

Handout 1: Acts Lesson 4

Part II of the Church's mission to Jerusalem ends with the martyrdom of Stephen. Part III of Acts begins in 8:4 with the Mission of the Church in Judea and Samaria

St. Stephen's discourse to the Sanhedrin is a pivotal moment in St. Luke's narrative of the history of the Church. In his survey of Israel's relationship with God, Stephen focuses on two points:

1. The Israelites have a history of rejecting God's servants: Joseph son of Jacob (7:9), Moses (7:23-29, 39-40), the prophets (7:52a), Jesus of Nazareth "the Righteous One" (7:52b).
2. God's divine presence with His people does not depend on any one sacred site: God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia (7:2), God was with Joseph son of Jacob in Egypt (7:9) and God revealed Himself to Moses at Mt. Sinai (7:30-34, 38). God had the Israelites make the desert Sanctuary and later the Temple (7:44-46), but His Presence is not limited to structures "made by human hands" (7:48-50).

It is Stephen's intention to show that it is God's divine plan that there is a new order that must break away from the Old Covenant Temple to fulfill the mission to take the Gospel of salvation to the world.

Stephen will make his case concerning these two points by observations about:

- Abraham (Acts 7:2-8)
- Joseph son of Jacob (Acts 7:9-16)
- Moses (Acts 7:17-43)
- The Jerusalem Temple (Acts 7:44-50)

The discourse is concluded with a direct application of his observations (Acts 7:71-73).

Please notice that there are five discrepancies between St. Stephen's account and what is recorded in the Hebrew Pentateuch:

1. The quote from Genesis 12:1 in Acts 7:3 refers to an event that took place after Abraham had settled in Haran and not before (Gen 11:31-12:1).
2. Stephen says that Abraham did not leave for the Promised Land until after the death of his father which cannot be correct.
3. Stephen says that 75 Israelites made the migration into Egypt, but Genesis records that there were 70, which includes Jacob, Joseph and his two sons (Gen 46:26-27).
4. In Acts 7:16 Stephen says that Jacob was buried at Shechem. However, Genesis 50:13 records that he was buried at Hebron in the cave Abraham purchased that was known as the tomb of Machpelah.
5. Stephen says that the land for the tomb at Shechem was purchased by Abraham, but Genesis 33:19 and Joshua 24:32 attribute the purchase of the land at Shechem to Abraham's grandson Jacob.

Comparisons of faith versus deceit: Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37) compared to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) compared to Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24).

Handout 2: Acts Lesson 4

The conclusion of Stephen’s discourse:

1. They say they love God and revere the Law, but they do not observe the Law and are in opposition to the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51).
2. Like their ancestors who killed the prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus, they have killed God’s servant Jesus (Acts 7:52).

He presents their rejection of Jesus the Messiah as part of the historical cycle of rejection of God’s servants in the history of Israel.

The parallels between Stephen’s martyrdom and Jesus’ Passion are complete:

	Jesus	Stephen
His opponents could not withstand his wisdom.	<i>No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions (Mt 22:46). And they no longer dared to ask him anything (Lk 20:40). Also Mt 22:46; Mk 12:17; Lk 20:19, 26, 40.</i>	<i>... but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke (Acts 6:10).</i>
His enemies conspired against him to arrest him.	<i>For the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should inform them, so they might arrest him (Jn 11:57). Also Mt 26:3-4; Mk 14:1; Lk 22:2; Jn 11:47-53, 57.</i>	<i>They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, accosted him, seized him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:12).</i>
They brought forward false witnesses.	<i>The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus ... (Mt 26:59). Also Mt 26:59-62; Mk 14:56-57.</i>	<i>They presented false witnesses who testified ... (Acts 6:13).</i>
The charge of blasphemy was made against him.	<i>He has blasphemed! What further need have we of witnesses? You have now heard the blasphemy ... (Mt 26:65-66). Also Mt 26:65-66; Mk 14:56-57; 64.</i>	<i>Then they instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God” (Acts 6:11).</i>
There was a petition of mercy for the executioners.	<i>Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).</i>	<i>Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them ... (Acts 7:60).</i>
He asked God to take his spirit.	<i>Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46).</i>	<i>As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59)</i>
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There is no more complete answer as to why a just God allows the innocent to suffer than the answer that is offered up to humanity in the saving work of Jesus Christ. In addressing the question of human suffering and reflecting on this mystery, John Paul II wrote: *Christ has opened His suffering to man ... Man, discovering through faith the redemptive suffering of Christ, also discovers in it his own sufferings; he rediscovers them through faith, enriched with a new content and meaning (Salvifici Doloris, 20).* St. Stephen was the first Christian martyr.

