

Displaced AND Redeemed

The Story of God's People According to Stephen

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“... you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.” (Leviticus 25:23)

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are from the NIV version.

How would you describe Stephen in the book of Acts? As a servant waiting on tables (Acts 6:3–6)? As an evangelist preaching to those responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion (Acts 7:2–53)? Or (perhaps the most vivid picture) as a martyr seeing a vision of the glorified Christ (Acts 7:54–60)?

In this article, we will consider Stephen the historian.

Did you know that Stephen’s speech constitutes the longest monologue in the book of Acts? Acts 7 is certainly apologetic. In fact, Stephen’s account of Israel’s history hit so close to home for its audience they chose to execute him.

Stephen’s summary is simultaneously the history of redemption and that of a displaced people. Stephen begins in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2) and proceeds through God’s calling from the land of the Chaldeans via Harran to the vision for a promised land for Abram. Yet, the Lord gave him no inheritance there, not even

enough ground to set his foot (Acts 7:5). Even while having neither land nor heir, Abram was somehow comforted by God’s promise, *For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, they will be enslaved and mistreated* (Acts 7:6). Besides a promised land, God led Abram to accept the promise of slavery and suffering.

In the story of redemption, we don’t assume opposition came from outside. It was the “patriarchs” of Israel who sold Joseph into slavery (Acts 7:9). Because God was with Joseph, opposition resulted in deliverance. As famine drove the sons of Israel to Egypt, Joseph was ready as God’s provision (Acts 7:8–16). As we read from Joseph’s own lips, the evil intended by Joseph’s brothers *God intended for good to accomplish...the saving of many lives* (Gen. 50:20).

For many generations Israel multiplied; so did the Pharaohs’ oppression. Stephen used words like “treacherous,” “oppression,” and “forced labor” to

describe the plight of God's people (Acts 7:7–19). In all this, God was not absent. He told Moses, *I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free* (Acts 7:34). Yet the mighty deeds God enabled Moses to perform were accompanied by 40 years of wandering in a wilderness (Acts 7:36). Israel was homeless, aimless, rebellious, yet guided by the “living words” received by Moses and passed to the people (Acts 7:38–39).

Even though Israel settled in the promised land, Stephen reminds those who inherited the tabernacle and the temple system, *the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. For Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool. Though God's own hand had made all these things*, the Holy Spirit led Stephen to rebuke those clinging to a house prepared for God. Like Joseph, the prophets, even the law of Moses, *the Righteous One* was rejected and betrayed (Acts 7:48–53).

Israel possessed the promises of God, yet they were often treated as strangers and foreigners. Israel's history was marked by oppression, slavery, and groaning. They were “resident aliens” displaced by famine and warfare. According to Stephen, each generation played its part—whether Jacob digging another well, unnamed Israelites baking bricks made with or without straw, or Moses stretching his staff over the Red Sea. Each generation, willingly or unwillingly, had a role in accomplishing God's purposes within His mission. And throughout its history, Israel was plagued by rebellion from within the camp. At the appointed time, Israel mistook the redemption wrought by God's own hand. They crucified the very Redeemer sent to fulfill the promises of God.

As you read Stephen's account of Israel's history, are you struck by the intense irony?

Having recounted the history of his own people—displaced, mistreated, sold, and even murdered—Stephen took his place among the oppressed and the redeemed. Full of the Holy Spirit, Stephen fell beneath the stones hurled at him. Yet as he looked to heaven, he saw his Savior standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55–60).

You know what happens in the following chapters of Acts. God's purposes are revealed again and again amidst suffering and injustice. Saul the persecutor, after approving the murder of Stephen, becomes the catalyst for a scattering of the disciples (Acts 8:1–3). As Saul sought to destroy the Church *house to house...those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went* (Acts 8:3–4). God's orchestration was again demonstrated as *men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord* (Acts 11:20–21). Within the providence of God, both Stephen's suffering and Saul's evil intent served to establish the very Church which later sent the same Saul on mission (Acts 13:1–4). Do you see irony? I see God's purposes made perfect in the faith of His followers across history.

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According to Stephen, the story of Israel is the story of pilgrimage. Stephen's speech is the story of God choosing and leveraging Israel for redemption. This history is a pathway of suffering, oppression, and groaning (Acts 7:34). Yet, such circumstances are perfectly in step with God's providence and promises. In the midst of mission, one might anticipate a reward for leaving everything to follow the Lord's calling. Yet, the biblical precedent remains. We should not be surprised that injustice and the mistreatment of God's people continue today. We should not be surprised by the stirring and displacement of nations in keeping with the plan of redemption. Even now, such circumstances propel the Great Commission to the ends of the earth.

As it was with the story of redemption, so it is in the ongoing unfolding drama of the Great Commission. We have the promised Spirit of God, complete with His power compelling us to witness. As we accept and embrace the promises of Acts 1:8, let us be prepared to accept the precedent of scattering established in Acts 8:1. 