

WEEK 1

APRIL 16, 2023

Digging Deeper

Words of a Dying Man

Stephen's Sermon

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In 1777, William Dodd, a well-known London clergyman, was condemned to be hanged for forgery. When his last sermon, delivered in prison, was published, a friend commented to Samuel Johnson that the effort was far better than he had thought the man capable of. Dr. Johnson replied, "Depend upon it, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully."

I cannot say whether Stephen sensed that he was about to be stoned to death when he delivered this message before the Sanhedrin, but his mind was wonderfully concentrated! More than just speaking well because of the threat of death, Stephen spoke powerfully because he was filled with the Holy Spirit (7:55). It is the longest sermon in Acts, and so the Holy Spirit thought it to be important enough for Luke to record it to the extent that he did.

Perhaps Luke wanted his largely Gentile audience to get a brief history of God's dealings with Israel. The sermon also serves as a transition to the Gentile mission that follows this chapter, in that it shows Israel's continued stubborn rejection of God's message and messengers. It shows that God had worked in many places and ways with His servants down through the centuries, and so worship is not limited to the land of Palestine or to the temple. Like Abraham, who obediently followed the Lord, so God's people must go where He leads.

Stephen was charged with speaking against Moses, against God, against the temple, and against the law and the customs handed down by Moses (6:11, 13, 14). While overall his message shows the charges to be false, it is more a sermon that traces God's historical dealings with Israel, Israel's history of rebellion against God, and a climax that indicts his hearers of the very charges that they were bringing against him. They were guilty of rejecting Moses and the law, and even worse, they had just killed the Righteous One whom God had sent for their salvation. Thus the overall theme is that ...

Stephen's sermon points us to the sovereign, abundant grace of God toward rebellious sinners, but also to the danger of hardening our hearts against God's grace.

Stephen's message focuses on three issues: (1) the patriarchal period (7:2-16); (2) Moses and the law (7:17-43); and, (3) the tabernacle and temple (7:44-50). The conclusion (7:51-53) is a scathing denunciation of the Sanhedrin, who were following in the rebellious pattern of their forefathers. First we will look at the explanation of Stephen's message, and then at the application of it.

The explanation of Stephen's message:

Rather than working through the message in detail, which would take far more time than I have, I want to show you three dominant themes that are woven throughout it. Also, there are several difficult historical problems that I do not have time to comment on. If you are interested in these, you can consult the best commentaries. But I will mention one as an example.

In verse 16, Stephen says that the patriarchs were removed from Egypt to Shechem, where they were laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. However, Genesis says that Abraham bought the Cave of Machpelah (near Hebron) from the sons of Heth (Genesis 23), whereas Jacob bought a piece of land from the sons of Hamor in Shechem (Gen. 33:19). Also, Jacob was buried in the Cave of Machpelah (Gen. 50:13), whereas Joseph was finally buried on the land in Shechem (Josh. 24:32). Scripture does not say where the other sons of Jacob were buried, although Josephus claims that they were buried in Hebron (Antiquities 2.8.2 [199]).



Questions to ask when reading the Bible

Sometimes when we read a passage in the Bible it can be confusing or we may not know how to best figure out what it is saying. Below are some good questions to ask when reading the Bible to help make the Bible make sense.

1. What stands out to me?

Note that this does not say “What does this passage mean?” Consider what stood out to you? What did you notice? What did the Holy Spirit highlight for you as you read it?

2. What does the text say about the character/nature of God?

The Scriptures are primarily about God so ask first what the text says about Him before moving to what it says about us, about His plan, or about anything else.

3. What does the text say?

Look at what the text literally says first (this may not be the intent of the text but it is important to look at it as read... at least initially).

4. How is it saying it?

What is the genre of the text and how should we read text in that genre?

5. Why does it say it that way?

Speculate about why the author chose this method of saying what they've said.

6. What is it trying to say?

Getting behind the Scripture, looking at its context, its original audience, its author, etc., what is the text trying to get across to the reader (both the original audience and us today?)

7. How does this fit into the whole of the book and the whole of Scripture?

Looking at the whole book, does what is being said jive with the whole book, with the whole of Scripture?

8. What questions do I have?

Do you have questions about the text? If they aren't answered in the text, are they good questions or are we asking questions that the text isn't meant to answer?

9. How do I feel about this teaching/text? Why do I feel that way?

What does your gut say? Are you frustrated with it? Are you trying to make it say something else than what it says? Does it make you uncomfortable? Where are these feelings coming from? Is there sin in my life I need to repent of?

10. What is the universal application of this text/teaching?

What are we to do with this text? Consider the original audience as well as us today.

11. What is my personal application?

What is God calling you to apply with what you've learned with this text?

12. How will I apply what it calls me to?

Make a plan to apply what God has taught you. Seek to be faithful and obedient to His leading, wherever it may go.