

## Stephen's Speech: Acts 7:9-16

Joseph is not the most prominent character in the Old Testament, at least not when we compare him with the likes of Abraham, Moses, David, and others. Was God's protection of Joseph necessary for the creation and preservation of God's covenant people? Yes. Yet, one must ask, "Why would Stephen dedicate eight full verses to Joseph's story when it could have been told in three or less?" Even David the King is only mentioned in passing, and not for his own sake. David is simply alluded to so that Stephen can touch on Solomon's Temple-building project (Acts 7:45-47). Why, then, does the narrative of Joseph's betrayal, slavery, and promotion figure so prominently in Stephen's sermon?

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First, there are many parallels between the life of Joseph and the life of Jesus, "the Righteous One, whom you [i.e., the Sanhedrin] have now betrayed and murdered" (Acts 7:52):

- The Holy Spirit gave Joseph a pair of dreams when he was a young man that prophesied his future exaltation above his brothers and even his own father. The content of these visions, combined with the special favor Joseph received from his father, Jacob, drove his brothers into jealousy. It was out of envy that Joseph's brothers eventually sold him into slavery.

Similarly, the Pharisees handed Jesus over to be crucified, being envious of Jesus' authority and the acclaim he received from the people. Pilate saw through their lies about Jesus to their perverse hearts: "For he [i.e., Pilate] knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up" (Mt 27:18). Yet, the Prefect was too weak to set Jesus free as justice demanded.

- Joseph's righteousness and faith in God, which were displayed throughout his trials and tribulations, were recognized by God. Although it took several years filled with heartache and woe, the Lord exalted Joseph. He took away the shame of his slavery and replaced it with incomparable authority and honor.

Likewise, Jesus experienced a particularly ignominious birth, upbringing, and death. He was born in a manger in Bethlehem, away from the palaces and grand residences of Jerusalem, only to grow up afterward in the small, mean town of Nazareth. Though he committed no crime, he was executed on a Roman cross and was laid in a new tomb apart from his father, Joseph. Yet, because of his perfect obedience to and faith in his Father, God raised Jesus from the dead, gave him a Name above every Name, and set him at his right hand. All the shame he endured was replaced with glory.

- Joseph was despised and persecuted by his brothers to the extent that one day they handed him over to slavers for a life of servitude and neglect. Yet, the Lord protected Joseph and promoted him to a position of high power, from which he serves as the savior of his father who loved him and the brothers who hated him.

In a similar manner, Jesus was handed over by his own people to death, though he had done no wrong. The Father protected his Son by raising him from the dead.

— Prayer —

Take a moment to pray for those who are being persecuted like Joseph. Pray that the Lord would protect them and soon bring their exaltation.

Now, Jesus serves as the Savior of the world, offering atonement for all, even those who persecuted him and nailed him to the cross.

— Prayer —

Thank God the Father for providing his Son as the sacrifice for our sin, and praise the Son for being our Savior, even though we rebelled and continue to sin against him. Our God is incomparably gracious!

This list of common elements between the life of Joseph and the life of Jesus is not exhaustive. Still, it is complete enough to recognize that Jesus functions as a New Joseph for the people of God. Like Joseph, Jesus was persecuted by his own brothers, was exalted by the Father, and serves as the Savior of the repentant. The Joseph story provides Stephen's audience with a biblical pattern to understand the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, Son of God.

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Second, the Joseph story figures prominently in Stephen's speech because it emphasizes one of the main themes of Stephen's rebuke: historically, God has been at work outside the nation of Israel just as much as he has been at work inside Israel.

Joseph grew up in the household of his father, Jacob, in Palestine. But the majority of his life was spent in Egypt. When Joseph crossed the border and entered Egyptian territory, God did not stand there on the northeast side and wave "goodbye." God was with Joseph in Egypt. God preserved Joseph's life, gave him visions of the future, and orchestrated his rise to power. God was not tied to the Promised Land. Where his chosen people went, so did he.

The Jews of Stephen's day believed wrongly, however, that God was tied to the Promised Land and the Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites understood that Yahweh was the Creator of all, including both Jews and Gentiles. However, they thought that God was active only among his chosen people in the Land that the Lord had given them, and that God did not care about the nations like he did Israel.

Although the Temple was important to Jew and Christian alike, and the Christians understood that the gospel was to the Jew first then the Greek, Christians quickly realized that God was and had always been at work among the nations and not just in Palestine. God had drawn Hellenistic Jews like Stephen to himself through the preaching of the Apostles and the ministry of the Spirit, and soon he would draw Gentiles to himself as well. The Lord was with his chosen wherever they were; he could be worshiped by anyone, anywhere, even by the Gentile who was far removed from the Temple in Jerusalem.

— Prayer —

Praise the Lord for drawing the Gentiles to himself. Without his lovingkindness, none of us would be part of the covenant people; none of us would be destined for the kingdom of heaven.

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Next week we will look at Stephen's take on the life of Moses, which occupies the center of the speech. Until then, take care, be safe, and God bless!