

Acts Chapter 7

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, if you will look at your sheet, we are entering into Acts chapter 7, and it is content that is very key and germane to the whole history of the nation of Israel, because this chapter is going to be dealing with the subject of the stoning of Stephen.
- And this is an absolute, what shall we say, watershed, if you will, in the nation of Israel's history.
- It is a very, very strategic time, and we will see as we move on through this chapter just how important it is. It's not incorrect, I think, to call this a milestone in the history of Israel.
- And to just give you an idea up front, this is the way I perceive it. The text does not say this. This is a wise man read into it, but I think it is very, very significant.
- And what I want you to note as we move through the text is that this man Stephen, who was chosen as one of the original seven deacons, was having a tremendously successful ministry in proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, a message that was extended to the Jews around Jerusalem, and multitudes were coming to faith in Christ as their Messiah, and it was being noised abroad.
- [1 : 3 5] His successes were an embarrassment to the Jewish religious establishment. Because they had already taken the position that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Messiah of Israel, that he was an imposter, etc.
- And here is Stephen out teaching just the opposite. He was the Messiah, and Israel as a nation crucified him. But God raised him from the dead.
- And what is now demanded of Israel is a national repentance and faith toward Jesus Christ. And if that is forthcoming, God would send Christ back then.
- That is, as of the time they were proclaiming that message. And, as we shall see here in chapter 7, Stephen is arrested.
- He is brought before the official religious ruling body, the Sanhedrin, also referred to in Scripture as the Council.
- [2 : 3 8] This is an organization that was presided over by 70 of the most respected, well-connected, influential Jews in all of Israel.
- And it was presided over, the president of the Sanhedrin was the high priest. The high priest was either Annas or Caiaphas, same one who presided over the kangaroo trial that was offered to Jesus of Nazareth before they handed him over to Pontius Pilate for execution.
- So there were a number of trials of Christ, but this is the same group of people, and the same one is presiding over it. Now it regards Stephen. If my chronology is correct, and I'm not insistent on this because it might not be accurate, but I think that what is going to transpire here in chapter 7 is about a year after the crucifixion of Christ.
- And what I base this on, we've already looked at the passage, we'll return to it if you think it's necessary, but remember the cursing of the fig tree. And, or no, I'm sorry, it wasn't the cursing of the fig tree, it was the cutting down of this particular tree, but it was a fig tree that wasn't bearing.

And when the Lord came to it, He gave this parable, and the parable said, three years, for three years I've been coming to this tree looking for fruit on it.

[4 : 19] And there hasn't been any fruit, nothing but leaves, no fruit. So, the tree is worthless, and is just taking up space in the ground for nothing. Why are we fooling with it?

Let's just cut it down. But the husbandman came along and said, well, let's give it one more year, and let me dig around it, that is, aerate it, and put in some fertilizer, and let's give this tree a reprieve, give it a chance to bear fruit for one more year.

And if it does, fine. But if it doesn't, then we'll cut it down after the year. And I related to you how that I think our Lord was actually talking about the fig tree being the nation of Israel.

And when he said, three years came I looking for fruit on this tree, that corresponds to the three years of ministry that Christ had to the nation of Israel.

And we came to Israel, he was, of course, looking for spiritual fruit. He was looking for acceptance. He was looking for reception of himself as the Messiah. That was not forthcoming.

[5 : 36] And instead of after three years cutting Israel off, which would have been, I take it, the crucifixion, the death of Christ, he decided to give the tree one more year.

And if my chronology is correct, that one more year will culminate with the stoning of Stephen and what I call Israel's final answer to God's gracious offer.

And they are, of course, going to reject. And what this means is that the opportunity for Israel to receive Jesus as their Messiah did not end with his crucifixion.

That's where most Christians ended. Most in Christendom take the position that when Israel crucified their Messiah, then God said, that's it.

No more offer to Israel. The kingdom offer is withdrawn. I'm finished with Israel. I'm going to lay them aside and I'll deal with them later. But nowhere does the text say that.

[6 : 51] It is simply assumed that the crucifixion of Christ was Israel's final answer. But I don't think it was. It says, especially in light of the fact, in light of the fact that Christ prayed from the cross, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

For whom was Christ praying? I don't think he was praying for the Roman soldiers who crucified him, although they didn't know what they were doing either. They were just carrying out orders and Jesus was just another criminal to be crucified.

But when he said, Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. I think he was talking about his own people, the nation of Israel. And I think that God did forgive them and graciously extended the offer to Israel after the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

And the disciples, the apostles, were preaching that. Peter preached it in Acts 2. He preached it again in Acts 3. In chapter 4 and 5, we see, persecution mounting and instead of the nation turning to a crucified, risen Savior, nationally speaking, they are cementing their position and they are turning away.

Remember, the religious establishment, these were the shakers and movers. These were the ones who were instrumental in trying to turn the people against Christ.

[8 : 23] And in many respects, they succeeded. So, what we have is an extension of the offer of the kingdom for Israel to embrace Jesus as their Messiah.

But it is going to be met with continued persecution and rejection. And my contention is, and I can't really prove this because the text doesn't really say it, but my contention is, the stoning of Stephen here in Acts chapter 7 is going to be the Ichabod for Israel.

The glory has departed. And God has written them off. He will deal with them at a later date after the church is raptured and Israel is back on center stage.

But I see this as monumental in the history of Israel. And the reason it is so significant is because it is these very leaders, the religious establishment intelligentsia, they are the ones who are actually going to execute Stephen.

I mean, they are the ones who will physically throw the stones that will result in Stephen's death when they stone him. And I think that what we will have here in chapter 7 is Israel's final answer.

[9 : 50] And as a result, God is saying, alright, that's it. That's your final answer, Israel. And we see chapter 7 close out with the first martyr of Christ being Stephen.

And then, very shortly thereafter, God determines to do a whole new thing without the key instrumentality of Israel.

He is going to raise up a single Jew, but He is going to equip him and outfit him to go not to Jews, but to Gentiles.

And He will be called Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. He's going to be extremely controversial. He too will be threatened with death by the Jews, by the religious establishment, but we know He will have a tremendously impacting ministry throughout the whole Mediterranean world with His missionary trips and etc.

So, that's a brief encapsulation of what chapter 7 is all about. And now, we want to get into the actual context. So, down in the corner, left-hand corner, you should have page 470, which will deal with the issues that we're talking about today.

[11 : 22] Notice, if you will, just back up a little bit, verse 13, at the top of the page, actually we're in chapter 6, we haven't got the 7 yet, but it says that they attacked him, that is, Stephen, and they brought him to the council.

That's another word for the Sanhedrin. And they set up false witnesses, which said, you see, when you don't have a legitimate case, but you are hell-bent on your goals, then you have to create an illegitimate case.

If you can't have an honest case, but you still want to achieve your objective, then you've got to have a dishonest case. And that's exactly what they are doing. Now, this is remarkable because this is an issue of integrity.

This is an issue that bores right into the heart and soul of Judaism, which is laid out in the Mosaic Law in the Old Testament, and it places a tremendous emphasis upon personal integrity and truthfulness and justice and all the rest.

This religious crowd is sweeping all of that aside. It is inconsequential. They are just ignoring the truth of the Mosaic Law, which requires honesty, integrity, decency, openness, justice, and all the rest.

[12 : 54] And they are willing to skirt it, go around it, in order to achieve their objective. So, they set up false witnesses.

And these false witnesses said, this man, that means Stephen, ceases not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law.

for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered unto us.

And you can hear all these people grumbling. That's terrible. Well, the whole thing is a sham. These false witnesses are simply people who have been paid to say what they are saying.

And in Israel, in Jerusalem, you could go out into the marketplace and you would find there a number of dishonest people who would be willing to do anything for a dollar.

[14 : 09] And these were probably rather easily identified. They were kind of people who always lived just a step away from the law. And they were always involved in something.

They were dishonest. They were thieves. They were etc. And the authorities simply sided up to these guys, greased their palm with a few shekels, and they would be willing to say anything.

And that's exactly what they are going to do. And shall change the customs which Moses delivered to us. And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him.

Here is old Stephen, all by his lonesome, innocent as the day is long, all he has been doing is proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

But it is a message the religious establishment could not and would not tolerate. Because what's their option? If they are not going to oppose Jesus of Nazareth, they've got to embrace him.

[15 : 13] where else are they going to go? And God forbid that they should embrace them because if they did, it would require them to repent.

It would require them, the religious establishment, to admit and say, you know what? We've been wrong all along.

We've got this whole thing wrong. We did contribute to the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, and we were out of line. We were wrong. It's our bad.

We repent. We acknowledge. We take responsibility. You think they're going to do that? There is something lurking in the heart of every man called the human ego.

And if there's anything it hates to do, it's to admit that it has been wrong about anything. And this guys, this is why repentance is so hard to do.

[16 : 12] Repentance means change your mind. And the reason you should change your mind is because you've been wrong. Admit it. Acknowledge it. Buy into it.

Own up to it. But it's hard to do. It's crushing on the ego to admit that we were wrong about something. And yet, that is what is required. Because why else would you change your position?

It is only for the sake of accuracy and truth. you acknowledge that you were wrong and you do a 180. You do an about face and you embrace the very thing that you had denied before.

And that's exactly what they are dealing with or what they refuse to deal with. So all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

his face shone. His face appeared to them like the face of an angel. I don't know exactly what it was they were seeing but apparently they were not sufficiently impressed.

[17 : 19] I think that Stephen had an expression on his face of just serenity, innocence. he knew where his ground lay.

He knew that his cause was just. He was not flustered. He was not intimidated. He was bold, confident, but humble.

And there he is before this austere group. And ignore the chapter division. This is another place where it does us no favor. Scott, do you have a comment?

Yeah. It's just kind of interesting that they would know what an angel's face looked like. Yeah, well, frankly, I'm a little surprised at the text because we have no reference for that.

Yeah, well, it's a good point. It's a good point you raised and I wish I had a better answer for it. But all I can say is he must have had an aura or an appearance about him that was unusual, that was maybe somewhat captivating.

[18 : 30] And in other words, I don't think he looked like a man who was really guilty or on trial for his life. I don't think he looked nervous. I don't think he looked really scared or anything like that.

He just had a calmness and a serenity about him. And you can do that when you know of your ground and you know of your innocence. You've got nothing to fear. fear. And all you're concerned about is truth.

And the high priest who is presiding over this says to Stephen, are these things so?

In other words, you hear what you have been charged with. You have been charged with blasphemy. You have been charged with saying that Jesus is going to tear down this place.

And remember what all this goes back to? This all goes back to his saying in response to what the disciples said about the stones of the building, of the temple, and of the area.

[19 : 30] Look at these massive stones. And he said, the time is coming when there will not be one stone left upon another, but all will come down.

And then he talked about his second coming. And then he made an enigmatic statement. Remember, he said, destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

And they were scratching their heads and said, destroy the temple. What's he talking about? But the text goes on to say there in John that the temple he was speaking of was his body.

And your body, by the way, if Christ is in you, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. And Christ was saying, destroy this temple, meaning his body, and in three days I will raise it up.

Well, we know what that referred to. It referred to the resurrection. And later the disciples knew that also. But here they are trying to use it. They are trying to twist the words and the meaning and saying that Jesus was going to destroy the temple and then change the customs which Moses delivered to us.

[20 : 35] This is all trumped up garbage. Not an element of truth in it at all. But you know, if you have an agenda, if you are pursuing a certain goal and you are willing to do anything to reach that goal, whatever you say doesn't have to be true, just so long as it accomplishes the purpose you want.

We're seeing this today big time on the political scene. Politicians can make accusations they do not have to have an element of truth in them.

And the one who is speaking it knows it isn't true. But, if you say it anyway, and you can succeed in getting an appreciable number of people to believe it, you've attained your goal.

This is the most ugly thing about politics. It is filled with lies, half-truths, and untruths.

And if everybody on whatever side of the aisle of whatever political party, if they had to send their words through a truthometer before they could be made public, it would be a wonderful thing.

[21 : 58] But we all know it doesn't have to be true at all. All that matters is that you can get somebody to believe it. That you can create doubt.

This is the rottenness of politics, and it all ties in with the humanity of nature. So, are these things so? You've heard the charge against you.

Now, by the way, what they are doing, what they are doing is violating the very law of Moses in the same way they did of Christ.

Because the law prescribes is that when someone is on trial, they cannot be forced to testify against themselves.

They need not offer any incriminating information. And this, by the way, is the basis for our Fifth Amendment. You've heard people say, I plead the Fifth. When you're called upon, you're before a court, and you're a witness, and you're called upon to answer a question, you can say, I refuse to answer on grounds which may incriminate me.

[23 : 12] That's the Fifth Amendment. You can invoke that. And of course, it usually doesn't make you look good because it makes you look like you've got something to hide or that you are guilty, but you cannot be forced to testify against yourself.

And they violated that with Christ, and now they are violating it with Stephen. Are these things so? There's no indication that Stephen's got any legal representation, that he's got anybody for defense, no more than what Christ did.

So they are applying their own laws in a way that is contrary to the law. And Stephen is going to answer. And his answer is going to incorporate the whole history of the nation of Israel.

It would have been nice, and what they would have wanted, of course, would be for Stephen to say, well, yes, this is true, and they get to go on with the execution. But they're looking for a yes or no answer.

Stephen is too smart to do that. So he's going to give an answer, but it will not be the answer they want. Question is, all right, are these things so?

[24 : 23] You've heard the charges that have been labeled against you. Are these things so? Israel, and Stephen said, men, brethren and fathers, hearken, give ear to me.

The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia. Now, someone might say, well, what does that have to do with anything?

That's not germane to what you're on trial for. But I suspect that Stephen probably knows how this thing is going to end.

And he's going to have his say. He's going to get his licks in before the stones rain down upon him. So what he is going to do, and this is just sheer genius, but of course it is Holy Spirit engineered genius.

He is going to begin with the actual history of the nation of Israel, whom these men represent.

[25 : 32] He's going to start where the nation began and bring them all the way through their history, showing them that Jesus the Messiah is what their history is really all about, and he's going to bring them right up to that very point.

But he's going to require them to listen to the whole story. So they sit there, I'm sure some of them are just fuming, and they've got their hands folded, and they are just glaring daggers at Stephen.

Can't wait to get those stones in their hands. The man, by the way, is already guilty. Everybody knows that. Even before the vote's taken, we know what we're going to do with this guy. We're going to do away with him.

He is a cancer growing on Judaism, and he is a threat to us. We're going to fix him. But Stephen is going to have his say. God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.

And God said to him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall show thee. And then came he out of the land of the Chaldeans, Babylonian, that's by the way to modern Iraq today, and he dwelt in Haran.

[26 : 55] And from thence, when his father, remember Abraham's father Terah, when his father Terah was dead, he removed him into this land wherein ye now dwell.

After Abraham's father Terah died, then he came down into the land of Israel. This is all Abraham. And he gave him none inheritance in it.

No, not so much as to set his foot on. Yet, he promised that he would give it to him, that is Abraham, God promised that he would give it to Abraham for a possession and to his seed, his descendants after him.

Now, what he is recounting here is history of Israel that took place 2,000 years before.

This is 2,000 years before Stephen and this Sanhedrin ever lived. But he is recounting their history. And he says, he gave it to his seed after him, when as yet Abraham had no child.

[28 : 13] neither Isaac nor Ishmael had been born. And God spake on this wise that his seed, Abraham's seed, should sojourn in a strange land.

Now, what will that strange land be? That will be Egypt. Remember when they will be in bondage in Egypt for some 400 years because of the situation remember with Joseph and the Pharaoh and 70 souls going down there in the land of Goshen and setting them up there in Egypt and so on?

That is his seed sojourning in a strange land and that strange land of course is Egypt and that they, the children of Israel should bring them into that is they, the they there refers to the Egyptians, that the Egyptians should bring them, that is the Jews, into bondage.

And entreat them evil 400 years and the nation to whom they shall be in bondage, that is Egypt, will I judge, said God.

And we know how severe that judgment was, the ten plagues on the land and the destruction of the Egyptian army in the crossing of the Red Sea, that was God's judgment of these people, of the Egyptians.

[29 : 40] And after that, they shall come forth. And the they, of course, refers to Israel. They shall come forth and serve me in this place.

And this place refers to the nation of Israel. And, verse 8, and God gave him, that is, Abraham, the covenant of circumcision.

Let's turn the page over. circumcision was the physical badge or identity that the one circumcised was in a covenant relationship with God.

This was a tremendously significant thing. It still is in the annals of Judaism, even to this day. And, essentially, you're all familiar with this, but it involved the removal of the foreskin of the penis of the baby boy on the eighth day.

And this excess skin, excess skin, was removed with a sharp piece of flint stone.

[31 : 01] It wasn't even a surgical knife. It was a sharp piece of flint stone that it was cut off. And that was considered as dedicated to God.

I'm sure really smart. Can you imagine a little eight-day-old baby wondering, what are they doing to me? What do I do to deserve this? Welcome to the world, kid. And we've talked about the prothrombin level in the baby's blood.

And prothrombin is the element that provides for the clotting of blood that is in our bodies. It enables our blood to clot. And God specifically told the Israelites that you circumcise the baby boy on the eighth day.

He didn't tell them why. He just said the eighth day. Not the seventh day. Not the ninth day. The eighth day. And it has since been established that on the eighth day of a baby boy's birth, the prothrombin level, the clotting factor in the blood, reaches its peak on the eighth day.

And that is verified today scientifically. Then it begins downward. And it never gets as high again in the life of an individual as it was on the eighth day.

[32 : 24] God said do it on the eighth day. And he didn't tell them why. But they carried out that dictate and they did it on the eighth day. And so Abraham begat Isaac and circumcised him the eighth day.

And that's where we'll have to conclude for this morning because food is here. And thank you, Cheryl, for the always excellent service that we get.

I appreciate that. Have you a question or comment? Yeah. My brother says then they have a big party and it becomes part of the hors d'oeuvres. But they do have a big party.

This is a big deal. You know, this is a big deal. And usually that's when they name the baby. And that is recorded in Luke chapter 2. Remember Zacharias and Elizabeth?

Zacharias was smitten with inability to talk. And when they named the baby, had the circumcision, and they named the baby, and Zacharias says his name is John.

[33 : 31] And John was able to speak and open his mouth. And everybody says, you're going to call this baby John? We don't have anybody in the family named John. He said, no, his name is John. And then of course that was the circumcision, and you're right, they had a big party, big celebration on the eighth day.

All right, thank you all. Yes, Dana? Two questions. First of all, is there a significance to 400 years? You mentioned 400 years. It seems like it appears several times.

Yeah, yeah, I think there probably is a significance. These numbers, I think, are not just coincidental, but I do think that there is an association with them.

The 400 is prominent, 70 is prominent, and 7 is prominent, so there is a significance to these numbers. Yeah, other question. Is there a parable with the circumcision removing foreskin?

Is the foreskin really needed? Is there some parallel there to the Jewish? Well, it meant circumcision that when one was circumcised, that made him an official member of the covenant of Israel.

[34 : 48] And without that, of course, he was not. Even though he was of Jewish parentage, yet if he had not undergone the right of circumcision, he was not considered a bona fide Jew. And you know, this circumcision thing, well, we'll talk a little bit more about that later, but it's very, very significant, and it's still very important in Judaism to this day, and for good reason.