



Walking Through the Scripture Together

April 13 – 19, 2008

Acts 7:39-60

## Stephen's Rant

### Zero-Tolerance for Wimping Out

**Text** Acts 7:39-60

<sup>39</sup>"But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. <sup>40</sup>They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' <sup>41</sup>That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. <sup>42</sup>But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings  
forty years in the wilderness, house of Israel?

<sup>43</sup>You have taken up the tabernacle of Molech  
and the star of your god Rephan,  
the idols you made to worship.  
Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

<sup>44</sup>"Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup>Having received the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, <sup>46</sup>who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup>But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

<sup>48</sup>"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup>"Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.  
What kind of house will you build for me?  
says the Lord.  
Or where will my resting place be?

<sup>50</sup>Has not my hand made all these things?' <sup>51</sup>

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup>Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— <sup>53</sup>you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

#### The Stoning of Stephen

<sup>54</sup>When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were

furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup>But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

<sup>57</sup>At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup>dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

<sup>59</sup>While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup>Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

#### Thought

Prophets are experts on bipolarity. They are also God's unwilling lightning rods. Those individuals who are wired (or miswired) along these lines get struck with jolts that can be really embarrassing if they hit during a date, a church service, a Bible conference, or some other venue that is public, calm, and civil. They suffer from a polarity disorder which causes them to identify with God first and humans second. You can identify them pretty easily because their hair is usually singed.

Their God smokes, so they do too.

God does not need spin doctors or marketing gurus. He has no need of defense attorneys who will emphasize only those facts favorable to his client's position. It does him no service to cover up or ignore or modify the parts that make Him look bad (to us or to our friends). We have not been hired as God's image consultants. It is we who need Him, not the other way around. So, though sympathetic with the desire to dress God up, to prop up His image or soften the anger lines running alongside the mouth, I say what any prophet would say, as civilly and as kindly as possible:

STOP! Just stop!

This abrupt imperative is not intended as a condemnation of moral wrongness but as a cry of warning from a motorist waving hazard lights in front of a washed-out bridge. You mean well, but what you don't know is that you're on slippery, dangerous ground. If you keep driving in the same direction, you'll be swept away by the current.

Timothy Stoner, *The God Who Smokes*

This excerpt from Stoner's book (you gotta love the title) really captures Stephen and his encounter with the religious high court of his day. His nation was literally teetering on the precipice of destruction — a pit they would fall headlong into within another three decades. Rather than merely trying to get himself off the hook, or trying to make truth palatable, Stephen — as well as his message — smokes.

## Small Group Discussion Guide

### Lean In

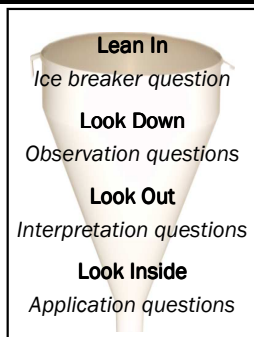
- What was the most defiant thing you did against your parents' wishes — something that you can laugh about now but maybe wasn't so funny then?

### Look Down / Look Out

- How do you account for the Israelites turning from God and Moses — right at the foot of Mt Sinai, no less — and worshipping a golden calf? Were they bored? Restless? Rebellious? Impatient? Or what?
- How does Moses respond to the crisis of the golden calf? Where do you see yourself in this story? How do you usually respond when others disappoint you?
- What was the purpose of the tabernacle and, later, of the temple? What hopes did Solomon have for the temple? Historically, to what extent were those hopes realized?
- Why isn't Stephen more diplomatic with all these judges who hold the power of life and death over him?

### Look Inside

- What do you typically do when you feel God has stopped speaking? Keep waiting? Run wild? Blame the church and/or find new idol to worship? Fall back on secular coping skills? Or what?
- What one life lesson has really stood out as you have walked with Stephen through his trial, speech, and death?



## Family Discussion Guide

### Day One Acts 7:39-43 Exodus 32

What happens in your classroom when the teacher leaves the room? Why do we act differently sometimes when our parent or teacher isn't around? Why did the Israelites give up on Moses and make the golden calf to worship? What do you learn from them?

### Day Two Acts 7:44-47 1 Kings 8

Why did Solomon build the Temple? What did he hope it would mean to the people? What is the point of church on Sundays? What does church mean to you?

### Day Three Acts 7:48-50 Isaiah 66:1-2

The Bible says that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. What does that mean to you?

### Day Four Acts 7:51-53 Jeremiah 4:3-4

Why isn't Stephen more "nice" when he speaks to his judges? How easy is it for you to say to others what you really think they need to hear? How do you know when to speak out and when to keep quiet?

### Day Five Acts 7:54-60

Why are Stephen's judges so angry at him? Why doesn't Stephen seem to be afraid of what they are doing to him? What two prayers does he pray as they start stoning him? How do you think he was able to pray his last prayer?

## Bible Life & Times

### The golden calf

In art and legend gods were frequently represented by animals thought to symbolize the attributes of a particular deity. In the overall religious experience of the ancient Near East, for example, bulls and bull calves were associated with strength, virility and kingship. The bull was regarded as the earthly form or representation of the heavenly god, embodying physical strength and the procreative power found in nature.

Several religious cults in Egypt (that of Apis being the most prominent) worshipped the bull and calf. Deification of a live, "sacred" bull was initiated during the First Egyptian Dynasty and continued throughout ancient Egypt's long history. Bull cults of the Nile delta, which existed at the same time and location as the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt, were dedicated to Horus, the "god of heaven."

The Canaanites also venerated bulls. El, the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon was referred to as the "heavenly bull." Baal, the storm god, was likewise associated with the bull on account of the animal's fertility. Artistic traditions from Canaan depict gods as riding on bulls, which had become living pedestals emblematic of kingship and power over nature.

The golden calf was Israel's first foray into syncretism, the combining of faith in the one true God with pagan traditions. In taking this step, God's chosen people exchanged his glory — the true, manifest presence of God — for the image of a bull — a false representation of God's presence (Psalm 106:19-20). The Israelites had tragically fallen prey to cultural influences from Egypt (from which they had departed) and Canaan (where they would settle). God's people were unwittingly associating their God with the gods of the nations.

The cry of the exodus deliverance, "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?" would be belied again and again by idolatry — Israel's colossal stumbling block.

Archaeological Study Bible



## details, details...

### Law given by angels

Jewish tradition clearly stated that the law of Moses was actually given through angelic mediation (i.e. God himself was not actually on the mountain but rather angelic representatives. Stephen alludes to this twice in his speech (verses 38 and 53). Paul mentions it also in **Galatians 3:19-20** in this key statement of the law's purpose:

Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised. God gave his law through angels to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people. Now a mediator is helpful if more than one party must reach an agreement. But God, who is one, did not use a mediator when he gave his promise to Abraham.

### They began to stone him

This note from *Wikipedia* on stoning:

In the Torah stoning is specifically prescribed as the method of execution for crimes such as blasphemy, apostasy and some cases of adultery. (See Deuteronomy 13:9-10)

However, the Talmud limits the use of the death penalty to Jewish criminals who, having been warned not to commit the crime, do so in the presence of two witnesses. The Talmudic restriction on how stoning was to be carried out differs from the type of stoning commonly assumed. According to the Jewish oral law, after the criminal had been determined as guilty before the Great Sanhedrin, the two valid witnesses and the sentence criminal went to the edge of a high place. From there the two witnesses were to push the criminal off. After the criminal had fallen, the two witnesses were to drop a large boulder onto the criminal — requiring both of the witnesses to lift the boulder together. If the criminal did not die from the fall or from the crushing of the large boulder, then any people in the surrounding area were to quickly cause him to die by stoning with whatever rocks they could find.