

Stephen's Defense Acts 7:1-53

One of the things that amazed me when I was a child was how frequently the Israelites in the wilderness would rebel against God and Moses even though they had seen miracle after miracle, kindness after kindness, grace upon grace. They have not even crossed the Red Sea yet before they show their hostility to God and to Moses, despite the fact that they had witnessed the world's most impressive series of miracles ever (in the ten plagues). And the crossing of the Red Sea would have been impressive, if not scary. Walls of water heaped up on both sides of you as you cross, and crashing down upon the Egyptians to destroy them as soon as they got over. Now they do worship after that. They are singing praises to God, just like I'm sure this Sanhedrin knew how to sing praises to God after the good things that happen in their lives. Yet three days later, you find them turning surly and angry against God and Moses. On one occasion they threaten to stone Moses to death, despite the fact that he had performed miracle after miracle, had shown remarkable leadership abilities, had laid down his life for them very sacrificially, and showed the obvious power of God in his life. And as a kid I would just shake my head at that. But as my father gently pointed out, I was blind to some of my own issues, such as grumbling over oatmeal, which paralleled their grumbling over manna. It's very easy for us to see the blindness of other people, and completely miss a similar blindness in ourselves. And the reason given in John 3:31 is **he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth**. Our flesh will always interpret things in earthly categories unless God's Spirit opens our eyes.

And that's why I've started today's sermon with the evidence that Stephen gave of the indwelling of the Spirit within the temple of the church. Last week we looked at the accusations that the Sanhedrin brought against Stephen. They couldn't win in debate out of court. They knew they couldn't win the debate fairly in court. So they had to hire false witnesses to testify against Stephen. And in verse 1 **the high priest said, "Are these things so?"** He's responsible now to defend himself.

I. The Accusations

II. The Answer (6:15-7:60)

A. Stephen evidenced the indwelling of the Spirit within the temple of the church (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon:

Acts 6:8,10,15; 1 Pet 3:15-16)

But I want to back up once more into chapter 6 and demonstrate how Stephen's life showed God's power and was a most important part of his defense. Like Moses of old, whose face glowed with the presence of God's Spirit, verse 15 says, **And all who sat in the council looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.** It didn't stop them from killing Stephen any more than it stopped the ancient Jews from attempting to kill Moses. But the reality of God's presence with Stephen is a powerful part of his answer to the Sanhedrin. And God's presence was manifest in everything that he did. Verse 8. **And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.** We saw two weeks ago that while the Jews had an empty religion, Stephen had a fullness of faith, of power, of wisdom and a fullness of the Spirit.

Look at verse 10. **And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.** That's in part why they had to resort to violence. They didn't have a good answer. And anybody that was looking on could see the contrast.

So the first part of Stephen's apologetics was a transformed lifestyle. He had holiness, joy, meekness, peace, power and a transformational ministry. And when you engage in apologetics with your unsaved loved ones, it is imperative that your words be accompanied with a lifestyle that shows the power that is behind Christianity. They are probably going to want to see with their own eyes what difference Christianity has made in your life.

Let me read to you Peter's admonition concerning apologetics, or the defense of the faith. It's 1 Peter 3:15-16. **But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts** [there's the first part – it's got to be an inward reality and presence of God Himself within us. He says, when you defend the faith, make sure that you are setting apart the Lord God within you. Every day you need to ask for His filling. So let me re-read that and go on. "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts"], **always ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you** [there's the verbal and intellectual part. "Give a defense" is the Greek word *apologia*, which we get the word apologetics from. So apologetics starts with owning the reality in the heart. It goes on to words and reasons. But then the next phrase says it must be accompanied with a transformed lifestyle. It says,] **with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.** He is saying that the reality of God's power within us, our demeanor and our conduct are all an important part of defending the faith.

You can have all the right words, but totally ruin your testimony by not living in the power of the Spirit. And so point A recaps the sermon from two weeks ago – the fullness of a confident Christianity, and shows how it is such an important part of any person’s defense of the faith. It was definitely an important part of Stephen’s defense.

B. Stephen shows how the history of Israel shows that the land of Israel was never a necessity of true religion. But in the process, Stephen shows how the promises to the patriarch’s can only be fulfilled if there is a resurrection. This is a powerful argument against the Sadducees.

(Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:2-6; Rom. 4:13; Ps. 37:11; Matt 5:5; Acts 7:16,21,29,30,33,36; John 11:48)

Now he does give a verbal defense as well, and it is important that *we* be able to do so. Verse 1 of chapter 7 says, **Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?” And he said,** and now comes a brilliant defense of his innocence and a brilliant indictment of the Jewish preoccupation with temple and land, as well as the utter inconsistency of Saducean doctrine. In fact, this is a great example of presuppositional apologetics.

But let me first explain his use of a story. I have begun to realize how important stories are when I have gone to India. Many times people will answer a question with a story. And the parts of the story illustrate what the answer should be. It’s an eastern way of thinking. And I’m going to have to force myself to be better at telling stories. It definitely does not come naturally to me. But I recognize it is important.

OK. Let’s dive into his response. He starts with the first Patriarch, Abraham. Everyone treated Abraham as a hero, so it was a point of common agreement. Which, strategically is sometimes a good way to go. And I think in this verse he is taking on the accusations that he has blasphemed the temple and holy land. He says, **Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory** [and that was a phrase used to describe the Shekinah glory of God in the Temple – “the God of glory”] **appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.** Right off the bat Stephen reminds them that there was no temple in the time of Abraham, yet the God of glory was there. Abraham didn’t even dwell in the land of Israel, yet God’s presence was so profoundly with him that he was called the friend of God. In verse 3 Stephen does admit that God called Abraham to go to the land of Canaan, but in verse 4 Abraham lives in Haran for years before he actually arrived in the land now called Israel. But even then, he wasn’t able to stay there. He was a sojourner. Look at verse 5. **And God gave him no**

inheritance in it [that's a key phrase in his defense. "And God gave him no inheritance in it], **not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.** Do you see the tension that he is setting up? Is God true or is God false? Abraham and his descendants are promised the land, yet Abraham did not inherit it, and in verse 6 God told Abraham *at the very time he made the promise* that there would be at least 400 years when his descendants would not inherit it. What's going on here?

And there's two aspects to that equation that we need to appreciate: First, that doesn't sound very much like temple and land were that critical to a walk with God. But secondly (and more importantly), Stephen is taking on the Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection, and he is doing so head on. I think it would have been obvious to the Sadducees. They had a long-standing debate with the Pharisees about whether there was a resurrection or anything other than this short life that we live. You can see the key doctrinal points being brought up against the Sadducees throughout the speech. For the Sadducees, what we experience in this life is all that there is. Now all of these guys were living like that to some extent, even though they didn't believe the doctrine. They were not searching for a heavenly country like Abraham was. All they cared about was this country. And Stephen is pointing out that if God is true to His promise to Abraham, and if God is not a liar, then it is also clear that Abraham was looking for a land that went beyond his lifetime. Now in doing this Stephen is siding with the Pharisees in their interpretation. Stephen is in effect saying that Abraham was looking forward to the new heavens and new earth. You see, all that the land of Israel was is a symbol and a down payment of the full inheritance of the earth in eternity. Otherwise, God failed Abraham in His promise. Can you see that in verse 5? The second part of the verse say that God promised the land to Abraham as a possession, but the first part says that Abraham did not inherit even enough to put his foot on it. That's why Romans 4:13 says that the promise to Abraham was really, **the promise that he would be the heir of the world.** So he starts off siding with the powerful Pharisees, over against the powerful temple Sadducees. This is what you call a "divide-and-conquer" strategy. Paul uses it later on in the book. They don't dare lynch him over this one. This is standard exegesis. If God promised the land of Canaan, yet Abraham doesn't get so much as a foot to step upon, but God later gives Abraham the whole world, then having the whole, he's also gotten the subset that was promised. God has not shortchanged him. That's why Jesus says **the meek shall inherit the earth.** The Jews were looking at the preliminary provisions of this life as being all that there was. In fact, the

Sadducees, who dominated the Sanhedrin didn't even believe in a resurrection. That's one of the reasons why they didn't believe in the resurrection of Christ. So the only logical conclusion that they could come to from the promise that God gave to Abraham was that the promise was not fulfilled and never would be fulfilled. Just that little verse is a powerful polemic against the Sadducean view of the land, the resurrection and the world to come. To them the land and temple were all important because they had nothing beyond this life to value.

Let's move on. Look at verse 6. **But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them for four hundred years.** They didn't inherit Canaan either, did they? And to insist that temple and land were critical to Israel's existence was pretty narrow minded, and ignored history. If God could keep Israel out of the land for 400 years, is it really that hard to believe Jesus, when He prophesied that Israel would be cast out of the land now? The Jews of that time thought that the land was sacrosanct to Israel's existence that God would never move them. They had made an idol of the land.

In the next few verses he keeps mentioning their honored patriarchs who were blessed by God in a foreign land. Verse 16 had Jacob in Egypt, and he and many other fathers died there. Verse 16 indicates it was only his bones that made it back to Canaan. But in verse 16 Stephen highlights the embarrassing fact that those bones are not even in Israel proper, but in the hated Samaria, where Shechem is. **And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.** I think these are things that a Hellenist like Stephen would have delighted in. God cares about people and lands beyond the Jews. The Jews didn't view Shechem as holy land, because of their prejudices against the Samaritans.

What about Moses himself that they accuse Stephen of blaspheming? Verse 21 indicates that **Pharaoh's daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son.** Moses their hero wasn't even raised by Jews in a Jewish household. Yet God was with him. This is incredible testimony against their racial and geographical prejudices. Stephen masterfully weaves other aspects of his defense into the life of Moses, but on this issue of temple and land, verse 29 says, **Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.** God was with Moses in a foreign land again. Stephen is point by point making the case that the land and temple were not needed for God's presence to be real and powerful. Verse 30. **And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the**

Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. In fact, when you read through the history Stephen gives, you realize that every single mighty deed that Moses did, and which the Jews revered, was done outside of the land of Israel and outside of the temple. Here is God's powerful presence in Saudi Arabia, and notice what God says about the land there in verse 33. **Then the LORD said to him, 'Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.'** I can just see the Sanhedrin squirming with the Scriptures that he selects. What is so cool about Stephen's defense is that he sticks to the Scripture, and using a story that all of them loved and knew about, emphasizes facts about the story that show that God is not restricted to one land or one place or one people or one temple. *Here was a holy land totally outside of Israel.* What does that imply? It implies that a place is holy only because of God's presence. And if God forsakes Israel, the land will no longer be holy. This is why I never refer to the land of Palestine as holy land. Scripture calls it polluted, not holy. But it also implies that any place in a foreign land where God's presence is, can become holy. And there was no defense the Jews could give to these quotations. He is using their own presuppositions – the Sadducees at least valued the first five books of the Bible.

What Jew did not delight in the story of the Exodus and all the miracles God performed to save His people? But Stephen reminds them that these amazing things took place before there was a tabernacle and outside the land. Verse 36: **He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years.** I think you get the point. For most of Israel's history, God was with them outside the land of Israel. *Yet these Jews were accusing Stephen of blasphemy when he said that temple and land would be destroyed?!?* It's the same reasoning that made the Jews of the Old Testament kill the prophets in the Old Testament when they prophesied that Israel would be cast out of the land and the temple destroyed. And the application that he makes in verses 51-53 is stunning. Just as those prophets were stoned for speaking the truth, you kill those who speak the truth to you. You are holding onto the land and killing anyone who threatens the status quo and anyone who might risk Rome coming in and taking away your authority. In John 11:48 the Jewish leaders said about Jesus, **If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.** It is not really the God of the land that they were interested in. It was their jobs and their security and their things. And they were willing to sacrifice God so that they could maintain their place.

What has taken the place of God in your lives? Has it been your house or your business? Has it been your security? Perhaps fear drives you to do things contrary to your conscience. What are you willing to die for? The Jews were willing to kill to maintain their security, but Stephen was willing to die to continue to enjoy His security. His focus was on God, not on the land. He knew that this land would pretty soon be emptied of its inhabitants. And I think it is so important that (while it is appropriate to value the dominion that we take of this earth, and value the things God has given to us), that we realize that our ultimate land is a heavenly one. People can take away your earthly things, but they cannot take away your heavenly things. And so, if your sense of value rests in the earthly, you are going to get stressed out like these Jews did when those earthly things are threatened. On the other hand, if like Stephen, your sense of value rests in laying up treasures in heaven, you will be able to value both the earth and heaven; you will be able to live to God's glory and die to God's glory. I have spent more time on this point because I think it was one of the major two points that Stephen was addressing. But let's look at some of his other themes a little more quickly.

C. Stephen shows how the history of Israel demonstrates that the temple was never a necessity of true religion (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:44-50)

Point C says that Stephen shows how the history of Israel demonstrates that the temple was never a necessity of true religion. We've already hinted at some of these arguments when we looked at the land because these two points really are tied up with each other. They had accused him of blaspheming the temple, and the only proof that they can give that he uttered blasphemy is that Stephen said the temple would be destroyed. Now what is so ironic about that is that Daniel (a man they respected, and who wrote hundreds of years before!) prophesied that the temple would be destroyed in the first century. How could it be blasphemy to be teaching what Daniel taught. In fact, Jesus quotes Daniel when speaking of the destruction of the temple. Second, this was Herod's temple. Herod was an ungodly man, and he wanted to change and beautify the temple made by Ezra. And the temple made by Ezra was quite different from Solomon's. And Solomon's temple was destroyed by God's judgment. And even before that, they had to destroy the tabernacle to make Solomon's temple. The charge of blasphemy is ludicrous.

And so, in verses 44-50 Stephen takes on their idol of the temple. To the Jews it was unthinkable to not have a temple. This was one of the

wonders of the world. This was the place of God's presence. When fighting against Rome, their rallying cry was "for God and for the temple." But Stephen shows how God has never been restricted to the temple.

For one thing, Moses, the very one they claim he is blaspheming, didn't even have a temple. He had a traveling tent. Verse 44. **Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed** [and I think that is a key phrase, because God appointed one thing in the tabernacle, but there were quite a few changes in the temple under David, and then in the temple under Ezra, Nehemiah. And of course the present temple was quite changed from the time of Ezra. Continuing in verse 44] **instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles** [in other words, this land was once pagan too, and it's not the land per se that is holy, but the people who occupy it that makes the difference], **whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built Him a house. However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me' says the LORD. Or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?**

The Jews were treating the temple as a lucky charm. It contained their God. And Stephen proves from Scripture that God cannot be contained in a box. And so the charge of blasphemy for saying that God would destroy the temple that had served its purpose was not blasphemy, but Scriptural.

And I might ask, "Are there ways in which you have tried to place God in a box, or use Him as a lucky charm? Are there religious events and experiences that have become a substitute for an ongoing relationship with the God of glory?" Formalism will not save you. And formalism will not give you the kind of boldness that Stephen had. Only the Holy Spirit can give that to you.

D. Stephen shows how the history of Israel shows a constant preferring of idols to God (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:39-43)

I see a third theme that is masterfully woven all through Stephen's talk, and that is that the history of Israel shows a constant preferring of idols to God. I won't belabor this one, but I think it is interesting that since the priests were the ones who dominated the Sanhedrin at this trial, that Stephen chooses to highlight the idolatry of their first priest, Aaron. If even Aaron

could be an idolater, why are you getting bent out of shape when I say that you are idolaters? Verse 39 talks about how Israel rejected the words of Moses and the law of God. Verse 40: **saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.** But is this not exactly what the present crew was doing when they elevated the temple above Jesus? They were rejoicing in the work of their own hands rather than in the work of God. And verses 42-43 say that as a result God abandoned Israel and gave them up not only to worse idolatry, but to be taken out of the land into captivity. And of course that is what Stephen and the apostles have been preaching will happen to this generation if they don’t repent.

And God doesn’t give these kinds of histories simply to satisfy our curiosity. He gave these reminders to warn every generation that when we prefer idols to God, we too will be given up. This is why I am so burdened for the church in America. If it is not turned back to her husband, the Lord Jesus Christ, then the church will be given up unto captivity as well. This is God’s pattern of working. This is why I encourage you to read Mike Ross’s daily devotionals on revival and seriously praying for revival. Just as these Jews saw no need for revival, the church of today is self-satisfied in its wealth, and buildings, and large numbers. Stephen shows how the whole history of Israel indicates that this is not enough; and worse, that it is idolatry.

E. Stephen shows how God repeatedly called His people to separate from apostasy (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:3,29,39; 2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4)

Point E. Stephen and all the apostles have been calling Israel apostate – them’s fighting words. And they have been calling people to leave the temple and leave the synagogue of Satan and to join the true synagogue – the church; to join the new Israel of God. Chapter 6:7 said that a great many priests had left the temple and were obedient to the faith. This is in part what has made everyone so upset. They are losing numbers. They are having to scramble to get replacement priests. Things are falling apart.

Well, in his defense Stephen appeals to Scriptural call after call to separate from apostasy. Chapter 7:3 shows that loyalty to relatives and country cannot take precedence over loyalty to God. God told Abraham, **Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.** He was called to separate from unbelief. In verse 29 Moses

has to separate from Israel. In verse 35 the very Moses whom Israel rejected became their ruler, and called them to separate from Egypt. But Israel had to be forced out of Egypt and they constantly wanted to go back to Egypt. Verse 39 shows their disobedience to this call for separation. **Whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt.** And he goes on to show other ways in which Israel of the past failed to separate just as these Jews were failing to distance themselves from apostasy.

Things never seem to change. We have the same problem today. Despite the clear statements of Scripture that we must come out from among them and be separate (2 Cor. 6:17); despite God's call, **come out of her My people** (Rev. 18:4), you have people who won't leave apostate denominations. They prefer the convenience of their programs, history and comfort zone to honoring God. So Stephen's defense continues to be a powerful testimony against this tendency. Already in the first century you had denominations. You had Christians who were tempted to stay with the apostate denomination, and you had the new denomination.

F. Stephen shows how the history of Israel shows that God's people were constantly persecuted (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:6,7,19ff, 24-28,52)

Point F is a more subtle answer. It would be easy for people to assume that if Christianity was illegal, that Christians must be doing something wrong. I mean, think about it – anytime a group is labeled criminal by the state, others tend to stand off a bit from them. This is one of Satan's strategies – to convince pagans that if Christians are being persecuted, they are obviously doing something wrong. I can't join that group; I would be breaking the law. This is what the communists bank on; this is what the Hindus and Muslims bank on. It's a form of intimidation.

And so what Stephen does in defense is to explain that God's people have always been persecuted. And once again, he appeals to a history that all his accusers accept. He uses their presuppositions to show them their inconsistencies.

How quickly these rulers forgot that Israel was a persecuted minority in Egypt for 400 years. And Stephen speaks of this oppression in verses 6 and 7 and then later he brings it up again in verses 19 and following. But backing up a bit, verse 9 is a great reminder that Joseph was persecuted by his own family, by the patriarchs of the other Israelite tribes. They were going to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery. These are your fathers, that each of your tribes is named after. In verses 24-28 he reminds

them that the Jews weren't interested in justice from Moses. They turned against their own deliverer. And all of that was to show that you cannot judge the legitimacy of a movement based upon its popularity or based upon its good graces with the civil government. In verse 52 Stephen makes that application quite plain. **Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers.** This is the beauty of Stephen's story telling method of defense. He can wrap so many threads of defense up in a short space, and then apply it.

G. Stephen shows how the history of Israel shows that God's prophets were always telling Israel to look forward to the coming of Jesus (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:37,52)

Another thread of defense that Stephen gives is to show how God's prophets were always telling Israel to look forward to the coming of Jesus. And since the charge was that he was against Moses, Stephen takes them on and says that *they* were really the ones who were against Moses since Moses pointed to Jesus. For example, in verse 37 he says, **This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren, Him you shall hear.** By failing to hear Jesus, they were disobeying Moses. And there was no excuse for them failing to recognize that he was a prophet like Moses. Not only did He bring the revelation of God, but He performed miracles that went way beyond anything that Moses ever did. He had already reminded them that just as they rejected Moses (verse 35), so too they have rejected Jesus. In fact, they had rejected all the prophets. He said, **Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?**

So, this was turning out to be not just a defense, but also a putting of the judges on trial. And there are a few judges in our nation that could stand to be put on trial. And actually, this is the beauty of presuppositional apologetics. Unlike evidentialism that is always on the defense, presuppositionalism goes on the offense and takes away the very foundations on which your opponents are arguing, and demonstrates that their unbelief is not because of lack of evidence. It is because of hardness of heart. There has always been an abundance of evidence to God and Scripture, yet people prefer to suppress it. And presuppositionalism alone goes on the offense like Stephen and takes away all excuses. At the end here, there is nothing that they have to say. All they can do is kill him anyway. But he does take away their excuses and makes it clear that their unbelief is

a willful unbelief that flows from a rebellious heart. It gets down to the issue of repentance, not arguments. As Dr. Krabbendam frequently says, “The heart of the issue is the issue of the heart.”

H. Stephen shows how the history of Israel shows a constant resistance to the Holy Spirit (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:35,37-43,49-50,51; Romans 1:24,26)

Let’s look at one last theme. Throughout the speech it became clear that Israel has not had a stellar record in listening to God. They were constantly bucking against God, and thus God brought them under judgment numerous times. It wasn’t enough that they were in the church. It wasn’t enough that they knew the Bible. It wasn’t enough that they loved the church rituals. The fact that they resisted the Spirit’s convictions condemned them.

Stephen mentions the first stage of judgment of one generation in verse 42: **Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven....** When God gives up a generation, and there is no longer that restraining grace, it will plummet into every kind of iniquity, including bizarre, irrational beliefs such as astrology. It’s not by accident that from 1976 to 1998 (a span of 20 years), the number of Americans who believe in astrology rose from 17% to 37%. But it just accelerates from there. Three years later, a Harris Poll in late 2000 indicated that in just over two years the figures had jumped to 41% of Americans (an increase of 4% in two years). In the year 2006, over 50% of people polled by Gallup said that they believed in astrology, though even more - 70% of Americans said that they consulted their horoscope on a daily basis. But to have such a fast downhill slide from 17% to 50% in thirty years is one of many signs that America is already under judgment, or as verse 42 words it, is given up. Romans 1 lists homosexuality as another sign of being given up unto a depraved mind. When businesses give preferential treatment to homosexuals, and when politicians and courts defend homosexuals rather than condemning them, it is a sign that we too have been given up – that we are already under God’s judgment.

I. But there is still hope for those who repent (Sample Scriptures cited in sermon: Acts 7:3,5,10,22ff,30ff,37,45,60)

All of this could be discouraging if it were not for the fact that this very narrative of Stephen gives us hints of hope that can come. Though Abraham had to leave his rebellious family behind, God was faithful to a remnant. And God called Abraham to blessing in verse 3 when he said, **Get**

out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you. And there was a remnant in the first century who were getting out of Judaism and leaving their loved ones so that they could inherit a heavenly land that is far, far better. Yeah, they might be expelled from synagogue and have to flee from the land of Israel in chapter 8, when the persecution really begins to heat up, but Stephen points to the blessings that came to the remnant throughout Israel's history. And I won't take the time to cover all of the blessings, but Stephen hints at them.

Secondly, he also hinted at the universal spread of the Gospel to every nation in several places. Some commentators believe that the abruptness of the way Stephen ends his speech and gets to his conclusion in verses 51-53 indicates that he was probably being interrupted. They were getting impatient. He starts quoting Isaiah 66:1-2, but before he can move on to quote Isaiah's judgment on Israel in the time of Messiah, and the verses that speak of the universal spread of the Gospel to every nation, Stephen feels it necessary to shorten his speech and get to the conclusion. But the leaders probably didn't miss what he was going to say because they had that famous passage memorized. In fact, one commentator believes that Stephen was using a common method of teaching where you quote one verse and let the hearers fill in the punch line from the next part of the familiar passage. Whether that is true or not, it is clear that the Sanhedrin knew exactly where Stephen was going with the Isaiah 66 passage. And to me Isaiah 66 gives such great hope. Yes, it criticizes the formalism in sacrifice and worship just like Stephen did. Yes, it speaks of the first century sacrifices as being to God as if they broke a dog's neck and offered up swine's blood; in other words, it was revolting to God. Yes, it speaks of the low point in Israel history during the time of Messiah. But it goes on to say, **"For thus says the LORD, "Behold, I will extend peace like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream.**

So there is hope. Even when the church of today often resembles the emptiness and blindness that you see in the Acts 6, we know that Christ's grace is sufficient to overcome it all. Do not give up on America. Do not give up on Europe. Some of the greatest revivals and Reformations in history have come out of worse times than ours. And we can pray that God would raise up many more Stephens, full of Scripture, full of faith, full of power, full of wisdom and full of the Spirit. And may God turn the hearts of our generation to fear His judgments and embrace His grace. Amen.

I charge you to not give up on the church of America, but rather address her as Stephen does. Take idolatry and apostasy and compromise

seriously. And with hope and confidence continue to press for the crown rights of King Jesus.