

**~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:**

Why did Stephen make such a lengthy defense and recount so much of Israel's history? According to his accusers, he had been speaking against the Temple and the Law of Moses (Acts 6:13-14) and thus needed to prove he was not anti-temple or anti-Law. His long discourse revealed his great knowledge and respect for his Jewish heritage, Moses, and the Law.

But Stephen's defense was much more than a history lesson. It was a convicting sermon centered around two stories of God-sent men who were rejected by their own, namely Joseph and Moses. The lesson was obvious.

Stephen also recited a messianic prophecy that God gave through Moses, attempting to point the Sanhedrin to Jesus (7:37). And he challenged their religious traditions and unscriptural view of God and His Temple (7:48-50). In his closing statement, Stephen nailed them to the wall: "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become" (7:51-53). No beating around the bush there!

Keep in mind that Stephen was anointed by the Holy Spirit as he made his defense (7:55). It was God speaking through him, and God wanted the Sanhedrin to be fully accountable for what they had done and for what they were about to do. When Stephen finished, they would be without any excuse. This was no blaspheming heretic they were about to stone; this was a devoted Jew who was very knowledgeable of Scripture and who had believed in the Messiah God had sent.

Stephen's Spirit-inspired speech also revealed insights into Old Testament stories that we would not have otherwise known. For example, we discovered that Moses knew forty years prior to the exodus that God had called him to deliver Israel, but he acted prematurely and in his own wisdom (7:25). God's work should be done God's way and in God's time. We need more than just God's calling. We need His plan.

We also learned that before Moses was forty years old he "was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds" (7:22). As an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses would have enjoyed a high political position in Egypt. He could have looked forward to a future of wealth, power, and prestige. But he identified with God's chosen people who were suffering oppression and injustice. Moses stands as an example to us, as the author of Hebrews wrote:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward (Heb. 11:24-26).

Like Moses, Stephen also stands as a timeless example of a man who sought to please God rather than man. As he was being condemned by the men who would soon stone him, Jesus, whom Scripture tells us is seated at the right hand of God, stood to His feet, I suspect in admiration (7:56). Not only that, but Jesus opened Stephen's spiritual eyes to see Him standing. What a privilege, and what an honor!

With his final breath, Stephen prayed for his persecutors, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (7:6). How that gracious prayer must have pierced the consciences of his murderers, testifying against them that they had just condemned another innocent man. Notice that, unlike Jesus' prayer for the Roman soldiers from the cross, Stephen apparently did not add the words, "for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:24). The Sanhedrin knew exactly what they were doing, and for that reason, I have to doubt if God answered Stephen's prayer.