

Introduction

1. Last week we saw Stephen confronted, arrested, and falsely accused by a group of men referred to as the Synagogue of the Freedmen
2. These were former slaves who had secured their freedom and were primarily Hellenistic Jews (Hebrews heavily influenced by Greek culture)
3. Luke uses words and phrases like **“full of the Spirit and wisdom”** and **“full of grace and power”** to describe Stephen and we saw this demonstrated when his accusers **“rose up and argued”** with him, but were ultimately **“unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking”**
4. So, they fabricated charges and hired false witnesses to testify against him before the Sanhedrin:
 - a. Their first charge was that he blasphemed Moses and God
 - b. The second charge was that he spoke against the temple and the Law, including altering the customs that had been handed down by Moses
5. Today we look at what many of your Bible’s label as his defense:
 - a. In reality, it’s probably better described as Stephen going on offense because he does little if anything to actually defend himself
 - b. However, he comes right out of the gate building a case against his accusers to demonstrate their continued resistance to God
 - c. He does this by:
 - 1) Recounting Israel’s history of resisting God
 - 2) Calling out his accusers for resisting God just as their fathers did

A. Stephen recounts Israel’s history of resisting God (7:2b-50)

1. Stephen begins with God’s promise and covenant with Abraham (READ 2b-8):
 - a. There are two reasons why Stephen begins with Abraham:
 - 1) The first is because that is where Israel’s history begins
 - 2) The second is because Abraham’s obedience to God’s call sets up a contrast to everything else Stephen is going to reveal about Israel’s history of resistance
 - b. Israel’s very existence is predicated upon God’s promises to and covenant with Abraham:
 - 1) God called Abraham and moved him to the land which began Israel (2b-4)
 - 2) God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (5)
 - 3) God foretold that Abraham’s descendants would first be aliens in a foreign land, but that they would ultimately return to the land and serve him (6-7)
 - 4) God entered into a covenant with Abraham (8a)
2. Stephen recounts the patriarchs’ resistance when it came to Joseph (8b-16):
 - a. Almost immediately in Israel’s history we see the first signs of resistance to God and His plans and purpose for Israel
 - b. Abraham is blessed by God and becomes the great-grandfather of the 12 Patriarchs who became the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel

- c. We are only three generations into Israel’s history when we see the first act of resistance that Stephen recounts (READ 8b-9b):
 - 1) If you remember the story of Joseph from Genesis 37-50, a great famine was going to come upon the land and God was going to rise up Joseph to save not just Israel, but all of Egypt
 - 2) He revealed all this to Joseph in a series of dreams, but when Joseph shared it with his brothers, they became jealous, were filled with rage, threw him into a pit, and ultimately sold him as a slave to Egypt
 - 3) So, what we have is God raising up someone to deliver them, but in their ignorance, they resist and rebel
- d. In spite of this resistance, God still fulfilled his purpose and plan for Joseph and delivered Israel from famine (READ 9-16)
- 3. Stephen recounts Israel’s resistance when it came to Moses—and not once but twice (17-40):
 - a. The first time they resisted Moses it was in ignorance (READ 17-29):
 - 1) God specifically raised up Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt—he was raised in the Pharaoh’s home, educated in all the ways of Egypt, and had even become a powerful man in words and deeds
 - 2) Meanwhile, his fellow Hebrews were being enslaved and severely oppressed by the Egyptians
 - 3) According to Exodus 2:11, one day when Moses was looking into the treatment of his fellow Hebrews, he came across an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew and he killed him
 - 4) Now, pay attention to v. 25: **“And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand”**
 - 5) Even before his calling at the burning bush, Moses had a sense that God had raised him up to deliver Israel, but as Luke reminds us, his fellow Hebrews resisted and rejected him, ultimately forcing him to flee to Midian
 - b. The second time they resisted Moses it was in disobedience (READ 30-40):
 - 1) Much like God did with Joseph, in spite of their resistance to Moses the first time, God sent him to deliver Israel a second time (RE-READ 35)
 - 2) But, just like the first time, Israel resisted again:
 - a) Moses led them out of Egypt
 - b) They witnessed angels speaking to him in the wilderness
 - c) He performed signs and wonders in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years
 - d) Angels spoke to him and he delivered oracles to them, including prophesying a future prophet like himself (e.g. the Messiah)
 - e) Yet, they resisted (**“repudiated”** meaning to thrust him aside) him once again, this time in disobedience (RE-READ 39-40)
- 4. Finally, Stephen recounts Israel’s resistance to God Himself (40-50):
 - a. They resisted Him through worshipping idols (READ 40-43):
 - 1) When they rejected Moses, they rejected God Himself as well, and not symbolically but literally—they asked Aaron, Moses’ brother, to make them **“gods who will go before us”** (40)

- 2) When Aaron made them a golden calf, they “**rejoiced over the work of their hands**” (41)
 - 3) Stephen quotes from Amos (42-43) where God used a rhetorical question to judge and condemn Israel’s idolatry during the Exodus and wandering in the wilderness
- b. They resisted Him by idolizing the temple (READ 44-50):
- 1) Stephen gives a second example of idolatry in the way they idolized the temple
 - 2) He begins by recounting how God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle as a means of representing God’s presence among Israel, and providing them a place to worship
 - 3) He then speaks of David’s desire to build a temple, but it wasn’t until Solomon became king that the temple was built
 - 4) The tabernacle and temple were important to the Jewish faith because they represented the presence of God, and God established it that way, but they were never meant to contain God—even Solomon recognized this (2 Chronicles 2:6: “**Who is able to build Him a house, seeing the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Him?**”
 - 5) The fact that Stephen says, “**However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands...**” and then quotes from Isaiah 66 suggests that the way Israel had begun to view the temple was a form of idolatry
 - 6) The closest equivalent we might have today is when people view the buildings we meet in as the Church and somehow containing God’s presence; this building is not the Church; we are the Church, God’s temple, and He lives inside of us
5. What appears at first read to simply be a re-telling of Israel’s history, is actually a brilliant, well-crafted strategy by Stephen:
- a. He had been accused of blaspheming Moses and God, as well as speaking against the Law and the Temple
 - b. But he turns the tables on his accusers by first showing how Israel’s leaders had a history of resisting and rebelling against God:
 - 1) They resisted Joseph
 - 2) They resisted Moses...twice
 - 3) They resisted God himself
 - 4) They idolized the temple
 - c. He now turns to his accusers and reveals how they are no different

B. Stephen calls out the Council for resisting God just as their fore-fathers had done (51-53)

1. There are primarily three charges Stephen levels against his accusers:
 - a. The first is that they “**are always resisting the Holy Spirit...just like your fathers did**” (READ 51):
 - 1) Stephen uses two great word-pictures to describe their obstinance and stubbornness:
 - a) “**stiff-necked**”—this portrays an unwillingness to yield or submit to God’s leading or to follow Him; most animals are led by their head/neck and when they don’t want to follow or be led, they stiffen up their necks and pull away

Trying to take Freddie for a walk outside the yard

- b) **“uncircumcised in heart and ears”**—portrays a hard or callous heart and an unwillingness to listen/obey
- 2) These come right out of the OT where God used them repeatedly to describe how past generations (e.g. their **“fathers”**) had continually resisted and rebelled against God
 - 3) The implication Stephen is making here is that what was taking place in Jerusalem through the Apostles and others like himself was the work of the Holy Spirit, and by resisting it they were resisting God just like their fathers had done in the OT
- b. The second charge Stephan makes against his accusers is that they had become **“betrayers and murderers”** of God’s prophets (READ 52):
- 1) Stephen refers to the persecution and killing of God’s prophets here and both the OT and history bears this out: **“They beat them. They wounded them. They treated them shamefully. They threw them out. They bashed their heads in. They killed them. According to Justyn Martyr, Isaiah was sawn in half by his own people. Jeremiah was constantly mistreated and thrown into a pit. Tradition says he was ultimately stoned to death. Ezekiel was mistreated. Tradition says he was murdered by an Israelite he rebuked. Amos had to flee for his life. Zacharias the priest was rejected and stone. Micaiah the prophet was punched in the face. This is how they were treated.”** (John MacArthur, from the sermon cited below)
 - 2) The implication Stephen is making here is that his accusers were guilty of the same thing; by persecuting him and the Apostles—those who were bearing witness to Christ—they were betraying (and by association murdering) the prophets who **“announced the coming of the Righteous One”** (e.g. the very one about whom they were witnessing)
- c. The third charge is that they were lawbreakers (READ 53):
- 1) If you remember, one of the charges they made against Stephen was that he was speaking against the Law and the customs handed down to them by Moses
 - 2) Stephen replies in a fashion similar to Jesus when He was confronted by Israel’s leaders and accused of violating the Law (John 7:19): **“Did not Moses give you the Law, and yet none of you carries out the Law? Why do you seek to kill Me?”**
 - 3) The Jewish leaders claimed to hold the Law in high regard, recognizing its divine nature (given by God through angels), but their own actions proved they did not keep the Law

Conclusion

****Two things stand out to me in the passage as takeaways for us:**

1. The first is that what Stephen experienced is no different than what similar men and women of God have faced throughout history:
 - a. Stephen recounted Israel’s history of resistance to God and the one’s He sent
 - b. Jesus Himself was resisted, rejected, and ultimately crucified
 - c. Jesus warned and prepared His disciples for persecution telling us that the world will hate us because it hated Him first
 - d. We are seeing this more and more right here at home in our own country

2. The second is that Stephen didn't appear to get discouraged or fearful when confronted by his accusers, but rather courageously and boldly proclaimed the truth, even calling out his accusers:
 - a. There's a lot of angst and fear among Christians today
 - b. Some leaders and churches have foolishly compromised their message or conviction thinking they can assuage the hatred or appease their accusers
 - c. But Stephen didn't do that; instead, he allowed himself to be filled with the Holy Spirit and emboldened with grace, wisdom and power