

**7:1 the high priest.** This same man questioned Jesus on similar charges, but received no response (Mark 14:60-61).

**7:2-16** Stephen begins with the story of Abraham recounted in Genesis 12-25. The story of Jacob and Joseph occupies most of Genesis 26-50. Right from the beginning, it is clear that God is not limited to activity only within the limits of Palestine.

**7:2 The God of glory.** The glory of God was especially associated first with the ancient tabernacle and later on with the temple (Exodus 40:34; 1 Kings 9:3). Stephen is already laying the groundwork that it is idolatrous to suppose that the presence of God could be identified with any particular place or building (7:49-50). God's call came to Abraham far from the "holy land."

**7:4 After the death of his father.** Genesis 11:26-12:4 implies that Abraham's father lived for 60 years after Abraham left Haran. At least one version of Genesis that circulated at this time (the

Samaritan Pentateuch) said that Abraham's father died at 145 years old, which fits Stephen's chronology.

**7:6-7** This is a combination of quotes from God to Abraham and Moses in Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 3:12. God would be with his people in Egypt and, after he delivered them from there, they would worship him in the desert at Sinai.

**7:9-10** The patriarchs, who formed the foundation of the people of Israel, foreshadow the continual reaction of Israel to God's messengers as they reject their brother Joseph (Genesis 37). Despite their rejection, Joseph became "ruler over Egypt" because God's hand was with him (Genesis 41:42-45).

**7:14 *seventy-five***. The Hebrew text of Genesis 46:27 says seventy, but the Septuagint text reads seventy-five.

**7:16** Jacob was buried in Hebron (Genesis 23:17-20; 50:13) at the cave Abraham bought from Ephron. Joseph's bones were eventually laid to rest at Shechem in a field that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor (Joshua 24:32). The Old Testament does not mention where the bones of the other sons of Jacob were buried, but a Samaritan tradition says it was at Shechem. Stephen appears to have telescoped events in order to get on with his main points.

**7:17-22** This background for Moses' life comes from Exodus 1-2:10.

**7:22** This information is drawn more from Jewish tradition than Old Testament narrative. ***powerful in speech and action***. Compare with the description of Jesus in Luke 24:19. Some Jewish traditions attributed all the greatness of Egyptian civilization to Moses (Bruce). Nevertheless, note that Moses saw himself as not at all eloquent and "slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10).

**7:23 *forty years old***. The Exodus account does not mention Moses' age at the time of this event, but rabbinic tradition taught he was forty.

**7:27 *Who made you ruler and judge over us?*** This inability to see that Moses' authority came from God is similar to the reaction of Joseph's sons to their brother (7:9) and to the Jewish leaders' resistance to Jesus (John 12:37-40).

**7:30-34** Just as God spoke to Abraham while he was far from "the holy land" of Israel, so too Stephen emphasizes that the piece of Gentile territory in northern Arabia where God revealed himself to Moses was called "holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). God's message to Moses was that he indeed was the one who would be sent to free Israel from Egypt (Exodus 3:7-10).

**7:33 *Take off your sandals***. When priests entered the Holy Place in the temple, they were required to remove their shoes. Stephen is reminding his listeners that God's holy presence was every bit as much on that distant mountain as it is in the temple.

**7:35-38** Stephen makes four assertions about Moses that have obvious parallels to Jesus. In the Greek, each of these assertions begin dramatically with the words "This (man)" or "This (Moses)."

**7:35** The first assertion is that it was "this Moses," whom Israel rejected, that was sent by God to be Israel's "ruler and deliverer." This is essentially the same claim Peter makes about Jesus when he calls him both Lord and Christ in Acts 2:36. Jesus is the new Ruler and Savior of his people, but he too was rejected by Israel.

**7:36** Stephen's second assertion is that "this (man)" performed wonders and signs as he accomplished his work of deliverance. The same is said of Jesus in Acts 2:22.

**7:37** The third assertion is that "this is the Moses" who prophesied the coming of another prophet whom the people were to obey (Deuteronomy 18:15ff). The Jews accepted this as a messianic prophecy (John 6:14), and the early Christians clearly saw Jesus as its fulfillment (Acts 3:22).

**7:38** The fourth assertion is that "this is the one" who received God's message to pass on to Israel. **assembly**. Literally, "the church." This is the same Greek word often used in the Septuagint to describe the assembly of God's people. Stephen is making the point that Moses (like Jesus) was the mediator of a covenant between God and people (see Hebrews 3:1-6). **received living words**. Stephen undoubtedly intended a parallel with the fact that Jesus, the new deliverer, was likewise with his people giving new "living words."

**7:39** **But our fathers refused to obey him**. In spite of all the blessings the people had (v. 38), they refused to obey Moses whom God had sent (just as the present leaders refused to recognize Jesus). Instead, they repeatedly resisted and defied him. The rigors of the wilderness led them to forsake the promise of their own land and desire to return to their slavery in Egypt. In their hearts, they had never left that land (Exodus 16:3; Numbers 11:4-5).

**7:42** Their involvement with the calf set the pattern for what the Old Testament calls Israel's spiritual adultery. Time after time they turned away from God to worship some idol or adopt various pagan religious practices (1 Kings 12:28; 2 Kings 10:29; Isaiah 1:29; 44:9-20; Jeremiah 7:18). **God ... gave them over**. This parallels Paul's statement about the Gentiles who pursued idolatry (Romans 1:24,26,28). **worship of the heavenly bodies**. Some of Israel's pagan neighbors worshiped the planets and stars as gods or the dwelling places of such deities. Although explicitly warned not to do so (Deuteronomy 4:19), such astrological practices became a reality for Israel (2 Kings 17:16-17; 2 Chronicles 33:3,5; Jeremiah 8:2).

**7:42-43** This is a quote from the Septuagint version of Amos 5:25-27 with the change of the city from "Damascus" to "Babylon." This again was a way for Stephen to telescope history for the sake of his speech. While Amos warned the northern kingdom of Israel about its impending deportation at the hands of the Assyrians (whose capital was Damascus), Stephen used this quote to sum up God's final message of judgment against the idolatry of Jerusalem, the inhabitants of which were deported to Babylon in 586 B.C. (2 Chronicles 36:15-21) **the book of the prophets**. This was a scroll that contained what are today known as the Minor Prophets, the books of Hosea through Malachi. **Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings?** In Amos (as well as here), the way this sentence is constructed demands a response of "no." The context of this verse in Amos shows that he meant to contrast the formal heartless religious ceremonies of his day with the sincere worship given to God by the Israelites generations before in the desert. **Molech**. An Ammonite deity vehemently spoken against in the Law because of its abhorrent requirement of child-sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5). **Rephan**. Derived from an Egyptian name for the god of the planet Saturn.

**7:47-48** While Solomon himself recognized that God does not live in houses made by human hands (1 Kings 8:27), the point was lost on later generations who lived as though God's favor could be guaranteed by merely maintaining the building and its ceremonies rather than by developing the inner qualities of humility, justice and faith. To call Israel back from such an attitude was the point of Isaiah 66:1-2 which Stephen quotes here (see also Isaiah 57:15).

**7:48 the Most High**. An Old Testament term for God used both by Jews and Gentiles. Only minor deities were thought to dwell in shrines.

**7:51 stiff-necked people.** The image is that of a people refusing to bow their head before God (Exodus 33:5; Deuteronomy 10:16). uncircumcised hearts and ears. Physical circumcision was always intended as a symbol of a heart set apart for God and ears open to do his will. Moses and the prophets likewise asserted that Israel's sin showed that this inner "cutting off" for God had never been accomplished (Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; 9:26).

**7:52** Jewish tradition held that Isaiah was sawn in two by the evil king Manasseh and that Jeremiah was stoned by Jews in Egypt. Jesus also warned the leaders that in rejecting him they were following in the same footsteps as their fathers (Luke 11:47-51). **the Righteous One.** Another term for God's Servant (see Isaiah 53:11).

**7:53** The final accusation Stephen makes is that these leaders are the ones who violate the Law of Moses. **through angels.** Jewish (and Christian) tradition taught the Law was given through the mediation of angels (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2), whereas the Gospel is announced directly by the Messiah himself.

## Caring Time

1. Since the Sanhedrin knew religious history every bit as well as Stephen, how do you account for their radically different response to Jesus? To fully understand Jesus, what is needed in your life besides well-rehearsed knowledge?
2. How do people hold on to religious rituals and heroes today, while missing the whole point of what those ceremonies and people represent?
3. In what ways could the charges that Stephen makes against the leaders be made against you? How might you be "stiff-necked" this week? How will you begin to bow to God in that area now?
4. Has Stephen's review of Old Testament history encouraged you? Challenged you? Confused you? Would you say that the Old Testament is more like a stranger or a close friend to you? How does this speech show the importance of the Old Testament to the early Christians? What will you do to let its importance grow for you?
5. When Jesus was brought to trial, he was basically quiet before the Sanhedrin; yet Stephen spoke very boldly. How do you decide when to speak and when to be quiet before opposition?
6. What has been your experience with people who seem overly concerned with religious arguments?