

The Jewish officials had run out of patience and were greatly frustrated by their inability to stop the earnest incursion of the believers who declared their faith in Jesus Christ. They contrived false charges against Stephen very similar to those they had raised against Jesus a few months before. How startled they must have been to see the face of this ordinary man transformed (not transfigured) as he rose to respond to the charges. Jesus hadn't given them the satisfaction of an argument refuting their manufactured charges, maintaining silence. He was innocent. Perfectly innocent. By His silence the burden of proof had remained upon His accusers. Stymied, they had successfully incited the crowd to demand crucifixion of Jesus. Mob rule and injustice had prevailed.

Now they desired to rid themselves of Stephen, despite the wise counsel of Gamaliel. Little did they realize they were rejecting God's last public appeal to the nation to repent and be saved. God had given them the benefit of marvelous signs and wonders and convincing preaching, even at the hands of this foreign speaking Jew who so vexed them. But even a face as of an angel could not break their stubborn determination. The High priest, who should have been seeking God's will and speaking for Him, coldly proceeded with the ungodly, unrighteous trial. Though they took pains to conduct respectable civil proceeding they would ironically find themselves "losing it," so to speak. Roaring like enraged beasts they bodily attacked the calm, innocent man with the angelic face. They stoned him while he was looking into heaven itself describing to them what he saw. Or rather, Whom he saw. Stephen, like his Savior and Lord, called for forgiveness for his attackers and the nation they represented.

Luke 23:34 *Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*

Did God forgive them for the murder of Stephen and their rejection of his faithful plea? Their Temple was destroyed about forty years later, the population slaughtered and scattered abroad, now for almost 20 centuries. Yet as documented in the Acts and later history, the gospel continued to go out world wide to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Gentiles), Romans 1:16, though not to the Jews nationally. Did Stephen anticipate the outcome of his faithful, bold response when he took the offered opportunity to speak? He didn't seek to defend himself or even his statements. He only sought to glorify God by turning their cold hearts from their heartless fleshly religion to the Christ whom they had rejected and had unjustly executed. His intent was not to condemn them but that they might be saved.

John 3:17 *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

Stephen's lengthy response was not a prepared sermon or an educated lecture intended to tickle their ears and calm their emotions regarding his preaching. He was filled with the Spirit, Who directed him in his approach, and his selection of incidents to touch upon, as well as the very words he used to express himself. Thus his message on behalf of Christ, though extemporaneous, was well organized, powerfully presented and focused. He fully responded to their false accusations but not as a formally arranged defense as one might attempt when trying to clear himself from a charge. As he told the familiar story he seemed to captivate his audience. They certainly could not find fault with what he was saying, or could they? But it gradually began to sink in—little pricks to the conscience. The stories and details each carried a subtle unwelcome message exposing their hard hearts and pricking what little remained of their seared consciences. While clearly establishing his knowledge and belief of the Jewish faith he used their history and their heroes to show them where they were lacking. He was clearly innocent of their charges. But he clearly established their national guilt, and their personal guilt as sinners.

His message has two general parts

1. Israel's pre-Exodus selection by God, the promises He had made to Abraham and his descendants, and their preservation and proliferation under His protection. Despite their national pride Israel had not always existed. They were not somehow intrinsically better than other nations when chosen from among them. Their early ancestors had not been perfect. Jacob particularly was self reliant, though finally faithful and submissive to God at the end of his days. His sons had rejected their brother Joseph, much like Jesus, the favorite of their father, and he had been preserved through suffering and rejection to preserve and bless them in the end, much like Jesus will.
2. The pattern of their revered forebears' repeated rejection of God's promises, His pronouncements, His ways, and His pleas over their twenty century history recorded in scripture. A pattern that had culminated in the death of their Messiah at their hands. When given the Word of God through Moses they ignored and neglected it. When given the Tabernacle and later the Temple they neglected these and turned to "high places" with groves of idols and false gods.

Not finished by any means, he paused in mid sentence, while quoting a well known prophecy of Isaiah, Isaiah 66:1. With an agonized yearning like the prophecy, made an impassioned appeal to them. An appeal that parallels the prophecy. The appeal that would quickly lead to his death. A death in accordance with his Savior's, but with no semblance of legal authorization. What did the Roman governor think of this? Lynched! Was there no justice to be found in the most highly privileged nation ever on

earth?

So where are we today? Have the Christians fared any better than Israel? Have we kept the faith once delivered to us?

Jude 1:3 *Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints?*

Have we kept from false gods and idols?

John 5:21 *Little children guard yourselves from idols.* (ESV)

Have we kept evil men out of our midst? Have we been any better than Israel in holding and celebrating what has been given us? Are we any more faithful than they? Any more successful than they? Does Jesus still love us? Do we love Him? Does He still love Israel? Is He faithful to us? To them? Will He return? For us? To them?

They gnashed with their teeth (Greek:: as in biting and eating greedily.) These civilized, refined, dignified men of high religious status became like ravenous beasts ready to destroy an attacker. As Stephen continued, the evidence against them was piling up and they were noticing. He had begun innocently enough with their well known roots. But somehow the way he told it stripped their fancied national glory from them. At first their ancestors were mere aliens, pilgrims for several generations, in a promised land not theirs.

Verse 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 Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. They could not credit them selves at all for the possessing the land they called theirs. It was a gift and calling of God.*

Furthermore as he spoke some implied comparisons that could be drawn from their history appeared—provocative comparisons. Some examples,

- 9 *And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,*
- 20 *In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months: {exceeding fair: or, fair to God}*
- 27 *But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?*
- 35 *This 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.*
- 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. {like...: or, as myself}*
- 38 *This is he, that was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, 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.*

Citations of Old Testament scriptures in the New Testament often refer the reader to, not only those specific words, but to the passage surrounding it and its context. The Jewish scholars and at least some “laymen” rigorously memorized large passages of scriptures in their youth. They had no Bibles of their own to

refer to as we now do.. When Stephen referred them to Amos it may have brought to mind the whole context with devastating implications regarding themselves, triggering their outrage. When God confronts a man he has two options, either to submit and repent or rebel, often attacking the messenger. These men attacked the messenger, (as they had Jesus only weeks before.)

Amos 5:21 *I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. 22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. 23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. 24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. 25 Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? 26 But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves. 27 Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the LORD, whose name is The God of hosts. 6:1 Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria, which are named chief of the nations, to whom the house of Israel came! 2 Pass ye unto Calneh, and see; and from thence go ye to Hamath the great: then go down to Gath of the Philistines: be they better than these kingdoms? or their border greater than your border? 3 Ye that put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near; 4 That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; 5 That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David; 6 That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. 7 Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed. 8 The Lord GOD hath sworn by himself, saith the LORD the God of hosts, I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces: therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein.*

This passage was literally fulfilled as recorded in the Old Testament history. Stephen's message implied a similar fate awaited his hearers. Then he quoted Isaiah,

Isaiah 66:1 *Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? 2 For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word. 3 He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. 4 I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not.*

We know from history about forty years after Stephen's death, the Jews were scattered again when the Temple and the City were destroyed by the Romans. Meanwhile we will follow the grace of God as He used this seeming immense setback to further His objectives. Soon the Gospel was spread worldwide, and the leading Jewish persecutor was found preaching the

gospel of Christ to the Gentiles.
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