

# THE STORIES WE TELL

ACTS 7:1-53    DECEMBER 18, 2019

In the *National Treasure* movies, Benjamin Franklin Gates sets off on quests to discover riches and uncover the truth. Along the way, he's guided by childhood stories and our nation's historical documents. Half the fun is that he has to steal things like the Declaration of Independence.

*Frozen 2* has a similar element to it. Don't worry, no spoilers, but I will say that a story from Anna and Elsa's family history guides them along and advances the plot as the movie unfolds.

When we left off, Stephen had been arrested for daring to preach to his fellow Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. Having been brought before the Sanhedrin, he's accused of blasphemy against Moses, the Temple and the Law.

Tonight, Stephen is given an opportunity to respond to the charges. As he does so, he reminds his listeners of some of the most famous stories in their Jewish history. Stephen uses these stories to show that the charges against him are part of a long tradition of resisting the revealed truth of God. His dialogue is not only a defense, it's a sermon. The longest recorded in the book of Acts.

A person listening to the sermon that day, being well-versed in these stories, should've not only been able to see the continual thread of God's progressive revelation to Israel and His long-term work to save all those who needed rescue, they also should have noticed that anyone standing against Stephen that day was squarely on the wrong side of history.

Stephen used simple stories to reveal these truths to the Sanhedrin. Now we, as believers in Jesus Christ, wouldn't put ourselves in *their* place. We recognize Christ as Messiah. But these history lessons still have something to say to us. After all, they're just as living and powerful as they were when first delivered. They are the living oracles of God. So what can they teach us? Well, first of all, it's an encouragement that even the simple stories in God's word are full of profound truth and wisdom for us. But second, if these stories were meant to be an example to the unbelievers that day of how they were like the people *resisting* the Lord in each case, we want to see the *faithful* servants of God in these tales and allow their example to teach us about how we can better glorify the Lord.

**Acts 7:1-7 - "Is this true?" the high priest asked. <sup>2</sup> "Brothers and fathers," he said, "listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him: "Get out of your country and away from your relatives, and come to the land that I will show you." <sup>4</sup> "Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this land you now live in. <sup>5</sup> He didn't give him an inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, but He promised to give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him, even though he was childless. <sup>6</sup> God spoke in this way: "His descendants would be strangers in a foreign country, and they would enslave and oppress them 400 years. <sup>7</sup> I will judge the nation that they will serve as slaves," God said. "After this, they will come out and worship Me in this place."**

In a round about way, Stephen *is* making a case for his innocence, but he's also taking the opportunity to preach to these men who are lost and headed toward hell. Though he has some sharp things to say, he opens up with tact and respect: "Brothers and fathers." He doesn't make them his enemies, but his family. A family that started with Abraham.

When God called Abraham, He made him quite an offer. “I’ll give you a new land. I’ll make you a nation.” But, this offer would require the utmost trust. God asked Abraham to prefer Him to his own country, his own family, even his own future. We know that Abraham came from wealth. Now, God was inviting him to a life of uncertainty and pilgrimage - to leave the sure inheritance that would’ve been his in Ur of the Chaldeans and, instead, be satisfied in the spiritual pursuit of a God he was still getting to know. To trust that this God was *really* going to follow through on His promises.

The story of Abraham gives us a wonderful example of *faith*. To walk by faith means not only that we believe God exists, but that He is to be *followed* and preferred over all other attachments. It means that we are growing more and more intimate with God and cooperating in His long-term work. First with our families and then with others we come into contact with. Like Abraham did. Now, Abraham had his share of stumbles in his walk of faith, but we see in his story a progressing development of faith and trust in the Lord. He “journeyed by stages” and became the father of faith.

**Acts 7:8-16 - <sup>8</sup> Then He gave [Abraham] the covenant of circumcision. After this, he fathered Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; Isaac did the same with Jacob, and Jacob with the 12 patriarchs. <sup>9</sup> “The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt, but God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his troubles. He gave him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over his whole household. <sup>11</sup> Then a famine and great suffering came over all of Egypt and Canaan, and our ancestors could find no food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors the first time. <sup>13</sup> The second time, Joseph was revealed to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> Joseph then invited his father Jacob and all his relatives, 75 people in all, <sup>15</sup> and Jacob went down to Egypt. He and our ancestors died there, <sup>16</sup> were carried back to Shechem, and were placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.**

God had promised that, through Abraham, all nations would be blessed. Of course, that prophecy ultimately looked forward to the arrival of the Savior, but in the story of Joseph, we see God blessing a nation that did not know the Lord: Egypt. Because God was willing to allow Joseph to suffer, and because Joseph was willing to *endure*, not only was the *family* of Israel saved, but the *nation* of Egypt was saved as well. Stephen points out that Joseph, the deliverer of Israel, was rejected at first, but recognized the *second* time. This is a clear foreshadowing, not only of Jesus Christ, but of the national Jewish response to Him at His first and then His second coming.

Stephen reminds them that, already, by the time of the great-grandchildren of Abraham, God’s chosen people were resisting His work and His chosen man. Among the sons of Jacob were liars, murderers, human traffickers. But still, God was with them. He still loved them. He still worked in their midst. He provided a way for them to be saved, and that was through the very brother they tried to kill and sold into slavery. We serve a God of astounding grace!

For us, as readers, Joseph’s example shows us how to keep walking with God no matter what circumstances we’re in *and* that Christianity works in the palace or the prison. Joseph demonstrates the incredible things that God can do with a life lived in sacrifice. Joseph lived his life on the altar and, as a result, families were saved. Nations were saved as Joseph invited *all* to come and be fed in the famine. Not only his allies, but even the very people who rejected him.

Now Stephen moves to another rejected savior: Moses.

**Acts 7:17-29 -** <sup>17</sup> “As the time was drawing near to fulfill the promise that God had made to Abraham, the people flourished and multiplied in Egypt <sup>18</sup> until a different king who did not know Joseph ruled over Egypt. <sup>19</sup> He dealt deceitfully with our race and oppressed our ancestors by making them leave their infants outside, so they wouldn’t survive. <sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God’s sight. He was cared for in his father’s home three months, <sup>21</sup> and when he was left outside, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted and raised him as her own son. <sup>22</sup> So Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his speech and actions. <sup>23</sup> “As he was approaching the age of 40, he decided to visit his brothers, the Israelites. <sup>24</sup> When he saw one of them being mistreated, he came to his rescue and avenged the oppressed man by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He assumed his brothers would understand that God would give them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> The next day he showed up while they were fighting and tried to reconcile them peacefully, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why are you mistreating each other?’ <sup>27</sup> “But the one who was mistreating his neighbor pushed him away, saying: Who appointed you a ruler and a judge over us? <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me, the same way you killed the Egyptian yesterday? <sup>29</sup> “At this disclosure, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he fathered two sons.

As was the case with Joseph, it would take a *second* arrival for the people received Moses as their deliverer. Stephen isn’t saying these things by accident, but is trying to show the Jews they were following the same pattern when it came to Jesus Christ.

Moses is one of the most fascinating characters in all the Bible. Here we’re filled in on a few more details that aren’t given to us in Exodus. Moses received the world’s finest education. The ancient historian, Josephus, records that he would have succeed Pharaoh as ruler over Egypt.<sup>1</sup> We’re told here that he was powerful in speech and actions. He was beautiful and important. In addition to all of this, he saw himself as the savior of the Hebrews. He assumed that, they too would recognize this. But then, taking the plan into his own hands, he became a murderer and a fugitive. It says in verse 23, “*He decided.*” He wasn’t ready to be used by God. Dr. J. Vernon McGee wrote:

*“He was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. Yet he was not prepared...All the learning of the world of that day did not equip him to lead God’s people.”*

But the Lord *did* want to use this man, and so he slowly prepared him to become one of the most significant leaders in all of human history. To do more for God’s people as a *shepherd* then he could’ve ever done as a *sovereign*.

**Acts 7:30-36 -** <sup>30</sup> After 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he was approaching to look at it, the voice of the Lord came: <sup>32</sup> I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. So Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> “Then the Lord said to him: Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have observed the oppression of My people in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to rescue them. And now, come, I will send you to Egypt. <sup>35</sup> “This Moses, whom they rejected when they said, Who appointed you a

<sup>1</sup> <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-2.html>

ruler and a judge? —this one God sent as a ruler and a redeemer by means of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> This man led them out and performed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness 40 years.

As an example to us, Moses teaches many things. First of all, his story reveals that God does not *need* the strength of this world to do His work. The best looks, the best education, the best social position isn't what Moses needed to be used by the Lord. In his case, those things were more of a hinderance than a help. No, it's Moses' fear of the Lord and his meekness that made him the spiritual man he was. And, Stephen's telling of the story here gives us the important lesson that, as individuals we must be *directed*, not just *motivated*. The Bible says we're sheep who need to be led. We're servants and soldiers. Servants don't make their own decisions. They are available to be dispatched and allocated at the Master's bidding. Or think of a soldier. A soldier doesn't give *himself* orders. He doesn't draw up his own battle lines. He is subordinate to the leading and timing of his commander. So, in seeking to minister, or in seeking to glorify God in our lives, we need to be led and directed before making choices and attempting new ventures.

**Acts 7:37-43 - <sup>37</sup> “This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your brothers. <sup>38</sup> He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors. He received living oracles to give to us. <sup>39</sup> Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him, but pushed him away, 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 Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we don't know what's happened to him. <sup>41</sup> They even made a calf in those days, offered sacrifice to the idol, and were celebrating what their hands had made. <sup>42</sup> Then God turned away and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: House of Israel, did you bring Me offerings and sacrifices 40 years in the wilderness? <sup>43</sup> No, you took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship. So I will deport you beyond Babylon!**

Stephen is shifting his focus from the *men* God had sent to the *people* who kept resisting the Lord. Even as Moses was actively delivering them, the Israelites resisted and rejected him. With the glory of God shining on the top of Mount Sinai, they chose the golden calf. And Stephen connects their rejection with what was happening in the Sanhedrin by reminding them that Moses was not just the Law giver, he was also a prophet. A prophet who told of Jesus Christ. The Jews Stephen was speaking to claimed to be the authorities on Moses and his most dedicated followers, yet they weren't like him at all. They're like the stiff-necked congregation in the wilderness who stooped down to the horrors of pagan worship. The Jews of Stephen's day may not have been bowing down to Molech, but they were worshiping man-made idols all the same. Their faith was not in the Lord or His work, but in the traditions they had crafted for themselves. And, like their ancestors before them, they were refusing to accept the testimony of angels, the signs and wonders in their midst, the truth of God made evident to them by the life of Jesus Christ and the power of His Church.

**Acts 7:44-50 - <sup>44</sup> “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses commanded him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our ancestors in turn received it and with Joshua brought it in when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers, until the days of David. <sup>46</sup> He found favor in God's sight and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built Him a house. <sup>48</sup> However, the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries**

**made with hands, as the prophet says: <sup>49</sup> Heaven is My throne, and earth My footstool. What sort of house will you build for Me? says the Lord, or what is My resting place? <sup>50</sup> Did not My hand make all these things?**

The story of David and his desire to build God a house is another example for us. He was a man who was passionate about glorifying God. He wanted to explore what he could do to magnify the Lord in his life. Of course, like Moses, sometimes his zeal got out ahead of God's leading and he had to be corrected, but he was hungry for spiritual things. He organized his life so that it could be generating worship to God and so he could be available to serve God. What a potent mindset that is to have now that we *are* the Temple of the living God. He dwells in us. We don't have to construct a building, we're here now. To have David's mindset in this dispensation of grace is a worthy goal for all of us.

Time fails us to comment on Joshua, Solomon or Isaiah as Stephen does here. Let's see how he closes his sermon:

**Acts 7:51-53 - <sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit; as your ancestors did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They even killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. <sup>53</sup> You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it."**

Everything Stephen says here is absolutely true. And these simple stories from their history clearly reveal that the Sanhedrin were right in line with the jealous brothers of Joseph, the calf-worshippers in the wilderness and the killers of God's messengers. They paraded themselves as spiritual, but were still fleshly in their hearts, hearing what they wanted to hear, doing not what *God* wanted, but what *they* wanted themselves. Rather than prepare themselves to crown the Messiah that God had been telling them about for thousands of years, they refused to acknowledge Him when He came and they sent Him to the cross because of jealousy and pride. God had tried again and again to speak to them as a group. He had spoken to the sons of Abraham through the provision of Joseph. The phenomenon of Moses. Through His glorious presence of the Tabernacle, the prevailing of Joshua. The passion of David. And, even now, we remember that Stephen's face had been shining with the glory of God as he delivered yet another plea to the leaders of Israel.

In the next passage, Stephen will be killed and violent persecution will break out against the Church, scattering believers all over the Roman empire.

For now, we want to do the *opposite* of the Sanhedrin and allow these Bible stories to speak to us. God's word is given to us for our instruction and direction, so that we can know what God has done and what that means for us as His servants. In these stories we learn about mature faith and *active* faith. We see how God works in various times and in various ways. But that, consistent in all His work, is His desire to use men and women like you and me. He doesn't require perfection. We can't offer that. He doesn't require greatness or popularity. He's simply looking for ears that will listen and hearts that will obey. He's looking for those who will stop resisting and instead go His way. Be they young or old, free or slave, weak or strong, well supplied or deep in famine. As we learn from these examples and trust the Lord and follow His leading, we will join the ranks of these faithful servants and become meaningful members of God's glorious work. What a wonderful thing any old Bible story can deliver to us treasure and truth that can shape our lives so that we might be used to shape this world.