

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

## A Sermon to Stiffnecks

Acts 7:1–53

Let's open up our Bibles together to the book of Acts. Our passage today is Acts 7:1–53, which is essentially just a sermon. It's Stephen's sermon to the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Sanhedrin.

In last week's passage, we saw the saintly Stephen get arrested and intimidated for his commitment to Christ. That was followed by false accusations against him. And instead of defending himself in Acts 7, Stephen does kind of like the Apostle Peter. He doesn't defend himself. He just preaches a sermon. And as someone who writes sermons for a living, I've got to tell you, this is fantastic, hard-hitting, Christ-exalting sermonizing in Acts 7.<sup>1</sup>

Several years ago, I heard that the British playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once called Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 boring. I find that interesting. Because when I was in college I read some stuff written by George Bernard Shaw. And the word that I would use for some of it is "boring." I guess it depends on what you're passionate about.

If you, like me, are passionate about God's Word, and passionate about OT history, which Stephen gives us a summary of here, this is not boring. This is a fascinating account of God's repeated interaction with his stiff-necked people.

If you were to ask, "What's this sermon about?" or "Why does he recount all of this Israelite history?" Well, Stephen gives you a clear declaration of that in verse 51.

<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people... you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."

What does it mean to be stiff-necked? I've entitled this message "A Sermon to Stiffnecks." What exactly is a stiff-necked person? Well, this is OT language.<sup>2</sup> It's the Jewish equivalent to what we in the Gentile world might call pigheadedness. It's a farmer's metaphor for obstinacy. It describes an ox or another beast of burden that refuses to respond to the prodding of its master, and instead stiffens its neck. And when an animal did this, its master couldn't guide it where it needed to go.

When a person is described as "stiff-necked" in the Scriptures, it means that they refuse to follow the guidance of the Lord. They refuse to go where God directs them. Just as an object lesson, everyone tense up your neck for a moment. You can sense what the word means, even as you do that yourself. This is a symbol of rebellion. It's a gesture of stubbornness. "I'm not going to do what you tell me to do, Lord. I refuse to relent. I refuse to be led."

The place in the OT where this "stiff-necked" terminology is most prominent is in Exodus when the Israelites make a golden calf and reject the Lord's leadership over them. That's why Stephen emphasizes that incident in his recounting of Jewish history. And then at the end of his sermon he says,

<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears,

Stephen is saying there, "You might be circumcised in the flesh, but your metaphysical heart (the center of your will) is uncircumcised. All you have is heartless religiosity! All you have is ritual and legalism. There's no sincerity in your faith."

*you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.*

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<sup>1</sup> MARTIN LUTHER: "Truly it was an excellent and sharp sermon!" Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 96.

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 386n1786: "The Greek term σκληροτράχηλος reproduces the Hebrew phrase 'hard in neck' (קָשָׁה עֶרֶךְ), which describes 'people who refuse to attend or yield' (M. Zipor, 'פְּשִׁי', TDOT 13:192); all occurrences of the Hebrew phrase occur in the context of the episode of the golden calf, cf. Exod 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut 9:6, 13."

**“You are just like them. You’re doing exactly what they did.”<sup>3</sup> It’s funny because Stephen totally turns the tables on these religious leaders here. Stephen is the one accused of wrongdoing, but you wouldn’t know it from his sermon in Acts 7.<sup>4</sup> He’s the one accusing them.<sup>5</sup>**

**When I was a kid, the best clapback on the playground when someone called you a name was the following: “I know you are, but what am I?” Someone calls you a thief or a punk or a jerk, and you just say, “I know you are but what am I?” Best comeback ever!**

**Well Stephen’s sermon is a very sophisticated form of “I know you are but what am I?”<sup>6</sup> The Jewish leaders accuse Stephen of opposing God and opposing the Word. And Stephen says, “No, No! You are the ones opposing God. You are the ones resisting the Holy Spirit and rebelling against God, just like your fathers did before you.”**

*As your fathers did, so do you.*

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**Let’s take a closer look at Stephen’s sermon and then we’ll talk application.<sup>7</sup> Stephen’s sermon has five sections. Write this down as the first. Stephen starts with father Abraham and the glory of God.**

1) Abraham and the **glory** of **God** (7:1–8)<sup>8</sup>

**In verse one, the high priest (Annas or Caiaphas?) speaks.<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> *And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”*

**In other words, “Are the accusations against you true, Stephen? Do you plead guilty or not guilty?” “Did you blaspheme God? Did you speak against Moses and the temple? Are you connected to this insurrectionist, Jesus of Nazareth, who said he would destroy this temple and change our customs?” Stephen is given a chance to defend himself here. But like Peter before him, he cares little about defending himself. He cares more about preaching the truth.<sup>10</sup> And just like Peter, Stephen’s going to go back to the OT to defend his position.<sup>11</sup> In Stephen’s case he goes all the way back to father Abraham.**

**Look at verse 2.**

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<sup>3</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 188: “The form of Stephen’s speech has ample Old Testament precedents, in those places where a leader challenges Israel to the correct behavior toward God through a recital of the history of the past, always referring to God’s merciful deliverance and often reminding them of the failures of past generations [Examples are Deut 26:5–10; Josh 24; Neh 9; Ezek 20].”

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle: “What followed was one of the most amazing and most potent sermons ever preached. Stephen knew his Bible and his Bible history.”

<sup>5</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 187: “Stephen’s speech is more a testimony and a polemic than a defense; but, as we shall see, the charges were subtly addressed throughout the speech and were ultimately redirected toward his accusers.”

<sup>6</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 206: “Ultimately his speech was not a defense at all but a witness.”

<sup>7</sup> Some have taken this sermon at a slower pace and preached it over a series of messages. I’m inclined, despite the length, to cover it in one message. It seems like Martin Luther felt similarly: “Now this epistle reading is simple. It gives us in St. Stephen an example of faith in Christ. So, this passage needs very little exegesis, and we can run through it quickly.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 85

<sup>8</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 355 rightly comments on the emphasis on God in this section over and above Abraham: “Abraham never appears as (full or abbreviated) explicit subject in vv. 2–8, while God is ten times the explicit subject in this section.” This he compares with the other sections of the sermon where “Joseph appears three times as subject and five times as nonsubject participant in vv. 9–16, with the focus on the section on the jealousy of Joseph’s brothers. Moses is thirty times the subject and fifteen times the participant in the long section vv. 20–40 (and v. 44), with the focus on Moses’ rejection by the Israelites and his being chosen and blessed by God.”

<sup>9</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 351: “The high priest, i.e., Joseph Caiaphas (see on 4:6), intervenes in the legal proceedings. After the cross-examination of the witnesses, which may have been inconclusive due to contradictory explanations of what Stephen specifically said, he addresses Stephen directly, asking him to comment on the charge that he has uttered words of blasphemy against the temple and against the Mosaic law.”

<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 355: “Luke narrates Stephen’s defense and proclamation with a threefold focus: the story of Israel is a story of God’s raising up leaders of his people whom Israel repeatedly failed to recognize; God has fulfilled his promises to the fathers as he gave them the land and the law and eventually the temple, but Israel repeatedly turned away from God to idolatry and did not realize that God cannot be contained in a temple built by human beings; Israel’s behavior in the past and the behavior of Jewish leaders in the present demonstrates their need for salvation.”

<sup>11</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 362: “We find direct quotations from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos, and Isaiah, and allusions to these and other Old Testament books, including Leviticus, Numbers, Joshua, 1 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Jeremiah, and Hosea. The speech concludes with a vision (v. 56).”

<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory<sup>12</sup> appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,

In other words, **“God’s glory is not localized in Jerusalem or in the temple. God appeared in his glory to Abraham even when he was in Mesopotamia.”**<sup>13</sup> There’s a subtle rebuke here in Stephen’s words. You can’t restrict the power and the presence of God to Jerusalem or the temple.<sup>14</sup>

Look at **verse 3**.

<sup>3</sup> and [God] said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’<sup>15</sup> <sup>4</sup> Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran.

Haran was not quite the promised land. It was just outside of Canaan.

And after his father died,<sup>16</sup> God removed<sup>17</sup> him from there into this land in which you are now living. <sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length,<sup>18</sup> but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.

So Abraham had no temple, and no inheritance in his lifetime. He lived according to the promises of God. He believed God, and he built his life on God’s promises.

Look at **verse 6**.

<sup>6</sup> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others [Egypt], who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. <sup>7</sup> ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and

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<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 366–7: “Stephen is speaking about the worship of God and thus about the temple. He uses the expression ‘the God of glory’ (ὁ θεὸς τῆς δόξης), a title which otherwise occurs only in Ps 29:3 (LXX 28:3); it is a majestic description of God which may echo the glorious theophanies during Israel’s desert wanderings. The God of glory is the God of Israel, whom Israel does, and must, worship.”

<sup>13</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 159: “Stephen’s point was that the Shechinah glory, the divine presence of God, was not confined to the land of Israel or the Temple.”

<sup>14</sup> Most of the history that Stephen recounts in his sermon took place outside of Jerusalem. Did you notice that. For instance: 1) God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia (7:2–3) and Haran (7:4), 2) He blessed Joseph in Egypt (7:9–16), 3) He spoke to Moses in the desert near Sinai (7:30–34), 4) He performed wonders and signs in Egypt (7:36), and 5) he gave his people the law at Mount Sinai (7:38). And worship of God is not localized in the Jerusalem Temple either. 1) The burning bush was holy ground, and Moses had to remove his sandals there (7:33). 2) Moses encountered God in Mount Sinai and was given living words (7:38). 3) The tabernacle, this portable tent, was a suitable place of worship for the people of Israel as they wandered in the desert (7:44–46). And besides all that Stephen reminds us 4) God does not dwell in houses made by human beings, the whole earth is his temple (7:48–50). You can’t put God in a box. You can’t contain the uncontainable God. You can restrict him to one area of the world or one specific constituency. Anybody who thinks that is guilty of self-absorbed parochialism. I think we can fall into that same trap today by thinking that Christianity is an “American thing” or a “North American thing” or a “Western thing.” The truth is that Christianity is advancing harder and faster outside of the Western World than inside it. We can also fall into that trap by thinking that our church is the only “true church.” Or we can fall into that trap more subtly by restricting our vision for ministry to the confines of own community.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen quotes from Gen 12:1, LXX. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 190n39: “Stephen consistently quoted from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which would be natural for a Greek-speaker like himself as it was also for the Gentile Luke. There are many variants in the scriptural traditions cited by Stephen when compared with the Hebrew Scriptures. Many of these are due to variations already present in the Septuagint as well as to considerable fluidity within the Septuagintal textual tradition itself.”

Some of the historical and factual differences between Stephen’s speech and the OT are more difficult to harmonize. I believe that a more generous approach to historiography including telescoping, geographical updating, approximations, and rounding off were acceptable in the first century world. Another possibility is given by Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 159: “It should be kept in mind that Stephen was under tremendous pressure in a ‘kangaroo court’ that was ready to kill him, and he might have made some factual mistakes. But that does not rule out verbal inspiration of Scripture. In this situation, the Scripture does not affirm the truth of what Stephen said, but it does affirm that Stephen did say what Luke recorded.” For a similar take, see Calvin’s comments in in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 89–90.

<sup>16</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 190n42: “The reference to Abraham’s leaving Haran after Terah’s death seems to conflict with the Genesis account, where Terah was seventy at Abraham’s birth (Gen 11:26) and lived to age 205 (11:32), while Abraham was seventy-five when he left Haran (12:4), making Terah 145 at that time with sixty years to go. Philo (De Migr. Abrahami 177) and the Samaritan Pentateuch of Gen 11:32, however, give Terah’s lifespan as 145, and Stephen seems to have been following that textual tradition.”

<sup>17</sup> John Pipers says, “God is merciful and does more than merely tell Abraham to go on to the promised land; he actually moves him.” “[He] exerts some special power on Abraham.”

<sup>18</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 190: “This latter statement was Stephen’s emphatic way of stating that father Abraham had no possession in the ‘promised land’ at all, and yet God was with him. In fact, it was to this landless Abraham that God gave the promises to Israel.”

worship me in this place.”<sup>19</sup> <sup>8</sup> And he gave him the covenant of circumcision.”<sup>20</sup> 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.

Now Abraham was a man of faith, and he is commended by God for his faith. But Abraham wasn’t perfect. **He had feet of clay, and his mistakes bleed all over the pages of the OT.** Abraham was never stiff-necked towards the Lord. But he is halfhearted at times in his obedience.

One of the threads that we see here throughout Stephen’s message is that God is slow to anger. God has forgiven and provided for stiff-necked sinners over and over again. And I think that’s part of Stephen’s message to these religious leaders in Jerusalem. **“You are stiff-necked and have screwed up royally by crucifying Jesus and defying God’s plan for redemption. But even now you can be forgiven if you repent.” God is even gracious and forgiving to stiffnecks like you and me in our own day.**

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**Now, here’s the second movement in Stephen’s sermon. Now he’s going to address Abraham’s great-grandson, Joseph and his stiff-necked brothers.**

2) Joseph and his **stiff-necked brothers** (7:9–16)<sup>21</sup>

Notice what Stephen says about Joseph and his brothers in **verse 9**.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt;

God had a plan for Joseph. God was going to make him into a great leader. God even revealed to Joseph through dreams, when he was a kid, that he would be a great leader for his people. But Joseph’s stiff-necked brothers resisted the will of God and “jealous of Joseph,” they sold him into slavery.

But “God was with [Joseph],” Stephen says.<sup>23</sup>

God was with him<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup>

Now watch how Stephen presents Joseph as a deliverer to his family. What man intended for evil, God meant for good (see **Gen 50:20**). And there’s some typology that Stephen is pointing out here... if you are attentive to what he’s saying.

Look at **verse 11**.

<sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons<sup>25</sup> in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, <sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 190: “According to v. 7b, the real goal of God’s promise to Abraham was not the land at all. It was instead the freedom to render true worship and devotion to God. Stephen would go on to show that even the temple had not realized this purpose. The promise remains yet unfulfilled. It is only fulfilled in Christ.”

<sup>20</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 285: “The Greek διαθήκην περιτομῆς (*diathēkēn peritomēs*) means the covenant whose content included and was even characterized by circumcision.”

<sup>21</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 370: “Even though Stephen (Luke) does not make such connections explicit, the jealous patriarchs who plot to eliminate Joseph can be seen as prototypes of the contemporary Jewish leaders who plotted to eliminate Jesus (Acts 2:23, 36; 3:13–15; 4:10–11; 5:30), and Joseph as a prototype of Jesus’ followers, whom the Jewish leaders oppose out of jealousy (5:17; cf. 13:45; 17:5).”

<sup>22</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 191: “The Genesis narrative has much to say about Joseph’s suffering, but Stephen chose not to dwell on this. Instead he stressed God’s presence with Joseph. God fulfilled his promises through Joseph, delivering Israel from famine by his hand.”

<sup>23</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 287: “The idea that Joseph had favor with God echoes Acts 6:8 and implies that just as Joseph was treated badly by his own, so will Stephen be... Stephen underscores God’s sovereign protection and work that proved that God was with Joseph.”

<sup>24</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 161: “Stephen’s point was that God’s revelation to Joseph came to him outside the land. Furthermore, Joseph was rejected by his own brothers, though God later exalted him.”

<sup>25</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 288: “The number seventy-five reflects the LXX in Genesis and Exodus (Gen. 46:27; Exod. 1:5). But Deut. 10:22 has seventy, as does the MT of these passages in Genesis and Exodus.” Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 288n6 adds, “Deuteronomy texts as well as Josephus, *Ant.* 2.7.4 §176, and 4QGen-Exod<sup>b</sup> 17.1–18.2 have seventy-five, as does 4QExod<sup>b</sup> 1.5. Gen. 46:26 LXX has sixty-six plus nine sons of Joseph to make seventy-five, while the MT apparently has only two sons of Joseph plus Jacob and Joseph to make seventy.”

<sup>26</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 372: “The reference to Shechem (Συγχέμ), which is mentioned twice, is significant since it is the city of the Samaritans at the foot of Mount Garizim. The reference to Shechem as the burial site of the patriarchs perhaps serves to underline the point that the fulfillment of God’s promises is not focused exclusively on Jerusalem or Judea: the place where the Samaritans live is



God used Joseph's precarious situation to bring about salvation for his father Jacob and his lousy brothers. Both God and Joseph were merciful to Joseph's brothers who deserved death for their actions. They rejected and betrayed Joseph, yet Joseph, in return, saved their lives. **Who does that remind you of? Who else did something like that?**

John MacArthur writes this, **"As Joseph was able to deliver his sinful brothers from physical death, so Jesus delivers His brothers from spiritual death."**<sup>27</sup> There's no doubt in my mind that this is exactly what Stephen is doing by mentioning Joseph.<sup>28</sup> He is creating a parallel between Joseph and Jesus and Joseph's lousy brothers and the lousy religious leaders of Israel in his day.<sup>29</sup> Preach it, Stephen!

Stephen isn't really defending himself in this speech. He's turning the tables on these religious leaders and subtly accusing them. He's subtle at this point anyway... his subtlety is going to diminish later!

**Look, here's something you need to know. We're all stiff-necked sinners. We were born that way. We were born with stubborn rebelliousness flowing in our veins. It's part of our inheritance from Adam and Eve when they fell in the Garden of Eden. And so when we hear Stephen's message we shouldn't laugh at these stiff-necked Sadducees and Pharisees. Nor should we despise them for their rebellion. They are us. And we are them. But thanks to God, who is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, we have been provided this great opportunity for salvation.**

**And part of what Stephen is saying here is, "Stop resisting the Holy Spirit. Repent of your sins. Repent and embrace Christ as your Savior."**

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**Speaking of stiff-necked rebellion, write this down as #3. This third section deals with Moses and Israel's rejection of him as a rescuer.**

3) Moses **rejected** as **rescuer** (7:17-43)

Now before we get into the details of Stephen's sermon concerning Moses, let me just point out a few facts about this section of the sermon. First of all, notice the structure. Stephen structures his comments about Moses around the three forty-year periods of Moses's life. There was his first forty years in Egypt (7:17-22). Then his next forty years in Midian (7:23-29). And then his final forty years leading the people out of Egypt and into the promised land (7:30-43).<sup>30</sup>

Notice too that approximately half of Stephen's sermon deals with Moses.<sup>31</sup> Why so much focus on Moses? Well, probably because the Hellenistic Jews accused Stephen of speaking against Moses (see 6:11). This is Stephen's way of saying, **"I know Moses. I know Moses better than you do! And I'm speaking the truth about him."**

Also Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, which were the only books the Sadducees held as Scripture. So it makes sense for Stephen to focus his attention on their hero and the author of their books.

Another key point in the life of Moses is that he never entered the promised land. He never came to Jerusalem, and he never saw the temple. He, instead, wandered in the wilderness while God manifested his presence in the tabernacle. Once again, Stephen is subtly emphasizing that God is not localized in Jerusalem or in a temple. In fact, almost the entirety of this sermon deals with events that take place outside of the boundaries

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part of God's history with his people. Luke's readers know from 1:8 that the good news will be proclaimed also in Samaria. There may be a 'negative' typology at work as well: while the patriarchs died and were buried in a grave whose location is known, Jesus died and was buried but did not remain in the grave."

<sup>27</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1-11*, MNTC, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 162: "God used a rejected one to save the rejecters. What was true of Joseph is true of the Messiah." Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 371: "The role of Joseph, who rescues Israel from affliction, corresponds to the role of Moses (cf. v. 36) and especially of Jesus."

<sup>29</sup> CHRYSOSTOM: "Thus even the one who was sold as slave, he makes him reign as a king in the place where he was considered a slave. Just as Christ also in death shows his power, so he reigns there, where they sold him." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 77.

<sup>30</sup> According to Deuteronomy 34:7, Moses died at age 120.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 7:17-43 is 26 verses. If you remove the first verse of Acts 7:1, then the sermon is 52 verses long. Of course, we have to keep in mind that Luke was probably synthesizing and editorializing the sermon for us. It's probably that Paul was his source for the content of Stephen's sermon. Also we have to keep in mind that Stephen may have wanted to preach more, but he was probably angrily interrupted.

of the promised land.<sup>32</sup> Stephen, as a Hellenistic Jew, has a better understanding of Jesus's mission to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8), than even the apostles do at this time!<sup>33</sup>

So, Moses. "You wanna talk Moses, religious leaders! Let's talk Moses." Look at verse 17.

<sup>17</sup> "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied<sup>34</sup> in Egypt<sup>18</sup> until there arose over Egypt another king<sup>35</sup> who did not know Joseph.<sup>36</sup> <sup>19</sup> He dealt shrewdly<sup>37</sup> with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive.<sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight.

**Not beautiful in the sense that Moses had high cheek bones and flowing locks like a baby Fabio or something.** No, Moses was strong in features and in temperament.<sup>38</sup> And he was a man who was uniquely gifted to lead the Israelites out of Israel.

He should have been killed in his infancy by Pharaoh's decree. But here's the irony. Not only was he spared from Pharaoh's decree, but he was spared by Pharaoh's own daughter. So Pharaoh raised in his house the very child who would later smite his people, the Egyptians, and liberate the Israelites. God has a unique way of going about his plan.

Look at the middle of verse 20.

And [Moses] was brought up for three months in his father's house,<sup>21</sup> and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son.<sup>22</sup> And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.<sup>39</sup>

If you remember, Moses thought he was a bad speaker. He begged the Lord not to let him speak, and to speak through his brother Aaron instead (Exod 4:10–17).<sup>40</sup> But Moses, through God's help, eventually found

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<sup>32</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 193: "All God's special acts of deliverance in Stephen's historical sketch take place outside the borders of Israel."

<sup>33</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 170: "Stephen emphasized the universality of the new faith; it is to be applied both to those inside and outside the land. Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew, and he understood the logical implications of the new faith that even the apostles were not yet able to see. In fact, it was not until Acts 10 that Peter understood."

<sup>34</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 373: "If the expression 'the people grew and multiplied' in v. 17 reminds Luke's readers of the growth of the church (cf. 6:7; 12:24), Stephen's reference to Israel's oppression in Egypt implies a typological link with the persecution by the Jewish leaders of the followers of Jesus who represent the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham."

<sup>35</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 164n21: "Historically, this was due to a dynastic change. Roughly around 1750 B.C., a Semitic people called 'the Hyksos' invaded Egypt from the northeast. They conquered Egypt and started a new dynasty. The reign of the Hyksos lasted until around 1550 B.C. It comprised the 15th to 17th dynasties. The story of Joseph and the emigration of Israel to Goshen took place during the time of their rule. Because of their own Semitic descent, the Hyksos allowed fellow Semites, such as Joseph and Jacob, to immigrate to Egypt during the famine. It was also the reason why Joseph rose to power in Egypt. In the 16th century, Ahmose I overthrew the Hyksos, ordered them expelled, and initiated the 18th Dynasty."

<sup>36</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 289: "Suggested possibilities for the pharaoh who conceived this new policy include Seti I (1308–1290 BC; Fitzmyer 1998: 375), Rameses II (1290–1224 BC; Bruce 1990: 196), and Thutmose I (ca. 1600–1514 BC [Larkin 1995: 111], whose dates are favored by the internal biblical chronology), depending on how the chronology of the OT correlates with Egyptian chronology, an issue that is debated."

<sup>37</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 194n53: "The verb translated 'deal treacherously' (κατασοφίζομαι) also occurs in Exod 1:10 LXX, where Pharaoh said, 'Let us deal shrewdly with [the Israelites].' It all depends on one's perspective: what was shrewd wisdom to Pharaoh was sheer treachery to the Jews."

<sup>38</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 290: "The term often translated 'beautiful' (ἀστεῖος, *asteios*) [Hebrew: נָחַם] does not refer so much to looks as to breeding: Moses was well formed or of favored status before God."

<sup>39</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 374: "The following elements of Stephen's description underscore Moses' role as a savior figure, who typologically prefigures Jesus as the Savior of the people of Israel. 1691 (1) Moses was born 'at this time' (ἐν ᾧ καιρῷ), i.e., at the right time (cf. Luke 2:1–2). (2) Moses was 'well-bred in God's sight' (ἦν ἀστεῖος τῷ θεῷ), a physical beauty that results from God's providence and is 'a sign of his vocation.' (3) Moses was educated 'in all the wisdom' (ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ) of the Egyptians, a wisdom that he needed for the mission for which God will commission him (cf. Luke 2:40, 52, which speaks of Jesus' growth in 'wisdom' and in 'favor with God and man'). (4) Moses was 'powerful in words and deeds' (δυνατὸς ἐν λόγοις καὶ ἔργοις), a phrase that is not found in Exod 2 but occurs in Luke 24:19 as a description of Jesus as 'a prophet mighty in deed and word (δυνατὸς ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ) before God and all the people' (cf. Acts 2:22: 'a man accredited to you by God with mighty deeds')."

<sup>40</sup> See the article at *The Daily Apologist* by Dewayne Bryant entitled "Bible Contradiction: Was Moses a Poor Speaker or Not?," 11-12-21: <https://thedailyapologist.com/blog/bible-contradiction-was-moses-a-poor-speaker-or-not>

his voice. And Stephen rightly calls him “mighty in words and deeds.”<sup>41</sup> And he wasn’t *just* mighty in the spoken word. He was *also* mighty in the written Word.

Well Moses, at age forty, tries to liberate his people. But look what happens. Look at **verse 23**. Stephen gives us more detail here than even Moses gave us himself in the Pentateuch.

<sup>23</sup> “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> 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?’ <sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’ <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?”

In other words, they rejected their rescuer. God sent Joseph to rescue them; they rejected him. God sent Moses to rescue them; they rejected him. **They are a stiff-necked people. We are a stiff-necked people. God sent Jesus to rescue Jews and Gentiles both. And we reject him.**

But God has a plan even in that rejection. Moses goes down to Midian and spends forty years there.

<sup>29</sup> At this retort Moses fled<sup>44</sup> and became an exile<sup>45</sup> in the land of Midian,<sup>46</sup> where he became the father of two sons.

He conceivably has all but forgotten his Israelite brothers. And that’s when Yahweh shows up on Mount Sinai.

<sup>30</sup> “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. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> ‘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. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’

Again notice that God is not localized in the temple. God can appear and make holy ground out of a mountain in Midian!<sup>47</sup> **God is not a genie in a lamp. He is God of the Universe, not just the God of Jerusalem. You can’t put God in a box!**<sup>48</sup>

Look at **verse 34**.

<sup>34</sup> 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<sup>49</sup> you to Egypt.’

Now notice again the curious way that God works. Look what Stephen highlights here in **verse 35**.

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<sup>41</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 291: “The fact that Moses was mighty in word and deed suggests that beyond this education God was working through him.”

<sup>42</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 195: “Verse 25 is totally unparalleled in Exod 2:11–15 and is Stephen’s reflection on the account.”

<sup>43</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 375: “The typological connection between Moses and Jesus is again obvious. As Moses was sent by God to Israel as ‘ruler and judge’ to save Israel, so God exalted Jesus as ‘Leader and Savior’ (5:31); and as Moses was pushed away by an Israelite brother, so Jesus was rejected by the Jewish people.”

<sup>44</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 196: “A glance at Exod 2:15 will show that Moses’ flight is attributed to Pharaoh’s wrath upon hearing about the killing of the Egyptian. Exodus 2:14, however, clarifies that the Israelite’s awareness of Moses’ deed first alerted Moses that the word was out and his life was in danger. By concentrating on this and passing over the reference to Pharaoh, Stephen made even stronger the connection between Moses’ flight and the Israelite rejection of him. They rejected their divinely chosen leader, put his life in danger, and forced him to flee.”

<sup>45</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 166: “It should be noted that the text states that he was a sojourner [ESV: ‘exile’]; hence he was going to be a temporary resident of Midian (v. 29)... Stephen’s point was that what happened to Moses also happened to the Messiah.”

<sup>46</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 293–4: “The rebuke caused Moses to flee to Midian, probably on the east coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, south of Edom... So Moses fled, married, and had two sons. Exodus 2:22 mentions Gershom by name, and Exod. 18:3–4 names Gershom and Eliezer. These remarks point to how Stephen at times telescopes events (Exod. 4:20 speaks of sons in the plural).”

<sup>47</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 294: “The rabbis taught that this locale showed that no place was too desolate for God’s presence... Given the debate about the sacredness of the temple, Stephen appears to make a similar point. Holy ground is where God is (see v. 33).”

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle: “‘Holy ground’ is wherever God meets his people, and not just inside the borders of Palestine. The greatest miracles of Israel happened in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert — not in the Promised Land.”

<sup>49</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 377–8: “The verb translated as ‘I shall send’ (ἀποστεύω) means ‘to dispatch someone for the achievement of some objective’ (BDAG). In the context of the typological links between Moses and Jesus and his envoys, Stephen implies that as Moses was sent by God to the children of Israel to lead, judge, and save the nation even though they had rejected him earlier, God’s ‘com[ing]’ to Israel in Moses’ mission, so Jesus was sent by God to the people of Israel to save the nation, God’s ‘com[ing]’ to Israel in Jesus’ mission and in the preaching of his followers, despite the earlier rejection.”

<sup>35</sup> “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man<sup>50</sup> God sent as both ruler and redeemer<sup>51</sup> by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.<sup>52</sup>

Stephen calls Moses, “both ruler and redeemer!” Here’s what Stephen is preaching to the Sanhedrin. **I don’t know if they are picking up what he’s laying down.** He’s telling them, **“Your forefathers rejected Joseph, and God made him a deliverer. Your forefathers rejected Moses, and God made him a redeemer. You rejected Jesus. But God has made him “the Deliverer” and “the Redeemer” of his people. Quit fighting against God! Quit kicking against the goads like your forefathers. Loosen your stiff necks and embrace Christ as Savior.”**

They accused Stephen by saying, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God” (6:7). But Stephen says, **“O no, I’m not! You are rejecting Moses! Just like your forefathers did in Egypt.”**

Look what Stephen says in **verse 36. He’s not taking his foot off the gas.**

<sup>36</sup> This man [Moses] led them out, performing wonders and signs<sup>53</sup> in Egypt and at the Red Sea<sup>54</sup> and in the wilderness for forty years.

<sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’<sup>55</sup>

This is a quote from **Deuteronomy 18:15.**<sup>56</sup> In other words, Stephen is saying, **“Moses knew that someday God would raise up a Messiah, an even-greater Moses, Jesus Christ.”<sup>57</sup> Yet you have rejected him. You are the ones opposing Moses, not me.”<sup>58</sup>**

<sup>38</sup> This is the one who was in the congregation<sup>59</sup> in the wilderness with the angel<sup>60</sup> who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles<sup>61</sup> to give to us.

**Listen to this for a moment. Let me describe someone and you tell me who it is. If I were to tell you, “There was a Jewish man sent by God to rescue his people. He did signs and wonders. He spoke for**

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<sup>50</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 296: “In verses 35–38 there is a fivefold repetition of the term “this one” (οὗτος, *houtos*), as if to emphasize that it was this one whom God had singled out to deliver God’s people. Almost like a refrain in a hymn, Stephen speaks of “this one” whom God chose, and prepares a reference to another—Jesus—like him.”

<sup>51</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 199: “[This] is the only occurrence in Luke-Acts of the noun ‘redeemer’ (*lytrōtēs*); but the verbal form, ‘the one who was going to redeem Israel,’ is applied to Christ in Luke 24:21. The word ‘redeemer’ is virtually equivalent to ‘Savior’ (cf. 5:31), and the comparison to Christ is unmistakable. Moses was a type of Christ.”

<sup>52</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 166: “In this way, the rejected one became the redeemer of the rejecters (v. 35); he was the one who led the people out of Egypt in the Exodus (v. 36).”

<sup>53</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 378–9: “The reference to Moses’ role of Israel’s redeemer being p 379 confirmed by miracles has typological significance—Jesus’ ministry was accompanied by miracles attesting to his divine calling as well (Acts 2:22), as was the ministry of his followers (2:43).”

<sup>54</sup> For more details on the location of the Red Sea, Mount Sinai, and the timing of the exodus, see my sermon on Exodus 14 entitled “The Great Escape,” 06-15-22: <https://www.vbvf.org/the-great-escape#gsc.tab=0>

<sup>55</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 296: “Josephus (Ant. 4.7.2 §165) seems to see Joshua as this prophet, a view that makes sense in terms of the move from Deuteronomy to the book of Joshua. However, there also appears to be the view in Judaism that another like Moses was to come after Joshua, and so the promise took on a typological sense in Judaism.”

<sup>56</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 293: “The promise is an allusion to Deut. 18:15 and to Jesus (Acts 3:22). The ruler-and-judge combination in Acts 7:35–37 also refers back to Exod. 2:14. So Moses is a ‘type’ or ‘pattern’ for what Jesus was to do and be. Stephen is tracing what also applies to Jesus, as do other passages in Luke-Acts.”

<sup>57</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 168: “The Sanhedrin was guilty of rejecting that prophet like unto Moses, who Stephen implied was Yeshua of Nazareth.”

<sup>58</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 297: “How can Stephen be blaspheming Moses (Acts 6:11) if he respects the role of Moses in the promise.”

<sup>59</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 297: “The word ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) appears here, not with its usual NT meaning of ‘church,’ but to refer to the gathering of Jews in the wilderness who formed a congregation or an assembly (Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:2–4, 9; 31:30 often with the phrase ‘the day of the assembly’). The term will be the one the Christian community chooses to refer to the church.”

<sup>60</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 200: “The tradition that Moses received the law through the mediation of angels is not found explicitly in the Old Testament, but it is found elsewhere among New Testament writers (cf. Gal 3:19).”

<sup>61</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 380: “Moses received ‘living words’ (λόγια ζῶντα), i.e., the law which God gave to Israel to give and preserve life for his chosen people. This expression confirms that the accusation against Stephen that he utters blasphemous words against Moses (6:11) is a serious misunderstanding of Stephen’s teaching. He acknowledges that the words of the law that God revealed to Moses are words of life.”



God and received living oracles to give to them. He was a mediator between God and man. But his own people rejected him.” Who am I talking about?<sup>62</sup>

If you said, “Moses,” you are correct. If you said, “Jesus,” you are correct. Why? Because Moses himself said, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.” Moses was a type of the mediator/rescuer to come in Jesus. And Jesus is the true and better Moses.

Look at verse 39. Here’s where the stiffnecks come in.

<sup>39</sup> Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, <sup>40</sup> 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.’ <sup>41</sup> And they made a calf in those days,<sup>63</sup>

The Israelites got restless when Moses was meeting with God on Mount Sinai. And in their restless agitated state, they created an idol with their own hands. Calf worship was an essential aspect of Egyptian religion.<sup>64</sup> And so as the Israelites started pining after Egypt... and as they remembered the good old days when they were slaves in Egypt eating leeks and cucumbers... they resorted to Egyptian paganism.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>41</sup> And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing<sup>66</sup> in the works of their hands. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away

That’s a terrifying statement right there, by the way. “God turned away.”<sup>67</sup> See **Romans 1** for more on that.<sup>68</sup> You would much rather have God chasten or correct you, than turn away.

<sup>42</sup> 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?’ <sup>43</sup> You took up the tent of Moloch and the star<sup>69</sup> of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.”<sup>70</sup>

Moloch was the despicable God of the Ammonites (**1 Kgs 11:7**). Pagan nations offered up child sacrifices to the false god Moloch (**Lev 18:21; 20:2–5; 2 Kgs 23:10**).<sup>71</sup>

Stephen, who knows his Bible well, quotes the prophet **Amos** here.<sup>72</sup> Amos indicted the Israelites 700 years after the Exodus for their stiff necks.<sup>73</sup> Amos tells them, “**You are just as stiff-necked as your forefathers in the wilderness.**” And Stephen, more than 700 years after Amos,<sup>74</sup> is saying in his day, “**You are**

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<sup>62</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 211 adds other parallels: “Moses humbled himself by leaving Pharaoh’s palace; Jesus humbled Himself by becoming man (Phil. 2:7–8). Moses was rejected at first, so was Jesus (John 1:11). Moses was a shepherd; Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14). Moses redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt; Jesus redeems men from bondage to sin. The history of Moses foreshadows the history of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>63</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 298: “The forming of the golden calf was the most significant of all the incidents of rebellion against God. Here were an embrace of idolatry and a rejection of the God who made Israel unique... Josephus omits discussion of the incident of the golden calf in his history of the nation, probably because his primary readers were polytheists.”

<sup>64</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 213.

<sup>65</sup> PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: “This idolatry was without a doubt born out of the superstition of the Egyptians, with which many of the Jews had become familiar. In [his history], Herodotus tells that among the Egyptians, the Apis, a certain strange or peculiar bull or calf, was worshiped like a deity.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 92.

<sup>66</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 298: “The imperfect tense of the verb εὐφραίνω (*euphrainō*) stands in contrast to the two previous aorist verbs. It highlights the joy of the celebration by portraying it with an ongoing aspect: ‘they were celebrating’ (BDAG 414–15 §§2–3). Usually this verb was used of worship for Yahweh at feasts, so this use is particularly cutting (Lev. 23:40; Deut. 12:7, 12, 18).”

<sup>67</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 381: “Israel’s willingness to ‘turn back’ resulted in God turning his back on Israel.”

<sup>68</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 299: “This language of giving over recalls the repeated verb of Rom. 1:24, 26, 28 regarding God’s judgment on the world. God let them go their own way. This is traditional Jewish language for defection into sin (also Jub. 1.13; Wis. 11:15–16).”

<sup>69</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 201n70: “For Israel the worship of the heavenly bodies seems to have come into wide practice under Assyrian influence, though the practice is found as early as 1370 b.c. in Palestine. It is frequently referred to in the OT: Deut 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kgs 21:3–5; 23:4f.; 2 Chr 33:3, 5; Jer 7:18; 8:2; 19:13; Zeph 1:5. See Bruce, *Acts*: NIC, 156, n. 64.”

<sup>70</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 299: “The Hebrew text of Amos has סִכּוּת (Sikkūt; probably Assyrian Sakkut) and כִּיּוּן (Kiyyūn; probably Assyrian Kewan), Mesopotamian gods of the sky, the latter referring to Saturn, also known as Ninib. Moloch is the equivalent of this heavenly sky and sun deity, as represented by either pagan god in the Canaanite-Phoenician context (BDAG 657). Less clear are the roots of Rephan (BDAG 903), but it could be the sun god of Egypt, Repa (Bruce 1988a: 145n70). The reference may well be to the defection to Baal of Peor (Num. 25:1–9; Bruce 1990: 205).”

<sup>71</sup> See April Favara, “Molech,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>72</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 299: “Here is the ultimate source of Stephen’s defense; in the end, Israel’s own Scripture condemns Israel.”

<sup>73</sup> I hold to an early date for the Exodus initiating approximately 1446 BC. Amos’s prophetic ministry took place in the eighth century BC, approximately 766 BC. See <https://biblehub.com/timeline/>

<sup>74</sup> Stephen’s death was sometime in the 30s AD, so it was close to 800 years than 700 years.

just as stiff-necked as your forefathers in the wilderness and your forefathers in the days of Amos before they were taken into exile in Babylon.”<sup>75</sup> “You were stiff-necked 1,400 years ago. You were stiff-necked 700 years ago. You’re still stiff-necked today.”

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**So that’s Stephen’s take on Moses. As part of his “defense” he tells the Sanhedrin that the stiff-necked Israelites rejected their rescuer, Moses. But he also emphasizes this... write this down as #4.**

4) God doesn’t  **dwell** in  **houses** (7:44–50)

Stephen says in **verse 44**,

<sup>44</sup> “Our fathers had the tent<sup>76</sup> of witness [**The tabernacle**] in the wilderness,<sup>77</sup> just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua<sup>78</sup> when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out<sup>79</sup> before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God<sup>80</sup> of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon<sup>81</sup> who built a house for him.<sup>82</sup>

What’s Stephen doing here? He’s summarizing hundreds of years of Israelite history in a few sentences. And he’s focusing on the “house” that Solomon built for God. This was the other part of their accusation against him. They said that he had spoken against Moses and against the temple (**6:13–14**). Stephen has dealt with Moses. Now he’s transitioning to the temple. **“You wanna talk temple, religious leaders, let’s talk about the temple. There was no temple until Solomon!”**<sup>83</sup>

And even so, look at **verse 48**.

<sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High<sup>84</sup> does not dwell in houses made by hands,<sup>85</sup>

By the way, there’s a subtle dig here at the religious leaders in **verse 48**. Look how **verse 48** parallels **verse 41**. Do you see that? In **verse 41** it says,

<sup>41</sup> ... they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the **works of their hands**...

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<sup>75</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 201n73: “Amos referred to ‘beyond Damascus,’ since he was prophesying to the Northern Kingdom where the threat was from Assyria. The place of exile for the Southern Kingdom was Babylon, and Stephen may have ‘existentialized’ the reference to better fit his Judean hearers’ concept of exile.”

<sup>76</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 300: “There is a contrast here between the ‘tent’ of Moloch (v. 43) and the ‘tent’ for God (v. 44).”

<sup>77</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 168: “The point he made by emphasizing the location is that this event, too, occurred outside the land. Throughout his sermon, Stephen had been trying to make the point that God’s presence, God’s blessings, and God’s work cannot be limited to the borders of Israel.”

<sup>78</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 383n1758: “Since the Greek term for Joshua (Ἰησοῦς) is identical with the name of Jesus of Nazareth, one could establish a typological link between Joshua’s role of fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. Stephen’s listeners would only have heard a reference to Joshua and the conquest of Canaan.”

<sup>79</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 301: “The verb ἐξώσεν is strong, as its use in the LXX shows. Second Samuel 14:13–14 uses the term to refer to one who is banished, and 2 Sam. 23:6 uses it of evil people tossed away. Psalm 5:11 (5:10 Eng.) speaks of evil people God is asked to toss away. The implication of the term is that those cast out are evil.”

<sup>80</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 308: “A textual problem here is whether David wishes to build a habitation for the ‘God’ (θεῷ, *theō*) of Jacob or the ‘house’ (οἴκῳ, *oikō*) of Jacob. Reading ‘God’ are 2x, A, C, E, Ψ, 33, 1739, and Byz. Reading ‘house’ are Ɔ74, 8\*, B, D, H, and 049. The less ‘natural’ and so more difficult reading is ‘house,’ and the distribution also favors this reading. The reading ‘God’ is straightforward and stresses that the temple would be for God (Johnson 1992: 133 opts for this reading). The reading ‘house’ suggests that the building of the temple was designed in part to be an act by the house of Jacob on behalf of God, to give God a permanent locale within the land. ‘House of Jacob’ is the more likely reading here on text-critical grounds. Psalm 132:3–5 seems to be the text at work here: David wished for God to dwell in support of the house of Jacob.”

<sup>81</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 384: “The fact that King David wanted to build the temple but was not allowed to build it intimates that the temple in Jerusalem is not as important for Israel’s worship as the Jewish people seem to think.”

<sup>82</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 202: “Second Samuel 7:1–17 tells the story of how God answered David’s request through the prophet Nathan: God was perfectly content with the tabernacle; he did not want a house of cedar from David, but he would raise up a successor to David who would build such a house.”

<sup>83</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 384: “Solomon himself recognized that God’s presence is not limited to the temple that he had built, when he said in his prayer on the occasion of the dedication of the temple, “But will God really dwell on earth? The heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1 Kgs 8:27).”

<sup>84</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 385: “The description of God as ‘the Most High’ (ὁ ὑψιστος; Hebr. אֱלֹהֵינוּ) underlines God’s transcendence and sovereign rule over all things which cannot be contained in a structure made by human beings.”

<sup>85</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 169: “Stephen was not saying, of course, that God’s presence was not in the Tabernacle or in the Temple. He knew from the Hebrew Bible that God’s visible presence was indeed in both structures. What he was trying to say was that because of God’s immensity and because of His greatness, He cannot be limited. While He did have an appearance of dwelling in the little Tabernacle and later in the great Temple, the Most High is not confined to any building.”

In verse 48, Stephen says about the temple,

<sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses **made by hands**<sup>86</sup>

Implicitly, Stephen is saying, **“You religious leaders have turned the temple into a kind of golden calf. You have reduced God to a building and a ritual.”**<sup>87</sup> You have perverted this great thing, the temple, that God had created to meet with his people and foreshadow the coming of Christ... you have perverted it into a superstitious, ritualistic, idolatrous good-luck charm for the Jewish people.”<sup>88</sup> **It was a talisman for these Jewish leaders, and they were the witch-doctors who thought they could manipulate God.**<sup>89</sup>

And Stephen has to remind them from the prophet Isaiah, **“God is not restricted to a building.”**<sup>90</sup> 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 what is the place of my rest?’<sup>91</sup> <sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?’<sup>92</sup>

**“Forget what your hands have made. What did my hand make,”** says God. The accusation against Stephen was that he had spoken against the temple and defamed this great house of worship for God. And Stephen’s defense, which is really more of a counter-accusation, is **“No, you’ve defamed the temple. You’ve defamed this good thing that God has given us, by turning it into an idol.”**<sup>93</sup> Your superstition has kept you from seeing that Christ is the fulfillment of all those temple sacrifices. The temple will be destroyed, but Christ will be forever.”<sup>94</sup>

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**Now, here’s where Stephen brings it all home. How’s Stephen going to land this plane? How’s he going to connect these dots in his sermon? Well, here’s how he does it. He shows them the pattern of stiff-necked rebellion that they are part of.**

5) The pattern of **stiff-necked rebellion** (7:51–53)

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<sup>86</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 203: “Stephen’s reference to its being ‘made by men’ (v. 48, literally, ‘hand-made’) connects directly with the golden calf in the wilderness (v. 41) and is an implicit charge of idolatry. When a place of worship becomes a representation for God himself, it becomes a substitute for a living relationship to God. The man-made ‘house’ is worshiped, not the living God; and that is idolatry.”

<sup>87</sup> BEDE: “Since they were saying that he [Stephen] was acting against the holy place, he showed from this [Old Testament parallel] that the Lord does not place a high value on dressed stone but rather desires the splendor of heavenly souls. From this he wanted them to understand that just as the tent was forsaken when the temple was built, so also they should understand that the temple itself would have to be destroyed when a better dispensation came to take its place, as Jeremiah long before had prophesied saying, ‘Do not trust in words of falsehood that say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 83.

<sup>88</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 204: “The temple was to be a house for Israel, not for God, a place for Israel to express their devotion to God. Stephen’s critique was that it had become something else—not a house for Israel’s worship but a house for God, a place where Israel sought to imprison their God and manipulate him according to their own concerns.”

<sup>89</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 204: “The temple became more and more a seedbed of nationalism, the place where revolutionary movements began. Eventually this led to war with their Roman overlords, which resulted in their utter defeat. The Romans reduced the temple to rubble in a.d. 70; not one stone was left on another. The warnings of Jesus and of Stephen had not been heard.”

<sup>90</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 276: “The temple was never designed to confine God but was intended to be a place of worship to him alone as the one true God.”

<sup>91</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 303: “God dwarfs the earth, so how can a building constructed on it contain him?”

<sup>92</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 170: “Although God commanded the building of the Tabernacle and allowed the building of the Temple, it was not for the purpose of confining His presence or His work. It was this point that the leadership of Israel failed to understand. They were trying to limit God’s work and presence to the land of Israel.”

<sup>93</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 386: “Stephen emphasizes that it is not he who denigrates the temple but the Jewish leaders, who abase the temple by thinking that they have God at their command, failing to use the temple as a place for a dynamic encounter with the living God. He emphasizes that it is not he who speaks against God but the Jewish leaders, who offend God by failing to understand God’s transcendence of which the temple is only a sign, and by failing to grasp the full extent of what God demands from them—which now includes, most critically, the acknowledgment and faith in Jesus as the one who rules on David’s throne at God’s right hand, fulfilling God’s promises for the last days. This is Stephen’s point, the main point of his speech, as the following verses demonstrate.”

<sup>94</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 203: “Stephen did not reject the temple as such but the abuse of the temple, which made it into something other than a place for offering worship to God. His view is thus closely linked to that of Jesus, who also attacked the abuses of the temple cult and stressed its true purpose of being a ‘house of prayer’ (Luke 19:46)... The particular abuse that Stephen addressed was the use of the temple to restrict, confine, and ultimately to try to manipulate God. This seems to have been the significance in his contrast between the tabernacle in vv. 44–46 and the temple in vv. 47–48.”

**When I used to read this sermon, I used to think that verse 51 came out of left field. Like Stephen was just having a nice little chat with the Sanhedrin and giving them a history lesson... but then Dr. Jekyll becomes Mr. Hyde, and he goes berserk on them in verse 51: “You stiff-necked people!”**

I don’t read this sermon this way anymore. This sermon has been escalating from the beginning. Stephen has been taking subtle shots at the religious leaders since the beginning.<sup>95</sup> He’s condemning them for their superstitious affection for the temple. He’s comparing them to the stiff-necked patriarchs of old.<sup>96</sup> And he’s criticizing the way that they think they can control God and localize him in Jerusalem.<sup>97</sup>

Now I see Stephen, as a skilled preacher, who has slowly but confidently started to intensify his tone all throughout the message. He started by saying, “Brothers and fathers, hear me” (7:2). He ends by saying,

<sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.<sup>98</sup> As your fathers<sup>99</sup> did, so do you.<sup>100</sup>

“Uncircumcised in heart and ears” is the language of the prophet Jeremiah (see Jer 4:4, 6:10, 9:26).<sup>101</sup> That was Jeremiah’s indictment on the people, before they were taken captive to Babylon.

Speaking of the prophets, Stephen says in verse 52.

<sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?<sup>102</sup> And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,<sup>53</sup> you who received the law<sup>103</sup> as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 201: “[Stephen] shows them that by rejecting the Messiah, they were imitating their apostate fathers, who rejected Joseph, Moses, and even God Himself. Stephen was no blasphemer, they were.”

<sup>96</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 362–3: “Stephen shows in his account of Israel’s history that the death of Jesus by the Jewish leaders corresponds to the pattern of rejecting God and his messengers which characterizes Israel’s history, going beyond this pattern in that the fathers killed God’s messengers, whereas the Jewish leaders whom Stephen addresses killed the One whom God’s messengers had predicted (7:52).”

<sup>97</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 188: “Israel’s past points to the present... The fulfillment of Israel’s true worship is in the Messiah, and in rejecting him they were rejecting what ultimately the temple was all about.”

<sup>98</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 305: “One should not forget that Stephen was described as full of the Spirit in Acts 6:3 and 6:5, so the response to his speech is a test of who is responsive to the Spirit.” Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 387: “Since Isa 63:10 is the only passages in the Old Testament (besides Ps 51:10–11) that refers to God’s Spirit as the ‘Holy Spirit,’ Stephen seems to allude to this passage, even though he uses a different verb. In Isa 63:9–14 the prophet recounts the gracious deeds of the Lord, who became Israel’s Savior. He points out that ‘in all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them’ (63:9). He challenges the people to remember the days of Moses when God ‘set his Holy Spirit among them’ (63:11). Despite God’s presence and despite the experience of God’s salvation in the past, they rebelled against him and acted against his Holy Spirit. Stephen asserts that the behavior of the Jewish people in the present corresponds with Israel’s behavior at the time of Moses and at the time of Isaiah who ‘always’ (ἀεὶ) disobeyed God. Not resisting the Spirit would have meant repentance, faith in and obedience to God’s new revelation.”

<sup>99</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 205: “Before now, Stephen had included himself in his references to the Jews. It was always ‘our fathers’ (cf. vv. 19, 38, 39, 44). Now it was ‘your fathers.’”

<sup>100</sup> Chrysostom: “‘You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.’ When it was not his will that there should be sacrifices, you sacrificed; and when it is his will, you do not sacrifice. When he would not give you the commandments, you dragged them toward you; when you received them, you neglected them. Again, when the temple stood, you worshiped idols; and when it is his will to be worshiped without a temple, you do the opposite.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 84.

<sup>101</sup> See also Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Ezek. 44:7, 9.

<sup>102</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 305: “Persecution of the prophets is common in the OT, which, although it notes only one example of such rejection to the point of murder, does echo similar complaints (1 Kings 18:4, 13; 19:10, 14; Jer. 2:30; 26:20–24; 2 Chron. 24:20–21)... Jewish tradition held that Jeremiah was stoned to death and Isaiah was sawn in two.”

<sup>103</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 388: “The Jewish leaders assembled in the Sanhedrin—chief priests, Sadducees, leading Pharisees, and Torah scholars—would naturally be convinced that they are paragons of Torah obedience. Stephen, however, accuses them of belonging to a people who habitually disobey God and his law. And he accuses them of having betrayed and killed Jesus, the Righteous One who came to redeem the people like Moses, an action that represents the ultimate failure to obey the law and the ‘living words’ (v. 38) that Moses and now Jesus brought to the people of Israel. If they had listened to the prophets and thus obeyed the law, they would have acknowledged the Righteous One, i.e., they would have come to faith in Jesus as the righteous Servant whom God sends to redeem his people. The rejection of Jesus as God’s righteous Servant is tantamount to the failure to keep the law.”

<sup>104</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 307: “The speech ends with the question of how they will respond to a history lesson given from their own sacred tradition. In effect, Stephen asks, ‘Do you appreciate your own history enough not to repeat its mistakes?’”



Notice Stephen doesn't mention Jesus by name. That's curious to me.<sup>105</sup> He simply calls him "the Righteous One," which is a famous messianic title from **Isaiah 53**. **Isaiah 53:11** says that the righteous one, the servant, makes "many to be accounted righteous" and bears "their iniquities."<sup>106</sup>

**Verse 53** intensifies the indictment against the Jewish leaders. They had the law delivered to them. Rabbinic tradition suggested that God used angels to deliver the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. And yet, they who should have known better did not abide it.<sup>107</sup>

This is the same kind of indictment that Jesus used. "Have you not read," said Jesus repeatedly (e.g., **Matt 12:3, 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3**). Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (**John 5:39–40**). Jesus said, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (**John 5:46**).<sup>108</sup>

It's interesting to me here how many parallels there are between Stephen and Jesus. They were accused of the same kinds of things. They stood before the same leaders in the Sanhedrin. They met similar fates. But there is one striking difference between Stephen and Jesus. When Jesus was accused, he gave no answer. **Isaiah 53** prophesied this: "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." When Jesus did speak, he spoke briefly... to Pontius Pilate for example (see **John 18:33–38**). He certainly didn't preach.

But Stephen, on the other hand, was not silent. **Isaiah 53** wasn't about him. It was about his Savior. So when he gets his one shot to preach to hardhearted, stiff-necked religious leaders in the Sanhedrin, he doesn't waste that opportunity. He preaches his heart out. He preaches, in fact, the longest sermon in the book of **Acts**!<sup>109</sup> And he probably would have preached more. But he was rudely and angrily interrupted.

**Sometimes we preach Christ and people get saved. Some times we preach Christ and people hate us for it. Sometimes we are the aroma of Christ to those who are being saved. Sometimes we are the aroma of death to those who are perishing. Sometimes people preach, like Peter in Acts 2, and 3,000 people get saved (2:41). Sometimes people preach, like Stephen in Acts 7, and ... well... we'll find out next time.**

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But before we're done, let me close with two applications. Write these down. Let me ask you two difficult questions in response to this text. These are diagnostic questions for your spiritual life. Here's the first.

1) What **stiffens** your **neck**?

**What hardens your heart? What causes you to stubbornly resist God's leading in your life? Could it be, maybe, unanswered prayer? "God, I've been asking for this for months for years, and I'm not doing anything until I get an answer from you." What if the answer is "no?"**

**What causes you to stubbornly resist God? Is it a pet sin? Or is it unforgiveness? Is it an unhealthy relationship? Or could it be an unwillingness to give up your sense of your independence? "God I'll do anything you ask me to do, except that! God I'll give you everything I am. I'll serve you with**

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<sup>105</sup> Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 276: "Stephen faces his opponents directly and uses a most potent weapon in response, the Scripture. Unlike other speeches so far in Acts, this one does not directly preach Christ but works through Israel's history to show why the nation stands in terrible need of God's fresh work."

<sup>106</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 172: "Yeshua was not prominent in Stephen's sermon; in fact, He was introduced for the first time in verse 52, and even then, He was not mentioned by name, but was called "the Righteous One." Stephen probably had more to say, but he was interrupted."

<sup>107</sup> MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 211: "It is sometimes argued that Jesus could not have been the Messiah, or else Israel would have recognized Him. As Stephen points out, however, they rejected both Joseph and Moses. This was their typical response to those God sent to deliver them."

<sup>108</sup> MARTIN LUTHER: "Unbelief is an evil weed. As soon as it 'pops up,' it stinks. It will not yield; the more it is trampled, the more bitter it will become. Therefore you should not imagine that you will convert the unbelieving, even if you have such a clear passage that they themselves feel that it is so obvious that they are unable to contradict it. Nevertheless they still find a way out, so that they might excuse their unbelief and evade Christ's teaching. Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 95.

<sup>109</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 355: "Stephen's speech in 7:2–53, with 1014 words in the Greek text, 1628 is the longest speech in Acts." Schnabel adds in 355n1629 that "Paul's speech in Pisidian Antioch has 470 words (Acts 13:16–41), Peter's speech on Pentecost has 429 words of Greek text (Acts 2:14–36)."

my whole heart. But I won't give you that. I won't give you my sexuality, my financial stability, my pursuit of personal gratification or my [fill in the blank]."

For me, I can remember distinct periods in my life where God was really pressing me to surrender everything I was to his lordship. And it was a battle for me. And I remember as a kid giving God ownership of my soul and my eternal state, but I don't think I really relented and gave God everything I was until probably age 18 or 19. And that's when I felt a real sensation where my neck started to relax and was no longer stiff and rigid and unyielding. And I'll just tell you, that was a great feeling. The tension just melted away, and I experienced a great sense of relief as I submitted to God's lordship over my life.

Have you experienced that before? What stiffens your neck? What keeps you from wholeheartedly surrendering everything over to the Lord? I just want you to know that having a stiff-neck and a hard-heart, that's no way to live. And you don't have to live like that. And I believe that God is going to make things uncomfortable for you until you do relent and turn everything over to his control. He loves you enough to not let you be at ease until you release everything to his control.

And here's a second diagnostic question for you.

2) What is your **golden calf** and what is your **temple**?

What is that thing that you inappropriately worship and bow down to? What is that thing that you devote countless time, energy, and affection to instead of God? It could be something good, like the temple. Or it could be something that is pure evil, like the golden calf.

Here are some common "golden calves" in our own day. These are evil things that we idolize: 1) illicit sex, 2) greed, 3) control, 4) envy, 5) gluttony, 6) selfish gratification, 7) addictive substances, 8) lust, etc. Some people in our country become addicted to substances and the ultimate objective in their life is to get that next high. They idolize what's killing them and they live and die tragically trying to gratify the deep desires of their soul with a sorry sinful substitute. That story is repeated again and again in our country every day.

But for most of us in this room, it's not the golden calves that trip us up. It's not blatant evil that enslaves us. Satan's more subtle than that. It's usually those things that are good, like the temple, that steal our time, energy, and affections and become idols that compete with God.<sup>110</sup>

So what's your temple? What's your superstition? What's that thing in your life, that good gift that God has given you that seduces you away from God and becomes an idol competing with him? 1) money, 2) food, 3) sex (even sex in the context of marriage), 4) art, 5) music, 6) marriage (or the possibility of marriage), 7) parenting (or the possibility of parenting), 8) your children, 9) your church, 10) your career, 11) your pursuit of happiness, 12) your legacy, 13) people's perception of you, 14) your reputation, etc.<sup>111</sup> I could go on and on. John Calvin called the human heart an idol-making factory. I could mention a million more possibilities and still not hit on those one or two things that grip your heart and cause you to take your eyes off God as the only thing that is worthy of our worship. Only you know what that thing is. Only you know and God knows where your idolatry problem lies.

All I want to say is this. When we put God's good gifts above God, we put those things at risk. When we put ourselves or some need that we think we have above God, we put ourselves at risk. And

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<sup>110</sup> JOHN CALVIN: "Not only does a person so mistakenly find pleasure in idols made by himself, but also he corrupts and spoils whatever God has instituted, twisting it to serve a contrary purpose." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 93.

<sup>111</sup> I heard John Piper once give the perfect illustration of how idolatry can grip our hearts and pervert something good (like the temple) into something evil. Piper mentioned a new book that he had just published, and it was one of the crowning achievements of his life to publish this book, and he had labored so hard to produce this "work of his hands." He went out to dinner, and he took this new book of his with him. And he set it out on the edge of the table. And there it was in all its glory for the whole world to see. And as Piper looked at the book of his creation with its beautiful blue cover and intoxicating gold letters with the words "John Piper" written on the bottom, he was glorying in his achievement. And he said that God hit him in that moment with this great existential crisis. God said, "John, you've got two choices, this book will be a tent of meeting in the wilderness where you can meet with God and where others may very well meet with God." In other words, it could be a great thing used of God for God's glory. It's not evil in and of itself. It's a good thing. Or here's the danger, "This book will be a golden calf, you will bow down and revel idolatrously in the works of your hands."

that's why we need to identify these "potential idols" and make sure that we don't elevate them to a place of deity.

So what's your temple? What's something that you need to confess before the Lord as a competing entity with God? Don't repeat the mistake of these Jewish Leaders in Acts 7. Don't be so focused on "the temple" that you miss Christ.

Bow together in a word of prayer, and then we can sing together.