

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE
Acts 7:1-60

I. A GREAT SERMON. 1-16

Having been charged (6:13-14), Stephen is now put on the defensive. How does he reply? By reviewing the history of his people. But is that a reply? Yes, rightly understood it is, for the true view of Jesus and His mission rests on the whole past history of the Hebrew people. Divine revelation is progressive, and it was fatal not to follow until it was consummated in the life and sacrifice of Christ.

1. The Preacher.

We are impressed by his fearlessness of man, his courage born of deep conviction, his freedom from Jewish prejudice, by his knowledge of the Scriptures; also his skill and argument, rhetorical power, spiritual insight, and self-command.

2. The Sermon.

In scope it reaches from Abraham to Solomon, and here the history is followed chronologically, those events in it being selected which best serve the purpose of Stephen's defense. Speaking to a council, the majority of which probably did not believe in the resurrection or did not have any use for anything super-human, began with laying a broad foundation for the supernatural occurrences which had offended his judges, by bringing out the undeniable fact that the entire history of Israel had been a supernatural history. His opening sentence strikes the keynote of his theme. It is the "God of Glory" who originated the nation of Israel. He traces this thought through four great epochs of the national career:

- (1) In patriarchal times, in His dealings with Abraham. The migrations of the patriarch were not the aimless wanderings of a monadic chief, but the movements of a man of God under Divine direction. Abraham, the father of the Hebrews, illustrates Divine election.
- (2) In the period of transition from the family to the nation; with Joseph as the central figure and leader. God used the schemes of wicked men to bring Joseph through the gateway of trial to the place of supreme power in Egypt, and through Joseph to transfer Israel from Canaan to Goshen, that they might have opportunity to grow from the family to the tribe, and from the tribe to the nation. Joseph, the savior of his people, illustrates Divine providence.
- (3) In the period of the bondage and deliverance by the hand of Moses. It was Divine Providence that led to the rearing of Moses in the court of Pharaoh. It was the God of his fathers who appeared to Moses in the flaming bush. It was God who from Sinai gave to Moses the living oracles and the pattern of the Tabernacle of the testimony, and revealed to him the coming and personality of the Messiah.
- (4) In the more perfect establishment of the ancient worship under David and Solomon. It was a Divine provision that the Tabernacle should give

way to the Temple. And God, "who dwelleth not in houses made by hands," condescended to fill with His glory the Temple of Solomon.

II. FROM THE COURT TO THE DESERT. 17-29.

The second part of this sermon is a review of the Israelitish nation in two great periods of its history.

1. Theocracy. 17-45.

The line followed is chronological, geographical, and biographical. If in the previous period, Abraham and Joseph dominates, here Moses dominates.

(1) Israel in Egypt. 17-36.

This portion takes the story to the end of Moses' sojourn in Midian, embracing eighty years of his life. A number of important truths and lessons crowd in here; among which we observe that God's promise is His purpose and it is never lost sight of (17); that struggles always precede freedom; Permanent good must sooner or later be struggled for (18-19); that in the hour of our greatest need, God draws near to help us, in some way or through someone: when the hour comes the man is not wanting and no movement is ripe until the leader appears (20); that those whom God would use He carefully prepares (21-22); that an insignificant event may at any time precipitate a momentous crisis (24); a trifling circumstance may stimulate to energetic action: thus, the act of Moses in delivering the individual Israelite from his oppressor greatly promoted his national design. "Do the thing that lies nearest to thee; the second will have only become clearer."

A further lesson is, that we must remain true to the highest we know though we be misunderstood (25). If we are in the way of God's will, we must not allow misunderstanding to chill our enthusiasm or arrest our endeavor. Better be an exile for the truth than a craven at home (29).

Moses was for forty years in the Egyptian court (20-28); for forty years in Midian (29-30a); now he enters upon a third period of forty years (36,42). In these periods, he was, respectively, Prince, Pastor, and Prophet; first, learning that he was somebody; then that he was nobody; and finally that God was all. Verses 30-34 tell of the call of Moses to accomplish that for which he had been preparing for eighty years. Youth is in too much of a hurry, and generally is impatient of training days. Remember Moses. Also, that for three and one-half years service, Christ had over thirty years of preparation. Training days are tremendous days and once past, they do not come again; so be patient and diligent.

Before Moses saw the vision and heard the voice (30-31), God saw a vision and heard a voice (34). He always sees and hears before we do and we see and hear only because He does. "I will send thee into Egypt," (34), that is, to the place where our task begins. He sends but we must go.

(2) Israel in the Wilderness.

Stephen's point here is that the people to whom he is

speaking are now rejecting the Messiah as their forbears had rejected Moses. Each had a special preparation; each had a Divine call; each founded a dispensation; each was a new spiritual force; each was a great religious teacher; each claimed a hearing on Divine authority; and each was rejected by his own generation. But the Messiah was greater than Moses. Much in this review is passed over by Stephen, but he emphasized Israel's idolatry (29-43), the sin which brought them into a new captivity; there observe that after exit from Egypt (36), is entrance into Babylon (43). Let the delivered beware of further bondage.