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**theme:** Salvation History (Acts 7:1-53)

**materials:** Bibles, news story

## welcome

How well do you know the history of your nation? Could you relate it accurately in a pressure-filled situation? Try, as a cell, to get as much detail about the names and dates and big events that happened in your nation.

*Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.*

## worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced divine community this week? Pray for your nation this week. Pray that your nation would see a revival of people coming to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour, that it would enact just laws and act mercifully, that it would be a place of freedom and righteousness.

***If you are in Canada, check out the "Prayer Cast" called "This Prayer Hour Has 22 Minutes" on Tuesday nights, 11:11 Eastern Time, at [www.24-7prayer.ca](http://www.24-7prayer.ca)***

## word

Read **Acts 7:1-53**

Why is Stephen standing trial? What are the accusations against him?

Why does he give a big history lesson as his defence?

What are two main themes in his speech?

How does he answer the charges against him?

Why would Stephen's speech be extremely upsetting to the Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin)? What does Stephen accuse them of?

How might this speech set the stage for the witnessing to the Gentiles that is soon to come?

Why does this history lesson matter to us now? Or does it?

## witness

The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands. Arrange to have a worship time somewhere other than in a Church building this week, ideally outside where others can see and join in. God has been "contained" in Church buildings for far too long, and we need to honour the words of Stephen the martyr by releasing the worship of God into new places.



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## action points

Look back to the founding of your own nation. What were the express purposes of those who helped to form your country? What were the hopes and dreams inherent in the identity of your nation? How are those being realised now?

## leader's guide

This passage is kind of tricky for us now, because we are not as familiar with the salvation history of Israel as Stephen and the Sanhedrin were. It is therefore hard to understand why Stephen essentially repeats a version of Jewish history as his defence against the charges of blaspheming against the Temple and saying that the Law was being changed. But if we are able to draw some of the themes of his speech out – themes that would have been evident to the Jewish authorities listening to him and to many of the first people who read the book of Acts – then it begins to make a lot more sense.

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jewish man (called a “Hellenistic Jew”) who had come to accept Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. He began preaching the message of salvation and the worship of God through Jesus, God’s Son. This preaching was still confined to Jerusalem, as the message of the gospel had not yet spread beyond Judea to the Gentiles. Stephen’s preaching provoked opposition from the local synagogue, as we studied last week. And so he had to defend himself against the charges in front of the Sanhedrin, probably knowing as he did so that the verdict was already in, and he would not survive the day. This is the last speech of a martyr.

There are two main themes that seem to run through the speech. The first theme is that throughout the history of Israel, God had raised up many deliverers (Joseph and Moses, for instance), but that the Jewish people themselves had repeatedly rejected them, and had themselves been guilty of breaking the Law that was given to them, even right from the beginning (**Acts 7:39-40**). The second theme concerns the proper way to worship God. The Hebrews had first been given the Tabernacle, and then constructed the Temple, both as places to worship God. But God could not and cannot be contained within places built by human hands, and the time had now come to recognise this. In addition, the Jewish people had also been guilty of idolatry throughout its history.

We can see in these two themes what Stephen was trying to do in his speech. He was accused of saying that Jesus would change the laws and customs of Israel; he responds by pointing out that Israel itself had failed to honour both the Law and the giver of the Law, by committing idolatry and by rejecting, even killing, God’s prophets. The implication is that Stephen believes yet another of God’s prophets sent to deliver Israel, this time his very own Son, the true ruler and redeemer, had been rejected and killed. (Moses had prophesied that a prophet like him would be raised up, who Stephen clearly identifies with Jesus, **Deut 18:15, Acts 7:37**). The idolatry of Israel (worshipping the sun, moon, stars, Moloch and Rephon) had caused God to turn His back on Israel, and they experienced exile. Far from disparaging the Law, Stephen proclaimed to be defending the Law against those who had historically failed to honour it properly, and to be warning Israel against the dangers of this kind of behaviour.

He was also accused of saying Jesus would destroy the Temple. He certainly held the Temple in less esteem than did the other apostles. But in this he responds that God was never actually tied to the Tabernacle or the Temple, that God’s glory was never bound up in this way (**Isaiah 66:1-2, Acts 7:48-50**). He was saying that he was actually standing in line with Hebrew Scripture in his criticism of the Temple system.

The underlying message of the speech was that God was still working in the same way that He always had, for those who had eyes to see. And the people of Israel, here represented by the Sanhedrin, were responding in



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the same way their ancestors had.

We must be careful not to divorce Stephen and the message he was proclaiming from the fact that he was essentially echoing the very Jewish message of Israel's own prophets as he spoke to the Sanhedrin. Stephen calls his accusers a "stiff-necked people", language taken directly from God's description of Israel in **Exodus 33:3**. He accuses them of having "uncircumcised hearts and ears" in exactly the same way that Jeremiah had accused Israel of failing to listen with its uncircumcised ears (**Jeremiah 6:10**). He said they were resisting the Holy Spirit, just as Isaiah had said their ancestors had grieved the Holy Spirit (**Isaiah 63:10**). In **1 Kings 19:10,14** and **Jeremiah 26:20-24** Israel is accused of killing the prophets of the Lord, just as Stephen accused the Sanhedrin at his trial. Stephen is portrayed here as standing very much in line with Israel's prophets, announcing the message of God to his own people, some of whom received it, some of whom rejected it.

None of this gives anyone the right to make blanket statements about the Jewish people. Stephen was speaking into his immediate context, therefore he used Jewish history to defend himself and make his point. Different language was used to get the message across to Gentile believers later. The vital point is that it was not about what race you were from, but how you responded to the gospel, to the person of Jesus Christ. Many Gentiles ended up hating and rejecting the gospel message and the messengers that were sent to deliver it. But there were those amongst both Jews and Gentiles who did receive the gospel, and when they did all the former distinctions fell away. In this process, they became something new, a new people (see **Romans 9:24-29**).

One of the effects of Stephen's speech and the consequences of it, as we will see next week, was a scattering of many of the new Christians out of Judea and into the Gentile world as a result of persecution. This outward and inclusive move seems to be anticipated in some of what Stephen says in his speech. He points out, for instance, that God first appeared to Abram in Mesopotamia, and that the covenant of circumcision was performed before Abraham was given any territory in the Promised Land at all. God's glory was not, therefore limited to the Promised Land, nor was proper worship only possible there. Stephen then points out that Joseph had been buried in Shechem, which is in hated Samaritan territory, not Judea. So there was nothing sacred about Judea as a burial site, if one of the patriarchs was buried elsewhere. And as God cannot be limited by buildings made by human hands, he is therefore not limited to the Temple, or even to one nation. This opened up the possibility that those who were excluded from the Temple or who did not live in Judea could still receive the gospel.

Stephen's speech may not be the best method of evangelism in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Gentile world, but it wasn't meant to be. Stephen was speaking into his time, into his situation, and he was speaking a language that his listeners understood. Even then, his message was not well received, but at least people understood the point he was making. It is nevertheless useful for us to see Stephen's picture of salvation history, how the action of God in sending Jesus was consistent with the way he had been interacting with his people from the beginning. Even in the face of rejection, God continued to send his prophets, his deliverers, his redeemers, until at last he sent his own Son, the fulfillment of his promise to his people. This is a God who loves his people, who is working for the redemption of all who will turn to him and respond to his love and mercy. There is a terrible danger in rejecting God, but also the incredible opportunity to receive him. The message of Luke-Acts is that everyone, not just one group of people, can be justified and transformed into the one new people of God.