

Stephen's gifts eminently qualified him for preaching and for performing miracles. In both spheres he was unusually proficient and successful. He was an eloquent and effective preacher of the gospel. Many of the cultured, religious aristocrats in Jerusalem would have been glad to have ignored Stephen, but they were not able to do so. On account of his bold and fearless testimony to the person, life and ministry of Jesus Christ, certain enemies of Christ engaged Stephen in an argument. When the dispute arose, Stephen defended his Christian position with such wisdom and zeal that his opponents could not defeat him in debate. He so confounded them with his arguments that they had no alternative, but to acknowledge their errors, or to silence him by force. To this latter method they resorted. They seized him, brought him before the Sanhedrin, bribed witnesses to swear that he was guilty of blasphemy, in order that they might put him to death.

It was the custom of that court to allow an accused person to plead guilty or not guilty, and to speak in his own defense. This address, recorded in 7:2-54, is his defense. It falls into three logical divisions:

- I. Israel in Egypt. Acts 7:17-36.
- II. Israel in the Wilderness. Acts 7:37-43.
- III. Israel in the Land. Acts 7:44-50.

In our last study we considered Israel in Egypt. Let us now study Israel in the wilderness.

Their hearts turned back to Egypt. What a tragic tale verse 39 tells! The Jews had come out of Egypt, but Egypt had not come out of the Jews. They had been set free, but they still loved their bondage. They were being carried to the land of their dreams against their wills.

1. The condition it reveals.

- (1) It reveals the fascinations of sin.

This historical incident is a picture of a condition that lies deep in many a human soul. Some lamely follow the Lord, while their hearts turn back to evil. They may have broken away from overt acts of sin, but they still love their sins.

- (2) It reveals the weaknesses of human nature.

Judgment drove them out of Egypt, but the longings of their hearts were not changed. How strange that men will do what they know will ruin them, yet they continue to do it against their own judgment. Paul expressed it in these words: "What I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." How true it is with most of us!

- (3) It reveals the madness of sin.

Not only does it drive men against their own better judgment, but also against their consciences, against the known will of God, and to their ruin with their own consent. It makes them like the chains that bind them, the hand that smites them, and the prisons that hold them.

- (4) It reveals the blindness of men.

They said, "Let us alone." They were satisfied with their lot and did not want to be disturbed. Is not that the cry of many who are under the power of sin? It made them criticize Moses who had come to deliver them. They murmured against God Who had snatched them from the chains of bondage. They dreamed, talked and sang of the land of freedom, but they did not want to go there. They shouted themselves hoarse for God, but they were not willing to obey Him. They wanted to worship God, and serve the gods of Egypt.

2. The problem it presents.

- (1) It threatened the peace of the nation. Such a spirit of rebellion, discontent, and criticism will break out sooner or later; it cannot always be smothered. It is like a smoldering volcano, whose power will not always be pent up.
- (2) It threatened the progress of the whole movement. How could they go against such a current? They were forty years in going a distance that might have been covered within a week, but God would not take that complaining group into the Land of Promise. He tarried until these complainers died, and He raised up a new generation.
- (3) It threatened the leadership of Moses. There were times when they were ready to desert him and return, and times when they were ready to murder him. The greatest leader in the world is powerless unless he has the cooperation of his people.
- (4) It threatened the frustration of the will of God. Man may defeat God temporarily. God may wait until a rebellious man or people live their little lives and die. Then he raises up a new leader, or a new generation, and goes on with His work. This has been true many times in history, in the lives of churches, and in communities. The cause of right may be blocked by some leader or some criticizing people, and God's will is temporarily hindered, but some day the critics will die, and new people will spring up with a different spirit.

Stephen made it clear that Christians have a glorious heritage. The religion of the fathers was symbolic. Almost every phase of Jewish worship was symbolic. Their bondage in Egypt, their deliverance, the Passover, the sacrifices, the Tabernacle with all its furnishings, the priesthood -- these were all symbolic of greater things.

These types and symbols found their fulfillment in the spiritual development of religion in Christ. Many times the writers of the Gospels said, "These things were done that the scriptures might be fulfilled."

These symbolic things had to be done according to pattern--"As He had appointed." There was no peculiar virtue in the ceremony or symbol, but there were great lessons to be taught by them. These lessons would have been destroyed and lost if the symbols were changed.

The Christian principle has not changed through all the ages. As we read in Hebrews, "God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son." God may have spoken by the voice of angels, or prophets, by priests, or by His Son. The messenger may have changed, but the message was unchanged.

The symbols of the fathers were instructive. We are told here that the Tabernacle the Jews had was a silent witness of God. The arrangement of the furnishings of the Tabernacle was not a haphazard thing, but each thing was a witness for God, and when the Jews entered to worship they had a sense of the presence of God.

God has not left Himself without a witness in any age or generation. There have been many silent witnesses for God--the Mosaic law, the Tabernacle, the Temple, the sacrifice, the incense, the priest in white garments, the cross, the church, or the church spire.

There has been danger of men vitalizing the symbols. They have in many instances worshipped the symbol instead of the thing symbolized. The Temple cannot take the place of God. The sacrifice cannot take the place of Christ. Baptism cannot take the place of salvation. They are but symbols, intended to teach great lessons.

There is danger of men ignoring or underestimating the importance of the symbols. The Jew was commanded to offer a spotless lamb. Why not offer one with a blemish upon it? How could a spotless Christ be represented by a faulty sacrifice? Some have tampered with baptism, saying it does not save us, therefore one method is as good as another. But how can the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus be pictured if the symbols are changed? When a symbol is changed the meaning is lost.

There is danger of missing the meaning of the symbol altogether. It takes more than church membership to make one a Christian. Just as it takes more than a marriage license to make a happy home, so it takes more than baptism to make one a Christian.

The Jews had linked God with their Temple so definitely that it was difficult for them to separate the two. Stephen attempted to break the charm, according to verse 48, and release God from the Temple and make Him approachable to all. To the Jews that seemed blasphemy, and added fuel to the fires that were already kindled.

Heaven was God's throne, but He was greater than His throne. The earth was His footstool, but He was greater than His footstool. The Temple was His sanctuary. No house made by the hand of man could imprison Him; no nationality could claim exclusive right to Him, and no age could monopolize Him.

Certain ones in various lands and ages have tried to confine God to places, days, and seasons. God is not found more readily on Sunday than He is on any other day.

God is spiritual. No physical house can contain Him, and no physical bars can hinder Him. He may be approached by anybody. Physical hands cannot handle Him, and physical eyes cannot see Him. God is universal. He is not limited to time, place, or condition. No age can exclusively claim Him; no race can monopolize Him; no place can imprison Him. He is omnipresent, which means, He is everywhere. He is omnipotent, which means, He is all-powerful. He is omniscient, which means, He knows all things. Nothing is hid from Him, not even the most secret thought of our minds or most silent wish of our hearts.