

Acts 7:35-8:3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 October 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 7 verse 35 to chapter 8 verse 3. This Moses whom they rejected, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge? This man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.

This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 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.

And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 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?

[1 : 1 3] You took up the tender Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship, And I will send you into exile beyond Babylon. Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen.

Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favour in the sight of God, and asked to find a dwelling place for the god of Jacob.

But it was Solomon who built a house for him, yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands. As the prophet says, 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? Did not my hand make all these things? You stiff-necked people, and circumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.

As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels, and did not keep it.

[2 : 2 7] And when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.

Then they cast him out of the city, and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him.

[3 : 3 3] But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women, and committed them to prison. The end of Acts chapter 7 tells the story of Stephen's

martyrdom, the first martyr in the history of the church.

Stephen has been accused, and he's brought before the council. He stands accused of speaking blasphemous words against God and Moses, seeking to change the customs and also the holy place of the temple.

In response to these charges, Stephen retells the story of Israel. He particularly focuses upon the characters of Joseph and Moses. He tells the story of Moses as a periodised narrative.

He is delivered as an infant. Then he visits Israel for the first time as a 40-year-old. And then, at the age of 80, he leads the people out of Egypt. There is a sort of parallel within the biblical narrative between these different deliverances or events.

In his childhood, he is drawn out of the water, taken from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. At the age of 40, he has a deliverance at the wells. He fights off the false shepherds, and he delivers the bride.

[4 : 39] And then, on a second occasion leading a flock to Mount Sinai, there is another deliverance at the water. The nation now is drawn out of the water at the Red Sea. The Sea of Reeds would remind us of the fact that Moses himself was drawn out of the reeds.

Stephen wants us to recognise the symmetries, the symmetries within the story of Moses, but also greater symmetries. Stephen is especially concerned that we appreciate the themes of rejection that run throughout the story of Scripture.

Those appointed by the Lord for the deliverance of the people are rejected by those people. Joseph is the first one that's told, and then Moses. Moses was called at the burning bush, and he had been rejected at his first visitation, and now he has sent them again.

Christ is returning to Israel in the message of his apostles. They have a chance to listen this time and to repent. There's a contrast between Israel's rejection of Moses and God's sending of him. God had chosen this one, and yet Israel turned their back on him. There's also an emphasis upon the role of the angel. The angel appears to Moses at Sinai in the burning bush. The angel also accompanies Moses in the wilderness, and angels are the means by which the law is given.

[5 : 52] Much as with Joseph, Stephen is likely telling the story in a way designed to help and encourage people to notice the resemblances between Jesus and Moses. Daryl Bach notes a number of these.

Moses is rejected, but he becomes ruler and judge. Moses is a deliverer. He performs signs and wonders. Moses is a prophet and a prototype of the coming prophet like Moses.

He is a mediator. He receives and gives the words of God. This is not a flattering telling of Israel's story. There's a parallel drawn between their past behavior and their current condition.

And this is going to be only heightened at the end of Stephen's speech, as he gives his indictment upon the nation. We're used to telling the stories of our peoples in flattering ways, in ways that present us as the heroic protagonists of the narrative.

This is not, however, how Stephen tells his story. In his telling of the story, Israel constantly rejects the ones that are sent to them. This way of telling the story is not novel to Stephen.

[6 : 49] We find the same thing as Christ tells the story of Israel in the parable of the wicked vinedressers, whereas he speaks over Jerusalem in chapter 23 of Matthew. He talks to his disciples in Matthew chapter 5 and the Beatitudes of how they persecuted the prophets that went before them.

Christ's people stand facing a tradition of rejection of the word of God. They are not the first to be rejected in this manner. This brutally honest and non-hagiographic telling of the story is possible because forgiveness is extended to Israel.

When forgiveness is extended, it is possible to tell the truth about what has happened. Indeed, forgiveness requires confession, the honest admission of our sins. For forgiveness to be received, there must be an act of telling the truth.

In telling the brutal truth of Israel's actions in this way, Stephen is inviting the people to repent. On the day of Pentecost, a message concerning Israel's sinful rejection of their Messiah had been accepted and had led to forgiveness and repentance.

But it does not have the same effect here. Stephen summarises the whole story of the Exodus in verse 36. His concern seems to be to get to the point of the parallels between Christ and Moses.

[8 : 01] Moses had foretold the coming of a prophet like him in the future. In Deuteronomy chapter 18, verses 15 to 19, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers.

It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. This is not a promise that terminates upon Joshua. It looks forward to something greater still. And this was an important promise for the early church. In Acts chapter 3, verses 22 to 24, Moses said, The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.

[9 : 00] You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you, and it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people. And all the prophets who have spoken from Samuel and those who came after him also proclaim these days.

We should remember that part of the accusation against Stephen was that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses. Now Moses is absolutely integral to Stephen's defense. He is turning the accusation back on them.

In rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting Moses just as they rejected Moses in the past. Israel rejected Moses when he was sent to them the first time. They rejected him the second time too.

Moses mediated the law and brought about their deliverance. But Israel wanted a golden calf as a replacement for him. Moses is also rejected or resisted on several occasions in the book of Numbers.

The golden calf though was the great act of rebellion in Exodus chapter 32. In consequence of their rejection of Moses and turning to worship idols, the works of their hands, God gave them over to the worship of the host of heaven.

[10 : 06] There's a reference to Amos chapter 5 verses 25 to 27 here. It's similar to Romans 1 where people are given up to idolatry and perversion as they reject God.

Again, one of the accusations against Stephen was that he taught that Jesus would destroy the temple. And indeed, Jesus had taught that he would destroy the temple. However, Stephen wants to challenge the way that they regard the house.

They have turned the house of God into a sort of idol. It's treated as something that gives them a way of containing and controlling God. But God cannot be contained by such a building.

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? Says the Lord. What is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? Stephen tells the story in a way that makes the wilderness experience paradigmatic.

When they feel rooted in the land, it can be easy for them to forget that they are always strangers and sojourners before the Lord. The temple itself, as a symbol of God's dwelling with them, can always turn into a sort of false idol, something that they presume upon.

[11 : 09] We might remember the words of Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 following. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.

Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known?

And then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations. Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?

Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

[12 : 23] And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer. Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your

kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Stephen, like Christ, is presenting a similar condemnation to that of Jeremiah. They have put their trust in this building. It has become an idol to them, but no building can contain the Lord of hosts. He ends with a powerful denunciation, their stiff-necked rebellion, their rejection of the messengers of the Lord. These have been consistent features of their behavior throughout their history.

Israel's history is not a glorious history of accepting the messengers of the Lord. Rather, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed the ones who foretold Christ.

It is not surprising that they have killed Christ himself. They accused Stephen of rejecting the customs. They received the law from angels and did not keep it. They accused him of blasphemy against Moses, but they have rejected the prophet like Moses, just as their forefathers rejected Moses when he was sent to them.

[13 : 38] Stephen's speech is a stunning defense. It is also a window into how deeply the early church reflected upon Scripture and the way in which it was fulfilled in Christ. Jesus had foretold such persecution to his disciples in Luke chapter 21, verses 12 to 19.

He had also foretold that they would be given the words to speak when the time came. But before all this, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but not a hair of your head will perish.

By your endurance you will gain your lives. This is all being fulfilled for the first time in the story of Stephen. He is the first of the martyrs. And in this, he is following his master.

[14 : 45] Christ himself had a very similar trial. The accusations faced by Christ are very similar to those faced by Stephen. And the events of Stephen's trial also fulfill something that Jesus spoke of in his.

In Matthew chapter 26, verses 63 to 64. But Jesus remained silent and the high priest said to him, I adjure you by the living God. Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus said to him, You have said so, but I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. In his trial, Stephen declares, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Most of the people in Stephen's trial would have been present at the trial of Christ. They would have recognized the significance of these words. But their response is to shut their ears. They stop their ears and they run at him.

In this response, we see them willfully closing themselves off to the message of Stephen and of the apostles. And not just closing themselves off, but taking the position of utmost hostility to it.

[15 : 50] Stephen, on his part, commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus. There is a parallel between Jesus cast outside and Stephen cast outside. Both cry with a loud voice. Both call for forgiveness for their enemies.

And Stephen, when he is killed, falls asleep. When he had foretold that some of them would be martyrs, Jesus had told his disciples, But not a hair of your head will perish. The description of Stephen falling asleep in such a violent form of death is a manifestation of the fact that they cannot really harm Stephen.

They may be able to destroy Stephen's body, but they cannot kill his soul. Ever since Luke chapter 19, Jerusalem was the stage on which all of these events were taking place. And now, there is going to be a shift.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem in the triumphal entry, people removed their garments and placed them before him. Here they removed garments again to drive Stephen out. And the apostles are scattered to the four winds of heaven.

They are scattered like a dandelion clock being blown. And as they are scattered, they bring the message with them wherever they go. We also have another character introduced here. Those putting Stephen to death put their garments at the feet of a man named Saul.

[17:02] This man named Saul becomes the instigator of great persecution for the church. A question to consider.

Stephen's speech comes at a decisive moment in the narrative. From this point onwards, the narrative will move away from Jerusalem and out into the wider world to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth.

How could we read Stephen's speech as a speech summing up the early stage of the mission and a verdict being declared upon people's response to it?