

## The God Who Saves – by the Savior Jesus Christ

Acts 7:17-38

In case you did not know this, people are strange. We are strange and peculiar beings, each motivated by a host of influences and experiences. This strangeness reveals itself in a number of ways, one of which is how two people can look at the same set of facts, whatever those facts may be, and arrive at very different conclusions. As a simple example, if I have a glass of water on the table and I point to it asking two friends to tell me how much water is in the glass; one may well say, “The glass is half empty!” And you know where this is going, for the other may well say what, “The glass is half full!” How is it that two people can look at the same fact and come to different conclusions? Now in the water example, we might argue that both my friends were right; but what of issues like the creation versus evolution debate. Both groups are looking at the same evidence; the same rocks and fossils, the same space and stars, yet they come to very different conclusions.

We know that our country is spiraling out of control in debt that none of us can truly fathom. On this fact, we can all agree. But what many disagree on is this, what does it all mean? We can see the facts, but what do we actually see? I believe it is safe to say that the majority of arguments people have is not so much about “what are the facts” but rather over “what the facts mean.” We are a strange people.

As we continue along in Acts 7, what we find here is an argument over the meaning of agreed upon facts. As we have already noted, no Jew would have disagreed with the facts that Stephen communicates in his speech concerning the history of Israel as well as concerning the fact of the life and death of Jesus. Stephen is not on trial for stating these “facts” – what he is on trial for is for stating what these facts mean that stands opposed to what the Jewish leaders believed these facts mean. Let me summarize the argument that is taking place in our text.

On the one hand are the Jewish leaders who believe that God had sent Moses to deliver (that is to save) Israel from Egypt and then gave Israel the law through Moses so that the only people God will ever receive into His presence are those who do what Moses taught which included worship at the temple in Jerusalem, being circumcised, following the laws regarding diet and washing, and the obeying of the moral law given by God. Their argument is that Jesus could not have been the long awaited Messiah because He broke the law of God, He broke the Sabbath by healing on it and He opposed the teachers of the law, the leaders of Israel, and so, ultimately they killed Jesus, believing that God would never permit His Messiah to be killed.

But Stephen interprets the facts concerning Moses differently. What Stephen argues in our text is that the history of Moses was actually pointing to that prophet of prophets whom Moses himself said would come after him. Let us see this at the end of our text, down in verse 37 where we read, **“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.’”** Here Stephen is quoting from Deuteronomy 18:15, reminding them that God would raise up a prophet **“like me”** – that is like Moses, to whom they must pay attention. From our text, we see that Stephen’s main point is that the history of Moses is meant to show that Jesus is that prophet like Moses and is in fact greater than Moses. Beloved, Stephen is preaching the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to these hostile men as he retells of the story of Moses. As he did this, he revealed no disrespect for Moses or the law or the temple, which is what the leaders had accused him of doing; but rather he sought to get these men to see what they should have seen in the story of Moses; the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we delve into our text, let me point out to you what is the key verse of application. It is found in verse 25, **“And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them**

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

**deliverance through him, but they did not understand.”** Here Stephen recounts that Moses’ action of killing the Egyptian who was beating the Israelite was so that the Israelites would understand that God had sent him to rescue them. Notice two times Stephen uses the word for “understand” here. The word describes having knowing something to the point of action. It is knowledge that produces results; like the student who does his work on the test to show he “understands” and can apply the material.

As Stephen draws his parallels between Moses and Jesus, his goal is not to simply speak of knowing some facts about Jesus, but rather that his hearers, which includes you and me, would understand Jesus in the way a husband understands his wife and loves her. The idea is of intimate knowledge; of a relational knowledge. Not simply, do you know about Jesus, but do you have a personal relationship with Jesus. Is this how you understand Jesus?

*At issue is this, these men believed that something better and more important than Jesus was present in the person of Moses, in the presence of the temple and in the practice of the Law. All of this reminds us to examine what it is, or even who it is that we, by words or by actions, knowingly or unknowingly, regard as more important and better than Jesus. None of us here would say there is, but consider your life carefully as we see how the men of Israel had disregarded Jesus.*

Let us start our study of this text with some questions; “What do you see when you consider Moses? What do you see when you consider Jesus? Do you understand that God sent Jesus to give you salvation? My intention this morning is to help you see what Stephen’s audience did not see or refused to see and understand. Here is what Stephen was seeking; that people would see, know, understand and therefore trust in Jesus as Savior even as He was revealed through the life of Moses. Just like Stephen’s first hearers, apart from the grace of God at work in your heart by His Holy Spirit, neither you nor I will see and understand what is revealed to us about Jesus in the life of Moses. May the Lord Jesus Christ, who caused the blind to see, grant sight to our eyes that we may behold Him through this history of Moses and fully receive Him as our own Savior. These verses reveal truths about our need for Jesus as Savior.

## I. **We are powerless to save ourselves (7:17-19, 34)**

*17 But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18 until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. 19 It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive...34 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'*

Stephen actually began this account of Moses back in verses 6-7, recalling the promise made to Abraham, which spoke of God is giving Abraham’s descendants the Land of Promise. Before this however, He would first have them enslaved for four hundred years and then bring them out of their slavery by His own hand. Each of these men hearing Stephen would see Moses as the person through whom God fulfilled this promise to deliver His people from their slavery and bring them into the land of Canaan. In our text, we find three facts about Israel’s trouble from which Moses would deliver them.

**First**, their slavery was to the Egyptians. Being slaves, they were not free to live their lives as they wish, or even in accordance with the ways of God but were forced to obey the commands of their masters.

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

**Second**, we know that Israel was not only in slavery in general, but that the king who ruled over them was treacherous and ruthless; both a liar and a deceiver. Pharaoh is an agent of death and destruction and he purposes to exterminate God’s people.

**Third**, according to verse 34, the people of Israel were groaning under the burden of their oppression. The Israelites were aware of their miserable and helpless condition.

What Stephen was emphasizing here was that God sent Moses to deliver enslaved, oppressed, and miserable people. God sent Moses to deliver a weak and helpless people, not to motivate a strong, competent people to obey God’s law so that they could obey it. Stephen will acknowledge Moses as the lawgiver but this is not the focus to which he draws attention. The point is that Moses came to rescue a helpless people from slavery, not to instruct a free and strong people on how to live. In quoting Deuteronomy 18:15 down in verse 37, Stephen is making this statement; that Jesus, the Prophet who is like Moses, came to deliver an enslaved, oppressed, miserable people.

The problem however is this; these men to whom Stephen was speaking did not see themselves as being in same condition as Israel was in Egypt. The truth is that on a spiritual level, they were in a worse situation. However, as they looked at the “facts” they concluded that because they had the temple, the sacrifices and the priesthood; and because they were living in the Promised Land, they were free. What Stephen is doing is exactly what Jesus did before him and exactly as the apostle Paul did after him, using Israel’s slavery in Egypt as a picture of the ultimate slavery that afflicts all humanity, each and every one of us. An interesting thought is that mostly likely, some of the very men who were involved in this same dispute with Jesus as recorded in John 8 maybe just a year or two before this, were arguing the same now with Stephen. Back in John 8 Jesus declared that He had come to set people free. Jesus had said in John 8:31-32

***If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.***

How did the Jews respond to this? They said that they did not need to be set free because they had never been the slaves of anyone. Jesus reminds them that this is not true and that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. John 8:34 says, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”*** But what does this mean?

We love to describe ourselves as being free people. We live in the land of the free. Rarely a week goes by in which I do not hear someone say, whether via the media or in person, that humans have free will. By the way, I severely dislike this phrase “free will” because it cannot ever mean what people think it means and so it creates a lot of confusion. What most people think of by “free will” is that every person has the freedom to choose whether he will be good or bad, whether he will do right or do wrong. And then, most people conclude that the majority of folks choose to do good as the free people that we are. There are a few problems with this. ***First***, this is not what the Bible says about us and ***second***, people say this because they redefine what is “good.” Remember what Jesus said in John 8:34, that everyone who sins is proving what? That he is a slave to sin. Those are not my words, but Jesus’, ***everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.*** How then can we claim to be free? According to the word of God, we are incapable of doing anything but sin because sin is our master. We reveal who our master is by whom we obey. Every time we sin, we reveal that sin is our master or, more pointedly, that we are slaves to sin.

The word of God repeatedly and unequivocally teaches that every one apart from a saving relationship to Jesus Christ, that is, in their naturally born state, is not free to choose good or evil but always chooses evil. The lie of the serpent to Eve in Genesis 3 was that by God’s keeping from them

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the knowledge of good and evil, God was keeping them from being like God and that they had the right to be like God. What the serpent did not tell Adam and Eve is this, that upon eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; that knowing good, they would be unable to do it; and knowing evil they would be unable to resist it. The Scriptures declare that, **“All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...”** (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus said in John 6:44, **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him...”**

If you want to disagree with what the Word of God declares and insist that there is such a thing as “free will” then let me tell you what you ought to do. *Stop sinning!* For those who claim to have a free will to choose good, then go, love all people the way you know you ought to love people. Go treat others the way you want to be treated. You say, “Okay, I can do that!” Can you? Can you really choose to do this on your own? I love how C.S. Lewis described it, saying, *“you never know how bad you are until you try to be good.”* The only people who think they are free, that is, able to do good, are people who do not know what true goodness actually is, that is, people who have defined “good” to fit how they live.

When Luke was just a little guy, about three years old; the adults were up late playing a game. It was well past his bedtime, but Luke would come out and want to play the game. First, I got up and tucked him back in bed, telling him it was time to go to sleep. But he got up again. So mom got up and tucked him into bed. There was a third time in which I informed my three year old that if he got up again, there would be consequences. Sure enough, Luke got up again, only this time he informed us saying, “I guess I will take the consequences because I want to play.” (Yes, my three year old used the word consequences). While we all wanted and did in fact smile at his persistence, it also revealed something that is true of humanity. Regardless of what we have been instructed, we cannot seem to help ourselves but to rebel, thinking that we can face the consequences without much harm.

This is how the apostle Paul describes humanity in the book of Romans. In Romans 8 we see that by nature we are hostile to God; we are born not wanting to submit to God’s law and, on top of that, we are not even able to submit to God’s law. This means that by nature, the way each of us is born into this world, we are incapable of pleasing God by our own works. This inability to do good God demands is because no one can do what they do not want to do and there is no one who naturally thinks that obeying God’s law is a good thing. Romans 3:10 says that there is no one who does good, not even one. Like Luke, rather than obey the instructions of his parents, we think it best to do what we want regardless of the consequences. Our hearts drive us to only do what we want to do and what we want to do apart from God’s grace is sin. This is humanity’s slavery, bondage of the affections and desires of our hearts. We begin by loving the wrong things, and this drives us to desire more and more of the wrong things. We see the right things, the God things as foolish and want nothing of them. This beloved, is what the author of Hebrews described in 3:12 as the **“deceitfulness of sin.”** It tricks you into thinking you are okay with God even if you are not doing His will. Know this truth, that apart from the grace of Christ, we sin and we always sin because we want to sin.

But it gets worse; for the Bible makes a devastating connection between our sin and the devil; the very antichrist. Every time we sin, we are associating, relating ourselves to the devil. Where stands it written? Hear the words of 1 John 3:8;

**...the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.**

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

Jesus Himself, speaking to a group of men, some of whom may well have been hearing Stephen's speech said in John 8:43-44,

***Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.***

Why is it that they do not hear Jesus? Because their hearing is in bondage, in slavery to the devil's desires. And it is a willing slavery. Because they wanted what devil wanted and not what God wanted, this made them hate Jesus and desire to kill him. This made them not understand anything He was saying. And this is the human condition apart from salvation in Jesus Christ. We are helpless, we are incapable of understanding or of responding to the will of God. By nature we hate God and are enslaved to sin and the devil. Is this true? Do you believe this? What did Paul tell the believers at the church in Colossae? We read in Colossians 1:21, ***"And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds..."*** This was not true for just some in that church, this was true of all of them. And it is true of each one of us; before Christ, we are alienated from God and slaves to sin.

This is the beginning of the good news however. For until you can see yourself as a helpless slave of sin and the devil; until you groan for deliverance even as ancient Israel did, you will not see your need of the Savior. Here is the deceitfulness of sin; more often people groan not because they see themselves as sinful, but rather because they see themselves as victims of the sins of others. We complain about not having friends or having lost a job. We grumble because our parents do not let us have something or do something we think we deserve. We are bitter because we heard someone say something bad about us. But like Moses to Israel, Jesus did not come to save us from such things, but rather to save us from the sin in our hearts and the wrath of God we deserve because of it. And we are powerless to do anything about because we are in bondage to it all. This is why Jesus came. So our text reveals our need for Jesus as Savior in that we are powerless to save ourselves, but next that...

## **II. Jesus is powerful to save completely (7:20-27, 34-36)**

As we move into the next set of verses, we need to see what Stephen is doing; he is making connections between Moses and Jesus. He is revealing how Jesus is "the prophet like" Moses about which Deuteronomy 18:5 and Acts 7:37 spoke. However, unlike Moses who could only provide a limited and temporary deliverance, Jesus is powerful enough to provide a full and eternal salvation. Let me walk you through a few of these connections.

### **1. Similar birth circumstances (7:20a)**

*It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.*

Remember that at the birth of Moses, there was a pagan king, Pharaoh, who was determined to kill all the Jewish baby boys in Goshen. At the birth of Jesus, there was also a pagan king, named Herod, who was determined to kill all the Jewish baby boys in Bethlehem. God miraculously saved Moses from death by separating him from his own people in Egypt. In a similar way, God saved baby Jesus from death as a baby by separating him from Israel in Egypt.

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

## 2. Similar favor shown by God (7:20-22)

*20 It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. 21 And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.*

Stephen says that Moses, here in verse 20 was **“lovely in the sight of God.”** I am not sure that this is the most manly description of Moses but the same word is used again of Moses, in the same context of his growing up, in Hebrews 11:23, where it says that he was a beautiful child. This word for “lovely” or “beautiful” is an old and unique word. The ESV translates it this way, saying he was “beautiful”; the NKJV says he was “well-pleasing” and the NIV; in a most understated manner says he was “no ordinary child.” Stephen has in mind Exodus 2:2 where the text reads that Moses was born a “beautiful” or “good” child. The idea here is that God had favored the child Moses; with health, by features, and by provision. Thinking back on the birth of Christ, we see the similarity between the prophet Moses and the one that would be like Moses. In Luke 2:40 we read, **“The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.”** And then again in Luke 2:52 we read, **“And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”**

Notice what Stephen says about Moses in verse 22, that he was **“was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power [dunatos] in words [logois] and deeds [ergois].”** Was Stephen making a connection between Moses and Jesus with this statement? Consider the testimony of Luke 24:19, where the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, in walking unawares with the resurrected Jesus said, **“The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet [like Moses] mighty [dunatos] in deed [ergos] and word [logos] in the sight of God and all the people...”**

Stephen was connecting the dots for these men, showing them that Jesus is this prophet to come, who would be like Moses and greater than Moses.

## 3. Similar experience of rejection (7:23-28)

*23 But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26 On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? 28 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?'*

It is hard to fathom why the fellow Israelite of 27 did what he did and said what he said to Moses. It has the same feel of the times when the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus He taught or performed some miracle. In John 2:18, after running the money changers out of the temple, the Jews asked of Him, **“What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?”** And again, in John 6:30, they demanded, **“What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?”** In other words, they are asking Him by what authority does He have the right to be ruling and judging them. This is essentially the same the abusive Israelite asked of Moses.

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

#### **4. Similar places of preparation for ministry (7:29-33)**

*29 At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons. 30 After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. 31 When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33 "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.*

I said similar, not exactly alike. For Moses spent 40 years in the desert of Midian before God directed him to deliver the people. Jesus spent 40 days in that same desert region before God brought Him out to save His people from their sin by preaching the good news of the kingdom. Both for Moses and Jesus, there was a time of quiet separation for preparation to do the work of God. Sometimes we would do well to take some time to prepare ourselves for ministry. Whether it be a 40 second prayer on the way up to a pulpit to preach, or as you meet with someone to share the gospel; or 40 minutes of reflection prior to coming to a worship service, to 40 days of studying a specific theme or book of the Bible, or whatever it is; we ought to prepare for service.

#### **5. Similar in using great signs and wonders before the people (7:34-36)**

*34 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.' 35 This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. 36 This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.*

Time does not permit us to recount the great signs and wonders performed by Moses before Pharaoh and the people, but just as Moses led the people out of Egypt via such signs and wonders so we read in the Gospel accounts of Jesus leading His people out of their slavery to sin via doing signs and wonders, the greatest of which revolved around the cross upon which He paid for our sins and upon the grave where He proved His power over sin. Jesus proved to be both the “Ruler” with authority over sin, death and hell; as well as the “Deliverer” from the same. Oh that this is how we would constantly behold Jesus.

#### **6. Similar in bringing words of life to the people (7:37-38)**

*“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.'” This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.*

Even as Moses received living words from God and passed them on to the congregation of Israel, similarly did Jesus give His living words to the church, the congregation of the redeemed.

Do you see Jesus as the one who alone understands and shares with humble, repentant sinners the words of life? Please turn with me to John 6. Most of you are familiar with the account of John 6, where after Jesus had taught some difficult things to understand to the people, many who had been following Him, according to verse 66, “...**withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.**” It is interesting to note verse 65 in which Jesus Himself summarizes what He had been teaching, saying, “**For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been**

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

**granted him from the Father.”** He had been teaching God’s sovereignty and grace in salvation, that it comes purely as a gift, granted by the Father, not as something merited or earned. This caused many to fall away. At this, in verse 67, Jesus turns to the twelve disciples as asks, **“You do not want to go away also, do you?”** Now then, listen careful to the response Peter gives on behalf of himself and the others and let me ask you, is this how you see Jesus? Peter says in verses 68-69, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”**

He did not say that Moses possessed the words of life; he did not say that the words of life were found in the temple, or in the keeping of the law. He did not say that the words of life were found in having the right spouse, or in having obedient children, that the words of life are not found in the right job, or the right circumstances, they are not found in possessions, or in the vain philosophies of this world. No, rather Peter states that the words of eternal life are found in one person, Jesus Christ.

Remember the issue Stephen is addressing; that *these men believed that something better and more important than Jesus was present in the person of Moses, in the presence of the temple and in the practice of the Law. This reminds us to examine what it is, or even who it is that we, by words or by actions, knowingly or unknowingly, regard as more important and better than Jesus.*

Let us not be like these men to whom Stephen is speaking, seeing Jesus but not understanding; holding onto lesser things, even if they be good things, for Moses was indeed good, but let us not hold on to lesser things en masse the wonder, the greatness, the splendor, and the joy of knowing, and walking with, and obey healing Jesus Christ. Moses was “a” deliverer. But Jesus is “the” Deliverer. Let us never seek salvation from sin or even from the smaller calamities of life by ourselves but always and only looking unto Jesus Who Is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. We are saved powerfully and completely by Christ alone.

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*Soli Deo Gloria*

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