

Series: “Stephen: The Man With a Face Like an Angel”

Main Idea: If we’re going to be people who finish well, as did Stephen, we need to give attention to two subjects, as did Stephen in his defense in Acts 7.

- I. Give attention to what God did in the past.
 - A. God began His redemptive plan with Abraham (2-8).
 1. He appeared to him when he was a pagan (2-3).
 2. He gave him a promise (4-7).
 3. He established a covenant relationship (8).
 - B. God continued His redemptive plan with Joseph (9-19).
 1. He used a sibling rivalry to take Joseph to Egypt (9-10).
 2. He used a famine to take the whole family to Egypt (11-16).
 3. He used Egypt to turn the family into a nation (17-19).
 - C. God furthered His redemptive plan with Moses (20-44).
 1. As a child, Moses experienced the protection of God (20-22).
 2. As a young adult, Moses experienced the rejection of his people (23-29).
 3. After forty years, Moses experienced the presence of God (30-34).
 4. As an old man, Moses received a divine commission (35-44).
 - D. God advanced His redemptive plan with Joshua, David, and Solomon (45-50).
 1. He gave His people the Land (45-46).
 2. He gave His people the temple (47).
 3. He gave His people a warning—Don’t put Me in a man-made box (48-50).
 - E. God climaxed His redemptive plan with Jesus (51-53).
- II. Give attention to what we’re doing in the present.
 - A. Some people fail to learn from the past.
 - B. Some people live in the past.
 - C. We must live in the present in light of what God did in the past.
 1. Because He created me, I should live for Him.
 2. Because He gave His Son for me, I should trust in Him.
 3. Because He conquered the grave, I can live a new life.

Scripture Reading: Acts 7

Finish well.

That’s what I want. For me. For you. To hear our Savior say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Not, good start, but well *done*.

I used to run competitively and quickly learned something. There are no prizes for starting well, only finishing well.

Stephen finished well. And we can learn from him. If we’re going to be people who finish well, as did Stephen, we need to give attention to two subjects, as did Stephen in his defense in Acts 7.

A Chinese boy who wanted to learn about jade went to study with a talented old teacher. This gentleman put a piece of the stone into the youth's hand and told him to hold it tight. Then he began to talk of philosophy, men, women, the sun, and almost everything under it. After an hour he took back the stone and sent the boy home.

The procedure was repeated for weeks. The boy became frustrated--when would he be told about jade? But he was too polite to interrupt his venerable teacher. Then one day when the old man put a stone into his hands, the boy cried out instantly, "That's not jade!"²

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the expositional series in Acts at WBC in 2001.

² H. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, p. 102.

If you want to know God well, there are no shortcuts. You must invest the effort and time that's necessary to learn the truth of God's Word. And though you'll never arrive in this life, once you become familiar with God's truth, you'll be able to detect the subtle deceptions of the Evil One.

Stephen was a man who knew God well, so well in fact that he could stand up to the religious Ph.D's of his day. His secret? To put it simply, he knew God well because He knew the Word of God well.

Indeed, that's why he was arrested and eventually martyred. The Jewish leaders hauled him into court one day because he debated in the synagogues, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. The critics couldn't refute him, so they resorted to mob tactics. They recruited some fellows to misrepresent him, and then trumped up three charges against him.

"This fellow speaks against the temple, against God's Law, and against our customs," they cried (6:13-14).

In his defense, Stephen responded with three resolves, as we saw last time. First, he put the spotlight on God (1-50). Secondly, he put the spotlight on Christ (51-53). And thirdly, he was prepared to pay the consequences (54-60).

Which he did. His bluntness cost him his life.

Remember, Stephen's goal all along wasn't to defend himself. Instead, his goal was to confront his hearers with the reality of Christ.

Maybe we'd see more fruit in our ministries if we weren't so worried about our safety and comfort. In fact, if we did what Stephen did and told people the truth about Jesus and their condition as sinners, two things would happen. As the old preacher put it, we'd disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed!

In this study we're going to take a second look at Stephen's speech, particularly at how he used the subject of history—namely, *Old Testament history*—to present the truth about Christ. The Old Testament contains a fascinating story line. Unfortunately, many today don't know it, or at least don't know it well.

But God wants us to know the story, *His* story, and use it in our witness. That's why He recorded it in His Word. I'm convinced of this. If we want to know God well, and then finish well, we need to give attention to two subjects, as did Stephen in Acts 7.

I. Give attention to what God did in the past.

In eternity past, before the stars were even in space, the Sovereign Lord devised a plan. He determined to form a people for Himself and His praise, a *redeemed* people. And then He chose to enact this plan in history.

Beginning in verse 2, Stephen rehearsed the plan God performed in the past. Obviously, there's so much he could have said (how can you sum up two thousand years of history in a six minute speech?). Granted, Stephen said a lot, but he was selective. It's important to note what Stephen said, and why.

Remember, he's responding to the charge that he's guilty of blasphemy. Was he? No. He shows from Scripture that he's not anti-God, nor anti-temple, nor anti-Moses. Rather, he's *pro-God*. But not the "god" his critics had manufactured with their massive, religious system, but the true God, the God of history.

In his examination of what God did in the past, Stephen picked five scenes from the timeline of redemptive history. Here's the first.

A. God began His redemptive plan with Abraham (2-8). Abraham. What a man of faith! He's the one who was willing to offer his own son on the altar at Moriah when God tested him.

But that was later in life. He wasn't always a man of faith. In fact, in Stephen's summary of Abraham's life, he mentions three things God did with the patriarch.

1. *He appeared to him when he was a pagan (2-3).* Listen to Stephen's first words (2), "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia."

Where? In *Mesopotamia*. Is that significant? Yes. Abraham wasn't seeking God when God appeared to him. He was a polytheist. Joshua 24:2 indicates he worshiped "other gods" before the True God, the God of glory appeared to him. God told him to leave his country, and go to a new land.

And so he did, as Stephen relates. He settled in Haran until his father died, and then moved to Canaan. While there God did a second deed for Abraham.

2. *He gave him a promise (4-7).* Not one foot of ground. Just a promise, as Stephen relates in verse 5, "God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child."

It's kind of hard for your descendants to possess the Promised Land when you don't even have *one* descendant yet. And though God later gave Abraham a son, Isaac, he never received the land in his lifetime. Only a promise. Your descendants will. I'm going to give it to them.

Abraham had many important conversations with God, yet Stephen mentions one in particular beginning in verse 6, "God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own [a reference to Egypt], and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. ⁷ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.'"

Don't miss those final words. What did God say His goal was for Abraham and his offspring? They will come and *worship Me*. God's intent is to form a people who will worship Him. In Jesus' words, "A time is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (John 4:23)."

That's what God wanted, then as now. *True worshipers*. God's redemptive plan is all about Him. Are there benefits for us? Sure! But fundamentally, He's forming a people who will worship Him with their lives. Thirdly, with Abraham...

3. *He established a covenant relationship (8).* Stephen said, "Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision." Right here is one of the most important words in the Bible. *Covenant*. God is a covenantal God. He made a covenant—a promise-based contract of sorts—with Abraham. And when God makes a promise, He keeps it.

He told Abraham, "I'm going to form a people for Myself, people who will worship Me, from your descendants." And that's what He did. God is a promise-making and a promise-keeping God.

But if you don't know history, you won't know the promises God has made in the past. And if you don't know His promises, you'll rob God of His glory and yourself of His joy.

At this point, Stephen moves to scene #2...

B. God continued His redemptive plan with Joseph (9-19). Again, notice how selective Stephen was. He devoted seven verses to summarize the account of God's

dealings with Abraham in Genesis 12-25, but only one verse (verse 8) to merely mention Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons (a summary of Genesis 26-37). Which says it's not enough just to know the *facts* of history. We need to process the implications of the facts, namely, what they teach us about God.

In scene #2, Stephen put the spotlight on Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph. In so doing he highlights two divine actions.

1. *He used a sibling rivalry to take Joseph to Egypt (9-10).* "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. *But God was with him*¹⁰ and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace."

God actually used a family squabble to send Joseph to Egypt, by way of a slave train. It was all part of the divine plan. From the prison to the palace, such was Joseph's lot.

And don't miss the words, "But God was with him." Stephen reminds his critics that though Joseph didn't have the temple, he had God.

2. *He used a famine to take the whole family to Egypt (11-16).* Here's how it happened. Jacob and his sons were living in Canaan when a severe famine hit. When food supplies dwindled, he sent his boys down to Egypt to buy grain. When these supplies ran out, he sent them a *second* time.

On their second visit, they got more than food. They got the surprise of their lives. They discovered their brother, the one they rejected, was indeed ruler over Egypt.

Don't miss how Stephen emphasizes the unveiling occurred on their *second* visit (13). The first time Joseph remained incognito. The second time he made his identity known.

Who else followed this pattern? Jesus did—and Stephen wanted his critics to know it. In the first visit, the Ruler remained incognito. But He won't the next time! "Every eye will see Him, even those who pierced him," as Revelation 1:7 states.

You see, the wicked act of Joseph's brothers didn't catch God off guard. God used it as part of His redemptive plan. In fact, He can even use a whole nation as in the next event.

3. *He used Egypt to turn the family into a nation (17-19).* Take a close look at the first words of verse 17, "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of his people greatly increased."

Joseph went to Egypt. His family followed him. His family turned into a nation. Was this all coincidence? No. It was all part of the plan of God. God used a famine to take the elect family to Egypt, and then He used slavery to make them want to leave. Which brings us to scene #3.

C. God furthered His redemptive plan with Moses (20-44). Stephen devoted more attention to Moses than anyone else in his defense. That's not surprising since his accusers said he was anti-Moses.

Due to the length of the narrative, I won't read everything he said. Instead I want to mention the high points he hit concerning God's dealing with Moses.

1. *As a child, Moses experienced the protection of God (20-22).* Notice Stephen's first words in verse 20, "At that time Moses was born." At what time? Remember verse 17? "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham." A plan is unfolding, a plan that involved a special child named Moses.

In fact, Stephen stated that Moses was "no ordinary child (20)." He faced danger as a babe, but God intervened and he grew up in Pharaoh's household.

2. *As a young adult, Moses experienced the rejection of his people (23-29).* At the age of forty, he left the palace, determined to deliver his people. But lo and behold, they rejected him! His own people would not accept him as their deliverer. As Stephen put it in verse 25, “Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.”

Again, does this sound familiar? John 1:11 says, “He came to his own, but his own did not receive him,” speaking of Jesus. When the Jews rejected Moses, it wouldn’t be the last time they’d turn their backs on a God-sent deliverer—a vital point in Stephen’s defense.

So Moses fled. Stephen uses an interesting word to describe Moses’ condition in verse 29, saying he “settled as a *foreigner*” in Midian. Again, like Abraham and Joseph, Moses never set foot in the temple nor the promised land. He was a *sojourner*, a foreigner. But he had God.

This is God’s way. As New Testament Christians, we too are foreigners. Paul says our citizenship is in heaven, not on this earth (Phil 3:20). Peter addresses the Christians in 1 Peter as, “God’s elect, *strangers* in the world (1:1).”

In spite of the initial rejection, God wasn’t done with Moses...

3. *After forty years, Moses experienced the presence of God (30-34).* An angel appeared to him in the flames of a burning bush. I’m intrigued by Stephen’s description of Moses’ response. Verse 31—“When he saw this, he was *amazed* at the sight.” Verse 32—he “*trembled* with fear and did *not dare to look*.”

Stephen’s critics had God all figured out, and condemned him as being anti-Moses. But in essence Stephen said, “Hold on! If you were really as pro-Moses as you think you are, you’d act like Moses. Moses didn’t try to put God in a box like you’ve done. He stood in awe of God.”

And so should we. More about that a little later.

4. *As an old man, Moses received a divine commission (35-44).* Stephen describes that commission in verse 35, “This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who made you ruler and judge?’ He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer *by God himself*, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.”

Moses didn’t volunteer. God enlisted him for service. And what a ministry he had! If you want the whole story, read Exodus through Deuteronomy. If you want the clef notes version, check out Stephen’s summary. He mentions four events from Moses’ life.

- He delivered God’s people (35-36). In addition...

- He gave living words to God’s people (37-38). That’s what Stephen called the *Torah* in verse 38, “He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received *living words* to pass on to us.” Sadly...

- He observed the disobedience of God’s people (39-43). They rejected the “living words,” and in their hearts “turned back to Egypt,” as Stephen summed it up (39). And consequently, “God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies (42).”

Then he mentions one final event from Moses’ life.

- He constructed the tabernacle for God’s people (44). Just as God directed.

It’s hard to miss the parallel Stephen is making between Moses and Jesus. Both were sent by God. Both came to deliver God’s people. Both were rejected. Both heard the

words, “Who made you ruler over us?” Both did miraculous signs. Both passed on living words. Both saw the people to whom they ministered choose a substitute god.

It was in this segment on Moses’ life that Stephen stopped his story and quoted from the prophet Amos. It was a stinging indictment from Amos 5:25-27:

“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Babylon (42-43).”

Why did Stephen quote from Amos? Because the people in his day were no different from the people to whom Amos ministered in the 8th century B.C. And they were no different from those to whom Moses ministered in the 15th century B.C. They all thought that because they brought God sacrifices, He was pleased. He wasn’t.

Nor is He today. If you think you can appease God by doing religious acts—like going to church, or praying, or giving some money—you’d better take a lesson from history. Our righteousness is like a filthy rag to Him. We need His righteousness, and that’s something He gives on the basis of grace and mercy, not our merit.

Don’t miss how Stephen uses Scripture, not his opinions, to make his point. But he’s not done yet. And so he continues with scene #4...

D. God advanced His redemptive plan with Joshua, David, and Solomon (45-50). Again, Stephen’s aim isn’t to give us an exhaustive account, but simply to hit themes pertinent to his defense. Thus, just before his punch-line, he quickly reminds his audience of three more things God did in history.

1. *He gave His people the Land (45-46).* That occurred under Joshua’s leadership around 1400 B.C. Let that date sink in. Since Abraham lived in 2,000 B.C., that meant God had been dwelling with His people six hundred years before they had the Promised Land. Then came a second gift...

2. *He gave His people the temple (47).* Solomon built it, as Stephen makes clear in verse 47. That occurred around 970 B.C. Again, crunch the numbers and you’ll see that God’s people had been worshiping the Lord over 1,000 years before they even had a temple. In fact, God gave His people something else in history...

3. *He gave His people a warning—Don’t put Me in a man-made box (48-50).* Stephen quotes the warning given by the prophet, Isaiah, in the 8th century B.C., “Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?”—a quotation from Isaiah 66:1-2.

God knew His people were susceptible to misrepresenting Him. So even though He authorized the temple, He warned them, “Don’t think that because you have the temple, you have *Me*.”

But that was the very crime the first century Jewish leaders committed. They thought that since they had the right ceremonies, the right rituals, the right land, and most of all, the right *building*, they had God. But they didn’t. In fact, they clung so tightly to these “things” that they missed the fulfillment that these “things” foreshadowed in God’s redemptive plan.

E. God climaxed His redemptive plan with Jesus (51-53). And that’s exactly what Stephen told his accusers. In verse 51, he offers a stunning rebuke. He, the man on trial, puts his judges on trial.

In essence he says to them, “Listen, men. You know the facts of history. You what the Scriptures teach. You know that the omnipresent God won’t fit in a man-made box.

You know God promised to send His Messiah. You know all this. Yet you rejected the Messiah who has come, Jesus. You murdered Him. And why? I'll tell you why. It's because you've got a neck problem and a heart problem. You won't let go of your traditions because you've got a *stiff neck*, and you won't accept God's Messiah because you've got an *uncircumcised heart*."

Was Stephen being unloving? No. In fact he did the most loving thing he could do. He loved a group of people enough to tell them the truth they desperately needed to hear, truth that could save their souls, even though he knew saying it could cost him his earthly life. And it did.

If we're going to finish well, we need to give attention to two subjects. There's the first, the truth about what God did in the past. Could you do what Stephen did? Could you, without any notes, tell God's story? Could you walk someone through God's Word, addressing their hangups, and lead them to Jesus?

If we're going to finish well, we need to give attention to what God did in the past. Not what we did. What *He* did. Our hope for eternity rests on what He did.

Here's the second subject.

II. Give attention to what we're doing in the present.

At the end of his defense, Stephen forced his audience to come to grips with the facts of history. He insisted they face the implications. So must we. I'll mention three.

A. Some people fail to learn from the past. Stephen drove the final nail in the coffin—actually *his* coffin—with this admonishment (51), "You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit."

I ran across "Wolf's Law" awhile back. Those who don't study the past will repeat its errors. Those who do study it will find other ways to err.³

"You are just like your fathers," Stephen told his critics. Some people refuse to learn from the past. Don't be one of them.

You say, "Ah! I'm not the studying type. I just know I love Jesus. That's all that matters." Be careful.

I once met a man who told me he believed in Jesus. He said he believed that Jesus died and rose again. He said he believed that Jesus is the only way to heaven. How many here would say that this man is a biblical Christian?

The truth is, the "Jesus" this man believes in is actually a man who evolved to become a "God." He's also the brother of Lucifer. This man doesn't believe in the virgin birth, but that Jesus was conceived by a physical "God," Elohim, who came to earth to have physical relations with Mary. Furthermore, he doesn't believe that Jesus' atonement is adequate or sufficient for salvation.

This man is a *Mormon*, and the Jesus he believes in is *not* the Jesus of biblical history. In fact, I asked him what the Book of Mormon taught. He said, "Well, after Jesus' resurrection, He came to America to preach to the inhabitants. His followers preserved His message until the Indians killed all but two. Before they were killed they wrote the message down in Reformed Egyptian on gold tablets. These plates were discovered by Joseph Smith in 1827, who translated them as "Another Testament of Jesus Christ."

³ By Charles Wolf, Jr.

Dear friends, I'm concerned by those who think that studying the Bible is some sort of optional Christian experience, who just want to *experience* God rather than know His Word. I challenge you, be a student of *His* story.

On the other hand...

B. Some people live in the past. Remember the opponents' original accusation against Stephen? "We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and *change the customs* Moses handed down to us (6:11)."

When it was all said and done, they chose their customs over Jesus.

Harry Truman once remarked, "Men who live in the past remind me of a toy I'm sure all of you have seen. The toy is a small wooden bird called the "Floogie Bird." Around the Floogie Bird's neck is a label reading, "I fly backwards, I don't care where I'm going. I just want to see where I've been.""

Warren Wiersbe puts it this way, "You do not move ahead by constantly looking in a rear view mirror. The past is a rudder to guide you, not an anchor to drag you. We must learn from the past but not live in the past."

C. We must live in the present in light of what God did in the past.

When I was growing up I recall a family trip. We happened to be driving through New Boston on our way to West Virginia. My dad was driving, and somebody in another car flagged us down. "Hey, your back tire is wobbling badly."

How do you think we responded? Did we say, "Mind your own business. Our tires are okay. They're just as good as yours."? Hardly. We said, "Thanks for letting us know!" And we got a new tire.

Friends, we're in trouble if we ignore the truth. Knowing what God did in the past helps us know what we should do in the present. Let me give you three examples.

1. *Because He created me, I should live for Him.* The historical facts of God's Word state that God created this universe. I am not living in a world that evolved. I am living in a world that God designed. I am living in *God's world*.

That being the case, I am not autonomous. I experience joy when I live for Him. And I must live according to His owner's manual, the Bible. Are you?

2. *Because He gave His Son for me, I should trust in Him.* The facts of history state that God offered His Son to die on a Cross on a hillside outside of Jerusalem around the year A.D. 30. He died because I have a problem I cannot solve. It's called *sin*. I need a Savior.

That's why God sent His Son into the world, and why His Son died in the place of sinners. There is no other way to be saved. Have you trusted in His Son?

3. *Because He conquered the grave, I can live a new life.* The fact is, three days after He died, Jesus rose again. And since He's alive, there's hope for me. If He could defeat my greatest enemy, death itself, He can enable me to overcome any foe.

And He can do the same for you. Will you entrust your life to Him, like Stephen did? May the Lord help us to be people who, by His grace, *finish well*.