

STEPHEN'S DEFENCE: THE CALL OF ABRAHAM ACTS 07:01–08

Introduction

Stephen defended himself, but not by offering a legal defence. He defended himself by proclaiming the glorious mercy and grace of God throughout Israel's history. He showed how Israel rejected God time and time again; nevertheless, God reached out to deliver the nation after each rejection. (Acts 7:1-53).

- I. Stephen on trial — defended himself (v. 1).
- II. The birth of Israel: the promise to Abraham — an inheritance and a possession (vv. 2-8).

I. Acts 07:01 *Stephen on Trial*

Stephen was on trial for his life. The charges had been made: he was accused of insurrection, of preaching that the sacred institutions of the nation were to be destroyed, that is, the land, the temple, the law and the customs (v. 11-15).

Stephen defended himself by reviewing Israel's history and making the following points. (Note that Stephen's defence was a sermon; he preached the gospel to the court.)

1. The nation and its sacred institutions (the land, the law and the temple) were being destroyed, but not by Christ. They were being destroyed by the people themselves. From the beginning they had always misunderstood and rejected God's plan. (See outline points 2-4.)
2. God loved Israel — He loved Israel so much that in every instance of misunderstanding and rejection, He had worked out a deliverance. (See outline points 2-4.)
3. God's final plan of deliverance was Jesus Christ, His own Son. But as in the past, the present generation had misunderstood and rejected Him. (See v. 52.)

II. Acts 07:02–08 *The Call and Promise to Abraham*

The birth of Israel, the call and promise to Abraham — an inheritance and a possession. Stephen began his defence (his sermon) from the very beginning of the nation's history. Note the emphasis upon God. God gave birth to Israel — of this there can be no doubt.

1. God appeared to Abraham and called Abraham (v. 2). (See *Israel, God's Special People*, Jn. 4:22; *Jews, the Seed of Abraham*, Rom. 4:1-25. See Gen. 12:1-5; 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-8, 15-19; 22:16-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 31:13; 35:9-12; Neh. 9:7-8. See Exo. 6:8; Lev. 20:24; Num. 14:8; Deu. 6:10; 31:20; Jos. 5:6; Jdg. 2:1.)
 - a. It was *the God of glory* (ho theos tes doxes) who called Abraham. (See *God of glory* Acts 7:2.)
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- b. It was “our father Abraham” who was called by God. He was the father of Israel: the first Jew called, the man chosen by God to be the great founder of the nation Israel.

Thought 1. Abraham is the great example of faith in the Bible. Men must hear the call of the God of glory even as Abraham did. And men must heed that call.

John 7:37 *On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”*

Rom 10:12-13 *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.*

Rev 22:17 *The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.*

Isa 45:22-23 *“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”*

Isa 55:1-3 *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”*

2. God promised a land, a land for an eternal inheritance — if Abraham would “leave” of his present country and leave all — his past life — for the promised land (vv. 3-4). Note four facts.
- a. The promised land (Palestine) was promised to Abraham by God. The land was...
- of God’s own choosing.
 - “the land I will show you” (v. 3).
 - an “inheritance” (v. 5).
 - “promised” (v. 5).
 - to be “possessed” (v. 5).
- b. The land was promised “to his seed (descendants) after him.” All believers are the seed or descendants of Abraham by faith. Abraham is *the father* of all who walk in the steps of faith even as he did. This is made abundantly clear by Scripture (Rom. 4:11-13, 16; Gal. 3:6-9, 13-14; 6:14-16).
- 2 The land promised to Abraham was Palestine. But the promised land is a type of heaven, of the eternal land promised by God, of the new heavens and earth, of the new Jerusalem. When dealing with the promised land this fact must be always remembered (Rom. 4:13; Heb. 11:8-16; 12:22; 13:14; Pet. 3:3-4, 8-13; Rev. 21:1-7, 10-27; 22:1-5, 19).
- c. The gift of the promised land was conditional. Abraham had to “leave” of his present surroundings and leave all for the promised land. He had to make a choice, a choice between...
- staying in the world of plenty and comfort (the material world as he knew it), and
 - giving up all for God and His promise of an eternal inheritance.

Abraham made the right choice: "So he left the land of the Chaldeans." God "sent him to this land where you are now living." (Note: Palestine is identified as the land of promise, the type of the promised land of heaven.)

Thought 1. Man must do two things.

=> Man must "leave" his present surroundings and leave the world and its material comforts and corruptions.

Acts 2:40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

2 Cor 6:17-18 "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty.

Eph 5:11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

2 Th 3:6 In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

1 John 2:15-16 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.

=> Man must believe in the promise of God, that in the "promised land" of heaven.

Heb 11:10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Heb 11:13-16 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Heb 13:14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Heb 12:22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.

2 Pet 3:10-13 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way,

what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

Rev 21:1 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.*

3. God promised the land to Abraham and his seed, but it was to be a future inheritance, not a present possession (v. 5).
 - a. God never gave Abraham any land, not during his lifetime on earth. Abraham never possessed the land. He never secured his *possession*, his *settlement*, his *resting place*, his *home* — not while he was on earth.
 - b. God never gave Abraham a son until he was incapable of bearing *seed*, well past years — not until he was 100 years old.

Thought 1. Note three significant points.

- 1) Abraham had to trust God both for the *promised land* and for *seed or descendants*. He could secure neither, not in his own strength.
- 2) Abraham had to *believe* God all his life, even up to the last moment. He had to believe God even as he was slipping out of this world into the next, for he had never possessed a single foot (v. 5) of the promised land. (What a picture of the believer and the promised land of heaven, of the absolute necessity for faith and for believing the glorious promise of God.)
- 3) The gift of the *promised land* and *of the seed* was just that, a *gift* of God's grace. In no way did Abraham ever earn or deserve it. Abraham merely believed and obeyed God.

Rom 4:3 *What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

Rom 4:13 *It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.*

Rom 4:20-21 *Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*

4. God told Abraham "his seed" would be strangers upon earth (v. 6. See Gen. 15:13-14). His descendants would not possess the land, not for a long time, not for some hundreds of years. They were to be enslaved.

Thought 1. Note the picture painted of the believer: the believer is as a *stranger* upon the earth. While a *stranger* on earth the believer is subject to the bondages (sin and death) and evil treatment of the world.

Heb 11:13 *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.*

1 Pet 1:17 *Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.*

1 Pet 2:11-12 *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

5. God told Abraham his faith would be rewarded: God would deliver "his seed" or "descendant" (descendants) and bring them to the promised land to serve God (v. 7).

Thought 1. Faith will be rewarded, abundantly so. Abraham's *seed*, or "the believer", will be brought to the promised land of heaven. Note why: to serve God.

Mat 25:23 *"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'"*

Luke 12:42-44 *The Lord answered, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions."*

Luke 22:28-29 *You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me.*

1 Cor 6:2-3 *Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!*

2 Tim 4:6-8 *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

Heb 12:28 *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.*

2 Pet 3:13-14 *But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you*

are looking forward to this, make even effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

6. God assured Abraham with a covenant, the covenant of circumcision (v 8). Circumcision was the *seal* of Abraham's faith, just as baptism is the *seal* of the believer's faith. Circumcision was the sign that Abraham was truly trusting God and His promise (see Circumcision, Ph. 3:3). ■

ACTS 07:02 GOD OF GLORY (HO THEOS TES DOXES)

To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran." Acts 7:02

God who possesses and manifests glory; God of the manifested glory, of the outward and visible glory; God who reveals glory. It is the Shekinah glory, the visible splendour, radiance and brilliance of God's Person which bursts forth from His Supreme Being. The idea is that God appeared and revealed His glory to Abraham. (See note, *Shekinah Glory*, Mt. 17:5-8. Note: this throws some light on how God went about calling Abraham. It must have been a visible appearance of God's glory just as Moses and Isaiah and others received.) □

JOHN 04:22 ISRAEL — GOD'S SPECIAL PEOPLE

"You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews." John 4:22

Why did Jesus Christ come to the Jewish nation and come to earth as a Jew? Very simply stated, the Jews were God's special people. They had been born by a special act of God. It all started long, long ago. God had wanted four things.

1. He wanted a people who would love Him supremely and give Him their first loyalty. (See Gen. 17:7; Isa. 43:10.)
2. He wanted a people who would witness to all other nations that He and He alone was the one true and living God. (See Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Acts 13:26, 47.)
3. He wanted a people through whom He could send the promised Seed, the Saviour and Messiah, Jesus Christ, to all men everywhere. (See Gen. 3:15; 17:7; 22:18; Gal. 3:16; Jn. 4:22.)
4. He wanted a people through whom He could send His written Word, the Holy Bible, and preserve it for all generations. (Rom. 9:4-5; 1 Pet. 2:10-12.)

In searching the earth for such a people, God could find none (Rom. 1:18-32). God could do only one thing. He had to find one man and through him raise a new people, a new nation.

1. God found and chose Abraham and through him established the Jewish nation. (Gen. 12:1-5; 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-8, 15-19; 22:16-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 31:13; 35:9-12.) God chose one man and challenged him to worship God supremely. If that man would worship God supremely, then God would cause a special people to be born of his seed. That man was Abraham. Abraham was the first Jew (Gen. 12:1-4; Gal. 3:16). In the Old Testament the Jews and their land (Palestine) were continually pointed to as the very special people and land of God. They were called...

=> God's treasured possession (Exo. 19:5; Deu. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Psa. 135:4).

=> the Lord's portion (Deu. 32:9).

=> the Lord's land (Lev. 25:23; Jer. 2:7; 16:18; Hos. 9:3).

=> the holy land (Zec. 2:12).

However, the Jewish nation failed to obey God supremely. The whole plot of the Old Testament centres around God's pleading and dealing with the Jews. Again and again, He gave the nation the opportunity to obey Him. He dealt with them in mercy and in judgment, but at every turn they refused to heed His pleading.

2. God chose the family of David. (see *Jesus Christ, King of Israel*, Jn 1:49). God had no choice but to make another move, so He chose one faithful family within the Jewish nation and gave to that family one great promise. The family was that of King David, and the promise was that of the Messiah, God's great King, God's very own Son. God's Son was to come through the line of David and establish an eternal nation of people who would love God supremely. However, the Jewish nation again failed God. They misinterpreted God's Word — the prophecies of His coming.

a. The Jews misinterpreted God's Word by saying the seed of Abraham included only the Jewish nation. In their minds, God had no children except the children of the Jewish nation. The Bible says explicitly that the seed of Abraham is Christ, and the special people of God are those individuals within all nations who worship God supremely (Gal. 3:16).

b. The Jews misinterpreted God's Word by saying that the eternal kingdom promised to David was the Jewish nation and the Jewish nation only. They expected Israel to be established as an earthly nation forever and all other nations to be subservient to Israel. But again, God's promise was not that narrow, nor was it that prejudiced. The Bible says there is not, and never has been, any respect of persons with God

(Deu. 10:17; 2 Chr. 19:7; Job. 34:19; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Pet. 1:17). God did say that Christ was to come from the Davidic line, but He also said that He was going to establish an eternal nation made up of people everywhere who would love God supremely (Rom. 2:28-29).

By misinterpreting God's promises, the Jews failed to be the missionaries to the world that God had chosen them to be. They became earthly bound and materialistic minded. They twisted the idea of the promised Messiah to fit their own schemes. They conceived of Him as One who was to establish an earthly kingdom for the Jewish nation alone. They failed to see that God was speaking...

- of an eternal kingdom of righteousness.
- of a kingdom that is of another dimension entirely — the spiritual dimension.
- of a new heaven and a new earth that would give each person an eternal life beyond just one earthly generation.

3. God had no choice but to make a third move. This He did by sending His own Son into the world through the Jewish nation. God sent Him so that the world through Him might be saved (Jn. 3:16-19). However, man rejected God's Son and crucified Him. This act — the killing of God's Son — was the final blow. When man slew the only Son of God, the whole world *was* involved. Both Jew and Gentile were represented symbolically in the Jewish religionists and the Roman authorities. They both actually did the plotting, sentencing, and execution. If the world were ever to be saved, it was now perfectly clear that God had to make every move Himself.

This He did once-for-all. In His eternal purpose and plan for man's salvation, God took the sins of all men and laid them upon His Son while He was being slain upon the cross. He allowed His Son to bear the sins of the world (1 Pet. 2:24). Then He took His Son and raised Him from the dead — never to die again. He did what man had always failed to do: in His Son's resurrection God began to build a lasting kingdom of righteousness, a new nation that is presently being made up of men from all earthly nations who desire and are willing to follow Jesus Christ supremely. He is calling out and forming a new people who have genuinely been born again — spiritually. These new born people shall live eternally — beyond just one earthly generation. These people are identified as His church, as a body of people who genuinely believe and follow Him. They are destined to be the inhabitants of the new heavens and earth. Believers become God's new community, new society, new race, new nation of people. They become His church, His new creation — spiritually and supernaturally born again — who comprise the true family of God (Lk. 8:21; Eph. 2:11-18.)

Eph 2:18-22 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

God, acting solely upon His own through the death and resurrection of His Son, has fulfilled His promises to both Abraham and David. All the people of the nations of the world now have the opportunity to become children of God, the special people of God. □

ROMANS 04:01–25

JEW, THE SEED OR OFFSPRING OF ABRAHAM

Abraham held a unique position in the Jewish nation, for he was the founder of the nation. He was the man whom God had challenged to be a witness to the other nations of the world — a witness to the only living and true God. God had appeared to Abraham and challenged him to leave his home, his friends, his employment, and his country. God made two great promises if Abraham would follow God unquestionably: Abraham would become the father of a new nation, and all nations of the earth would be blessed by his seed or offspring (Gen. 12:1-5; 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-8, 15-19; 22:15-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 35:9-12).

Scripture says Abraham did as God requested. He went out not knowing where he went (Heb. 11:8). He completely and unquestionably trusted God and took God at His word.

Now note: it was not Abraham's keeping of the law that pleased God. In fact, the law had not yet been given (Gal. 3:17). What pleased God and what caused God to justify Abraham was Abraham doing as God had said. Abraham simply *believed* the promise of God that God would give him a new life — *in* a new nation — *with* a new people.

Note several things.

1. Abraham and his "seed" or "offspring" were the only ones to whom God gave the promises. This is emphatically stated (Rom. 4:13-25; Gal. 3:6-16, 26, 29).
2. Only a promise was given to Abraham (Rom. 4:13-21; Gal. 3:14, 18-21, 29). No other information whatsoever was given. God did not identify the country nor tell Abraham where he was to go. Neither did God tell Abraham when his wife (Sarah) would bear the seed (the male child) from whom the promised nation would be born. God made a simple promise, and all Abraham had to go on was that simple promise, that is, the sheer Word of God.

3. Only one condition was attached to the promise. Abraham had to believe God. No works whatsoever were involved.
4. Abraham did believe God (Gen. 12:4-5; Rom. 4:3. 11-22; Gal. 3:6; Heb. 11:8f).
5. Abraham was *counted righteous* because he believed God (Rom. 4:3-5, 9-13, 19-22; Gal. 3:6; see Gen. 15:6). God did not count him righteous because of who he was or what he had done. He simply believed God. Therefore, God took his faith and *counted* his faith as righteousness (Rom. 4:1-3).
6. The proof that Abraham really believed God was that he did what God had said. His faith *preceded* his obedience. He believed God and then he obeyed God. If he had not believed God, he would not have left his home or his employment. He would not have left his familiar surroundings and meaningful relationships and personal attachments. The fact that he did as God asked was evidence that he believed the promise of God.
7. The man who believes God is the man who receives the promises of God (Rom. 4:5-12, 16-17, 23-25; Gal. 3:7-9, 14, 22, 26, 29). Paul argues that neither heritage nor nationality, neither merit nor works, neither the law nor the rules of the law have anything to do with the promises of God (Gal.3:6-7). The true children of Abraham are those who believe God — any person of any nation. In fact, God's promise that a nation would be born to Abraham and "his seed (offspring)" was the promise of an eternal nation. This eternal nation is to be of another world, of another dimension of being: the spiritual dimension, a dimension just as real as the physical dimension. But it is to have one distinction: every citizen is to be a believer — one who has believed God and His Word. This is exactly what this passage is saying: "They who believe are the children of Abraham, the children of God's promise. They are to be blessed along with faithful Abraham. They are to be the citizens of God's Kingdom, of 'the new heavens and the new earth.'" (See Heb. 11:8-18; 2 Pet. 3:10-14.) □

PHILIPPIANS 03:03 CIRCUMCISION

Before Christ, circumcision was the physical sign that a man was a follower of the true God. It was the sign that a man believed the promises that God had made to Abraham and Israel (see Gen. 17:10-14; Rom. 4:11). God never intended circumcision to have any value other than being a sign. It was not to bring righteousness to any man — not even to Abraham (Rom. 4:9-10). It was given only as a sign — a sign of the faith that a man already had in God's promises. Righteousness was imputed to the man because he believed God's promises; then the man was circumcised as a sign of his faith in God (see Rom. 4:11).

However, many abused God's purpose for circumcision.

1. Some made circumcision a substitute for true righteousness. A man was thought to be safe and secure in the arms of God if he was circumcised. Believing God and loving men had little to do with being a child of God. Many forgot the circumcision of a pure heart and became Jews of the circumcision in name only. Circumcision became merely an external and physical sign.
2. Some used circumcision as a way to divide and categorize people. A great wall of division was thrown up around the uncircumcised (cp. Acts 10:1; 1 Sam.17:26, 36; 2 Sam. 1:20). Any man who was uncircumcised was thought to be *cut off* and *far off*, not only from those thought to be the people of God (the Jews and the circumcised) but from God Himself. (See Acts 10:1-33.) An uncircumcised man was looked upon with bitter contempt. In the mind of the Jew, God was thought to love only Israel, despising and rejecting all other people (the Gentile nations).
3. God has done away with circumcision as a sign of righteousness since Christ has come (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Col. 2:11). Righteousness is now of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter of rules and regulations (see Rom. 2:25-29; 4:8-12, 23-25). The truly righteous man is the man who is God's *inwardly* — the man whose spirit has been *recreated* into the very nature of God. God's very own righteous nature is implanted into the very nature of man when he is *born again*. A man *born again* by the Spirit of God is God's "new creation" (Jn. 3:3f; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 1:4). □