

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

## **The God Who Saves – Past, Present and Future (Part 1)**

Acts 7:1-16

*1 The high priest said, “Are these things so?” 2 And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’ 4 Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. 6 “But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 7 “ ‘AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,’ said God, ‘AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.’ 8 And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; 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. 9 The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11 Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. 12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13 On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. 15 And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16 From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”*

There is nothing alluring in being publicly accused of teaching or believing false things or of misleading people. This is even truer if the people accusing you are people in authority and have the power to harm you if they do not like what you are saying. This is the circumstance that Stephen finds himself in here at the beginning of Acts 7. Stephen has been seized by the Greek speaking Jewish people as mentioned in Acts 6:9, and has been dragged before the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin. Let me remind you that this is the same ruling council that just some time earlier had condemned Jesus to death and most recently had threatened and flogged the Peter and John for preaching in the name of Jesus.

As Stephen stood before these men, he had been falsely charged with blasphemy against Moses, against God, and was even accused of premeditating an act of terrorism against the temple back in Acts 6:11-14. This is no petty misunderstanding. Stephen was guilty, in their minds, of undermining the Jewish faith and was leading people astray. The charge is high treason against the Jewish state and religion that carries with it the penalty of death. What we have in Acts 7 then is Stephen’s “defense”, his apology; or his explanation of these charges.

How Stephen responds seems puzzling to us. How does this recounting of Israel’s history answer the charges of treason against God and Judaism? On the surface, every one of these men hearing his words would agree with what he said. So, why does he respond this way; with this history lesson of Israel? In this defense, we see Stephen demonstrating his high regard for God; for Moses and the Old Testament. He is not disrespecting them; he is exalting them. As we

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read through his recount, we find Stephen affirming everything written in the Old Testament; which stands in contrast to the false charges against him.

As Stephen spoke to the Sanhedrin, we are reminded that he did something much greater than simply defending himself. This is a fulfillment of what Jesus told His disciples back Luke 21:12-15. Hear there what Jesus said and compare it to what we find Stephen going through here in our text in Acts. Jesus said,

**12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.**

I love verse 13, that, "***It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony.***" We need to learn that when our faith is challenged, it is a God-given opportunity to tell others about Christ and about the gospel. Remember what I have said throughout our study here in Acts, that opposition always leads to opportunity. This is what Stephen is doing as he chooses material from the Old Testament, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to reveal to these men that the true way of salvation is not through the temple, nor through the sacrifices, or circumcision, or the keeping of the Law but rather through Jesus: through His life, death and resurrection. Stephen presented to these men the God who saves; past, present and future. Walking through the Old Testament, Stephen showed them their misunderstanding of their own history. The history of Israel, through the events and words recorded in the Old Testament, reveals how the God of history pointed His people to Jesus and His work alone as the only way of salvation. Remember that the Jews at this time believed that God only saved people who were or who become Jewish by submitting to circumcision, to the temple sacrifices and to practicing all the laws contained in the Old Testament. What Stephen argued is one of the most important truths about salvation; namely that *God has always and only saved people by grace through faith in the suffering Messiah.*

Luke, the author of Acts, records this speech as his prime example of how to understand the Old Testament in light of the coming of Christ. Israel's history points to Jesus and the salvation He would bring. This has always been a concern of Luke as he carefully recorded that Jesus did for those two men on the road to Emmaus. In Luke 24:27 we read,

***Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.***

And now, in Acts 7, we find Luke revealing that this was the understanding of the church from the beginning. Stephen, through this speech to the Jewish authorities proved that the true people of God have never been identified by their Jewishness, but by their relation to the Jewish Messiah, that is Jesus. And so, here is the main point I wish to expound upon this morning; namely, that the God of the Old Testament always pointed His people to salvation by Christ, by the Messiah, by Jesus alone! This is another way of saying that *salvation is by grace alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone.* This will serve as our outline both this morning and for next

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week as we see how Stephen's speech is a lesson of salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone. This morning we look to the lesson on grace alone.

## I. **God has always saved by His grace alone (Acts 7:2, 4, 9, 13-14)**

As Stephen walks through Israel's history, we are struck by the words he chooses to declare this truth that God saves by His grace alone and not because of or even in conjunction with human merits or efforts. If we are to see the grace of God in this text, let us first establish what the grace of God is.

Perhaps the simplest definition of grace is contained in just three words: God's unmerited favor. A. W. Tozer took this a bit further saying that: "*Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits on the undeserving.*" Notice that grace is not merely unmerited favor; it is unearned favor bestowed on sinners who deserve wrath. To put it another way, showing kindness to a stranger is "unmerited favor"; but doing good to your enemies is more in keeping with the spirit of grace (see Luke 6:27-36).

Grace is not an empty sentiment or some abstract quality. It is not theoretical but rather is a practical, dynamic, active, and working principle: The grace of God instructs us in how to live for God according to Titus 2:11-12. God's grace is an active force and energy constantly at work. Grace is God's sovereign initiative toward undeserving sinners. Here is God's grace as expressed in Ephesians 1:5-6

***He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.***

We are not to see grace as a single event in our Christian experience. According to Romans 5:2 we stand (our standing and position before God) is in grace. And according to 2 Peter 3:18, we are told that we are to "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*" And so, as we look at what Stephen communicates to his hearers about grace, let us begin with concise yet full definition. Grace is *the free and benevolent influence of the holy God operating freely in the lives of undeserving sinners.* Now the question is, how do we see this idea of grace in Stephen's speech?

Notice with me first the person who is the main subject of our text. It is not Abraham, or Joseph, but rather the person is God. The history of Israel begins with God. And how is God described from the start? In verse two Stephen calls Him, "***the God of glory.***" Where did Stephen get this title? It sounds familiar enough. But upon investigation, we find that this phrase, "***the God of glory,***" appears only once in the Old Testament. It is found in Psalm 29:3 that is a psalm of praise to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Psalm 29:3 reads, "***The voice of the LORD is upon the waters, the God of glory thunders, the LORD is over many waters.*** The point of the Psalm is to declare that God is glorious because when He speaks, things happen. What things? Oh, things like creation, the weather, earthquakes, and oh yes, things like salvation.

How does this relate to what Stephen says here at the beginning of his speech and how is it a revelation of grace alone? This great God of glory "***appeared***" (passive tense) to Abraham (v. 2) and He spoke to Abraham (v. 3). God spoke to a man; a creature. In the same way that God, out of no necessity in Himself and not response to anyone or anything compelling Him, but

# The Church Alive

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simply in accordance to His own good pleasure, spoke creation into existence out of nothing; so, in like manner, this God of glory spoke the nation of Israel into existence by instructing Abraham to leave his country and go to the land He would show him. This was purely an act of grace.

There is no way around this although many easily miss it. That God would speak to Abraham and command him to go to the promised land was simply an act of free grace. There was nothing in Abraham’s person or character that would compel God to respond to anything in Abraham. In fact, Abraham was a gross idol worshipper. The call to Abraham was God’s gracious, unsolicited, unmerited choice. There is no way around this. This call took place some six hundred years before the giving of the law to Israel on Mt. Sinai and the founding of the nation. It was given a thousand years before the construction of the temple where the sacrifices for sin would take place. And behind Stephen’s statement of God speaking to Abraham is a profound question: *“If the temple and the law (6:14) are so necessary for a right standing before God, then how does one explain God’s calling Abraham while an idol worshipping pagan in Ur of the Chaldeans?”* God called and delivered Abraham as an act of grace.

There is more. In addition to this call out of Ur, we find God, again, graciously telling Abraham what He would do in verses 4-5. He would give Abraham and his seed the land of Canaan. This was God’s gracious promise. As Stephen speaks these words, these descendents of Abraham were standing in what city, Jerusalem; which is in what land? The land of Canaan, the promised land. *What is the point?* Stephen reminds these men that the land in which they were living was given as a gracious promise made to Abraham, before the law existed. What would give them or anyone the idea that they had earned the right for to live in this land. They had falsely concluded they were there because they were so faithful. What Stephen revealed is that they were in the land because God is so gracious.

The people that Stephen was speaking to had cheapened God’s grace. They had devalued God’s grace. What is cheap grace? Many years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined a term that has come to characterize much of evangelical Christianity today and was true of what the religious leaders had done in Stephen’s day — it is the term “cheap grace.” Cheap grace is actually a self-imparted grace, a pseudo-grace, a grace that in the end results in the most costly of all consequences; the damnation of the soul to hell. Cheap grace has nothing in common with God’s grace; it is a contemptible counterfeit; a despicable derelict; a phony façade. Such a grace is “cheap” in *value*, not cost. In the words of one preacher, such grace is “a bargain-basement, damaged-goods, washed-out, moth-eaten, second-hand grace.” Such grace is a man-made, man-conceived, and man-maintained. It is reminiscent of the indulgences Rome was peddling in Martin Luther’s day. Cheap? Yes, but the cost of it is actually far more than the buyer could possibly realize, because such “grace” is absolutely worthless.

And beloved, we suffer from the same inclinations; the same assumptions as these religious men. By our own nature, we conclude that whatever good things we have in our lives, we deserve; that we have earned them. We say we have them by “grace” yet we also think that because we worked hard for them; or because we were born into the right family, we come to expect that we should have such things. It is a foregone conclusion that we are alive and that we are healthy and that we have food to eat, a nice home to live in, and friends who care about us because this is what we deserve; this is the way it should be.

Where stands it written? We need to remember what the Apostle Paul told the people of Athens saying, **“He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things...for in Him we**

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**live and move and exist..." (Acts 17:25, 28).** What makes us think we deserve the clothes we wear, or the homes we live in, or even the families to which we were born? We do not even earn the food we eat as Psalm 145:15 -16 declares:

**15 The eyes of all look to You, And You give them their food in due time. 16 You open Your hand And satisfy the desire of every living thing.**

"Wait Pastor! You are being too hard! This is not true. At least it is not true of me. I know I do not deserve such things!" Do you? Beloved, every time we grumble, complain, fight, argue or get depressed and sad when such things are taken away from us, we reveal that we are not thinking about God's grace but rather about what we deserve. When was the last time you responded like Job when he lost all of his possessions and his seven children on the same day? What did Job say, "**The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD**" (Job 1:21). What was Job saying? He was saying that everything was a gift of grace, not the reward for his obedience. And here in Acts 7, by reminding these men of the calling of Abraham and the very existence Israel in the land of Canaan with a temple and priests is a revelation of God's free, unearned, unmerited, unsolicited grace and not an evidence of their own human worth.

But Stephen has more than simply the call of Abraham as a demonstration of both life and salvation by grace alone. There is a clear revelation of the grace of God seen in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Stephen refers to them at the end of verse 8, the "twelve patriarchs," the sons of Jacob. The Jewish people boasted in their patriarchs, the founders of their nation. Do you remember the story of how the ten brothers of Joseph sold their brother into slavery because they were jealous of him? In verse 9 we are reminded of the cruelty of these men toward their brother Joseph and then see the grace of God. We read;

**The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.**

This is all grace; God's unearned, unmerited favor. First of all, the ten brothers of Joseph were jealous and envious. Additionally, they plotted an evil scheme to rid themselves of their brother; to lie to and deceive their father Jacob in the matter; and to make a profit while doing it. According to the Law of Moses, which these hearers of Stephen's speech so vehemently embraced, anyone who did what their "patriarchs" had done, should be put to death. According to the law, they did not deserve to live. But how did God treat them through Joseph? A famine hits the land of Canaan forcing the brothers to come to Egypt. God has already been gracious to Joseph in so many ways that we do not have time to recount. Needless to say, Joseph, by God's grace and plan had become the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. So the brothers come to Egypt to get food so that their lives might be preserved and they end up getting food from their betrayed brother that they do not recognize. When the brothers come back a second time, Joseph reveals himself to them. Joseph could have used his power and authority to kill them; this is what they deserved, but rather he tells them that God sent him ahead of them to save their lives. Both Joseph in a small way, and God in this grand way, extend grace.

# The Church Alive

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In truth, no one would have considered the story wrong if God or Joseph had destroyed these wicked men. Even the brothers recognized several times in the account that they deserved to die by Joseph hand. Yet, in a display of the grace of God, contrary to what they deserved, Joseph rescued them from the famine and provided them relief from the famine.

So Stephen's point is that these Jewish leaders have completely misunderstood God's word and misinterpreted the cause of their fortunate condition. All that they have is not due to anything that they or any of their ancestors ever did but it is all owing to God's decision to be kind to them contrary to what they deserve. They possessed the land, had the temple, and had received the law only because of God's grace, not because of their value or their obedience.

And as we close and prepare ourselves for the Lord's table, let me remind you that the same is true of every one of us. There is nothing you have, no pleasure you enjoy, no ability you possess, nothing that is yours because of you. It is all a gift, given to you by the God of glory who delights to give undeserving sinners gifts they do not deserve. But not only are all the creation pleasures you experience on a daily basis gifts of God grace but most wondrously, God has provided salvation for His people as an act of his free grace. This is worthy of your consideration. Hear the words of 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 and let them speak to your heart,

**26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, 29 so that no man may boast before God. 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."**

Beloved, if you are headed for heaven, it is because of the finished work of Jesus; it is only because God has chosen to be gracious to you in the same way he chose to be gracious to Abraham, to the ten corrupt brothers of Joseph and even to Joseph himself. Grace is *the free and benevolent influence of the holy God operating freely in the lives of undeserving sinners*. And all of God's actions in history, from creation, to Abraham, to the founding of Israel, all the way through the Old Testament point to Jesus as the only one who can bring people to God because God has always saved by His grace alone and not on the basis of human works or worth. Have you experienced this true grace of God or have you settled for cheap grace? Are you living in light of God's grace that changes, influences and affects your behavior toward increasing godliness, or are you living under the pressure of cheap grace where your salvation and your joy are dependent upon you rather than God!

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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