

The Charge Of Blasphemy

Synagogue of the Freedmen

As we start with our examination of this scripture passage, I would like to begin by giving you some background of the people who came against Stephen by charging him with blasphemy. They are all mentioned in verse 9, “Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians (sī- 'rē-nē-ians), and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia sə- 'li- sh(ē-)ə and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.”

The men of “the synagogue of the Freedmen” in Jerusalem were descended from Jews who had been captured and taken to Rome by general Pompey from 63 to 58 B.C. and later released. Pompey found that the Jews adhered so strictly to their religious and national customs that they were worthless as slaves. The name “Freedmen” is derived from the Latin term for one **manumitted** meaning the son of a former slave. At this very time the Roman writer Pliny ('pli-nē) wrote that the Jews who stayed in Rome were described as “mean commoners”. They had a reputation for violence.

Cyrenians came from the city of Cyrene (sī- 'rē-nē) on the coast of Libya, North Africa. Cyrene had a large Jewish population that had migrated from Alexandria. One such person, named Simon, was visiting Jerusalem during the Passover feast when Jesus Christ was crucified and was forced to carry his cross as one can read about in **Matthew chapter 27**. Fifty days later Peter preached to Jews from Cyrene on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (**Acts 2:10**). As we will see

today Stephen was attacked by Jews associated with a synagogue that included people of Cyrene and some of whom were later converted and became preachers of the Gospel, as Luke writes about in [Acts chapter 11](#). It is important to note that through the efforts of those preaching the Gospel, even enemies of God, murders of Jesus and His evangelist Stephen may repent and become His children.

There are many modern heroes of the faith like Stephen of old, this morning I will weave quotes into my message from **Jim Elliot** who was born in 1927 and died in 1956, a life of only 29 years. Jim was an American Christian missionary and one of five men killed during Operation Auca, an attempt to evangelize the Huaorani people of Ecuador. James' wife, Elizabeth, later returned with another team and many of the Huaorani became believers. James said, **“Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me.”** God calls all His children to share the Gospel so people must decide – God or the world – are you living as a “crisis” man confronting the world with Jesus?

Continuing in verse 9, there were Jews from **Alexandria**, a city in northern Egypt, they were also part of this synagogue. There was a large population of Jews in Alexandria, they were influential business people. However, the position of Alexandria's Jewry began deteriorating during the Roman era, as deep antisemitic sentiment began developing amongst the city's Greek, Roman and Egyptian populations. This led to the subsequent Alexandria riot in 66 A.D., which was in parallel with the outbreak of the First-Jewish-Roman War which began during the twelfth year of the reign of Nero as the Jews in Palestine revolted against Rome and it ended in 70 A.D. with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Cilicia [sə-ˈli-sh\(ē-\)ə](#) is the region of Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey on the Mediterranean coast, opposite the island of Cyprus. Cilicia is closely associated with the Apostle Paul, having grown up in Tarsus, the leading city of the area. Roman Asia primarily encompassed the western half of present-day Turkey

Since the Freeman, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians were all from Roman territories some were Roman citizens as well as Jewish, like Saul who became Paul. So, now we have some background to help us understand the people who come against Stephen and charge him with blasphemy.

Jesus' Claim

There are three main concerns from this text I want to address. The **first** comes from verse 14, “[for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place](#) (meaning the temple in Jerusalem) [and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.](#)” This is being labeled ‘**Blasphemy**’ a verbal insult uttered intentionally and malevolently against God Himself, His truth or His Word, revealing the offender’s contempt for God. Blasphemy is expressed in various forms in the Bible, blasphemy can include flagrant actions and disdain for God’s Word, His promises, and His people. Scripture bears consistent witness to the severity of the offense. In the Old Testament, a member of the Israelite community would be put to death for it; in the New Testament, condemnation is said to await one who blasphemes. At this time, Stephen is being judged by the Old Testament for the New has not yet come to be.

This brings to my mind these questions; Did Jesus really say what verse 14 claims? Did Jesus say that he would destroy the temple? Did Jesus say He came to change the customs or laws of Moses?

The **second** concern is, did Stephen say and mean what Jesus said and meant? We do not see Stephen speaking of the destruction of the temple but the people claim Jesus said He will destroy the temple and Stephen is speaking the name of Jesus. Is there a difference in the way these people present the destruction and what Jesus actually said?

Thirdly, did Luke agree with what Jesus and Stephen said and were being accused of saying? If so, why did he say in verse 13 the people set up false witnesses to say that Stephen said these things? If Stephen and Jesus really said that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs of Moses, how was there a need for false witnesses?

Why Does Blasphemy Matter?

Before we tackle the three questions I just posed, there is one more, just by way of introduction, namely; does blasphemy and what happened to Stephen matter? Is this a real concern for us today in the 21st century? I will let you answer this question in your own mind and heart. But as you think about this second half of chapter 6 and blasphemy and the arrest of Stephen, I would ask you to consider three things:

1. Stephen died for the truth that I am about to tell you. In fact, he chose to go on speaking this truth when he knew that it would cost him his life. So, he chose to die rather than not speak about Jesus. Verse 10 says that Stephen spoke with wisdom and with the Spirit. So, he was no fool to choose to die for this truth. We would be fools to say what happened long ago does not affect us today. To give one's life for Jesus is a decision that Christians are growingly being confronted with. Jim Elliot said it this way, **"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."**

2. The Jewish leaders killed people for this truth. They saw it as so threatening that it was better to kill a good man than to let this truth about the destruction of the temple and that the Messiah had arrived than let it spread throughout Jerusalem.
3. The third sign that this is a vital truth for us is that when Luke recorded Stephen's defense in chapter 7, he gives it more space than any other speech or message in the whole book of Acts.

I pray that the Lord will give you a heartfelt assessment of the utter importance of what we are about to hear and how it applies to your life.

Question 1: Did Jesus Really Say These Things?

Did Jesus say that he was going to destroy the temple? **By a show of hands how many think this is a true statement?** See if this is true, first, we go to the gospel accounts of Matthew 26 and **Mark 14:58** were both passages tell us that at Jesus' trial false witnesses came forward and said, "This man, meaning Jesus, said 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" (Mt. 26:61) When the high priest asked Jesus to answer the charge, "**Jesus remained silent.**" (Mt. 26:63) So, from Matthew and Mark there is no evidence Jesus said He would destroy the temple physically, this is only the testimony of liars.

Next, in Matthew 27 and **Mark 15:29** we learn that as the crowds passed by the cross while Jesus hung there dying, they mocked Him saying, "**You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.**" (Mt. 27:40) Here again we have the case of others trying to put words into Jesus' mouth.

Most importantly, in John's Gospel Account, Jesus was cleansing the temple of the money changers and the "Jews said to him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?' ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'²⁰ The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' *John adds this comment* ²¹ *But Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body.'* (John 2:18-21) In this passage Jesus says to the Jews, "If you destroy the temple and I will build it again in 3 days."

But since we know that destroying the temple referred to Jesus' death and we also know from **John chapter 10**, Jesus made clear saying, ¹⁸ "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." Jesus was speaking of His body and He was laying down His life voluntarily. So, we understand Jesus never said He would destroy the temple on the mount.

Well then, what did Jesus mean? Did He simply mean that He would die and then rise again—His body would be destroyed and then raised up in three days? If that is all that Jesus meant, then why did He refer to Himself as the temple? Why would He say words like this in the temple itself, knowing that most people would take Him to refer to the temple building and all that goes on there? The Jewish scholars missed what Jesus meant for they did not have ears that heard. However, for those who had ears to hear and those that thought through the resurrection, which obviously Stephen did, here is what Jesus meant; He was saying when I die, the temple on the mount dies. When I am destroyed, the temple is destroyed. This whole system of temple sacrifices, all this animal blood flowing to atone for sins, all this priestly activity surrounding the holy place where God dwells - it all ends when I die. God will no longer dwell in the temple made by man's hands – God will dwell in every believer, for I have fully paid for their sins. You destroy Me

and in My dying you destroy the temple. In a few short years there will be nothing left of the temple but I and My followers will live forever.

The temple was a shadow of the coming of Jesus and He has taken the place of everything in the temple. This is why the curtain in the temple tore in two as Jesus died. It was a token of the destruction of man-made system of atonement. The walls were coming down. Jesus himself was taking the place of everything in the temple. Jesus coming, His crucifixion and resurrection did indeed destroy the temple for the temple was no longer of God. Jesus destroyed the temple in these ways –

- Jesus became our one and only high priest who lives forever to make intercession for us as seen in [Hebrews chapter 7 verse 25](#). So, the temple priesthood was ended and no longer needed.
- Jesus offered himself and his own blood once for all to make an eternal redemption as revealed in Hebrews chapters 9 and 10 ([Hebrews 9:12, 25-28](#) and [10:10-12](#)). All the animal sacrifices of the temple no longer provided any covering of sin for Jesus was final and complete sacrifice that forgave sin.
- The redemption through Jesus made Him the mercy seat of the temple. ([Romans 3:24-26](#)), and his own blood became the blood of the covenant ([Mark 14:24](#)) for the glory of God; the old shekinah glory of the temple came down and rested on Him and raised Him from the dead ([Romans 6:24](#)). Peter wrote, God “[who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.](#)” ([1 Peter 1:21](#)) Jesus is, as James said in chapter 2 (v. 1) “[the Lord of glory](#)”, so the temple is no longer the place where you go to see the glory of God. Jesus is place. Destroyed and in three days raised up—Jesus is where you go to see the glory of God.

The temple in Jerusalem was “destroyed” by the resurrection of Jesus. It stood as a building made by man but devoid of God until 70 A.D. and then it stood no more. God the Father gave believers a new temple, a new priest, a new sacrifice, a new access to glory and fellowship with God. So, when John the apostle had a vision of heaven in Revelation chapter 21, he says, ²² **“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”**

What is the true meaning of Jesus’ words **“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”**? He was saying, that He himself was taking the place of the temple by dying for sin once for all, and by rising from the dead to reign as the everlasting priest and Lord of glory. When I die, the temple system dies and when I rise, I am the temple. I am the sacrifice for sins. I am the priest and mediator between God the Father and man. I am the presence and radiance of his glory. The temple is finished. So, my answer to the first question is, Jesus said when they killed Him the temple would be destroyed, it would no longer be where God was found; He is the new temple and we are the new temple with the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

Question 2: Did Stephen Mean What Jesus Meant?

Now the second question is; did Stephen mean what Jesus meant when he carried this teaching on into the early church?

The reason I ask this is because verse 14 seems to imply that Stephen was saying that the destruction is still future, but Jesus had said the destruction would happen immediately and the rebuilding would take place in three days. Verse 14 reads, “for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” Stephen is saying that it will happen. Jesus said it is done in three days after He died.

How shall we understand this? It is not difficult. What Jesus meant was that the basis of the Old Testament sacrificial, priestly, worship system, which focused on the temple, was destroyed when He died, it was destroyed the way a shadow is destroyed when the reality lies down on it and takes its place. Jesus removed the whole basis of the temple system by laying himself down as the reality that all the shadows were representing. In that sense the destruction was complete in three days, and He rose as the new temple for all who trust him.

But what Stephen had to deal with was the dismantling of the old temple system and this did not happen overnight. It was happening gradually. This puts a whole new slant on Acts chapter 6, verse 7 from last week, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” One thing Stephen’s faith shows is echoed by Jim Elliot, “Wherever you are, be all there! Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God.” Would you say this statement has been true of your life?

What this really means is Jesus brought a new dynamic and the preaching of the Gospel brought a great many priests to be believers and a greater number of

priests began losing their jobs as the temple system began to collapse and within about 35 years not one stone stood upon another – the temple was completely destroyed. A great many priests came to believe that Jesus is the One and only High Priest, and will never die, and all Christians are priests in His service.

So, what Stephen meant when he said that Jesus “will destroy” the temple, is that, just as Jesus took away the basis of the old system, so now He will go on to dismantle its practices until it is no more. Stephen and Jesus are in perfect harmony on this great issue. The temple is done for. Jesus has destroyed it and He is the One and only High Priest to God, and the One and only habitation of the fullness of the glory of God. For Stephen what Jim Elliot would voice thousands of years later had meaning, “**Lord, make my way prosperous not that I achieve high station, but that my life be an exhibit to the value of knowing God.**”

Question 3: Did Luke Agree With Jesus and Stephen?

Finally, I ask, did Luke agree with what Jesus and Stephen said? I ask this because Luke says in verse 13 that the people set up false witnesses to say that Stephen said these things, “**and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.”**” In what sense were the witnesses false? Did Luke not think Jesus and Stephen said with the death and resurrection of Jesus the temple would be destroyed and its sacrificial systems and physical destruction would continue until within a few short years it was completely destroyed and thus, changing the customs of Moses? Luke knew these things to be true. Here are a few examples why I say this about Luke:

- In Acts chapter 15, verse 1, Luke reports the controversy over circumcision. Some were teaching, “**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**” The ‘custom of Moses’ are the same words

used in chapter 6, verse 14. Chapter 15 continues with the Apostles addressing this issue and they said the Holy Spirit had shown them there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile for all believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. The custom of Moses was no longer required.

- Another example is found in Acts 10 where Luke tells us about the vision Peter had just before he was called to go minister to Gentiles - whom he considered unclean according to the Mosaic food laws. The vision showed “unclean” animals and Jesus’ voice from heaven said, **“Kill and eat”** ¹⁴ **But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.’** ¹⁵ **And the voice came to him again a second time, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’** (Acts 10:14-15) In other words, just as Jesus had already stated, **“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?”** (Thus he declared all foods clean.)” (Mark 7:18-19) The customs of Moses were no longer necessary.

So, I conclude that Luke knows very well that Stephen and the others were preaching these kinds of things and telling the Jewish people that the temple system is obsolete and with it some of the customs of Moses belong to the past. They have served their purpose in making Israel distinct. But now the people of God are no longer of Israel alone. It is people from every tribe and tongue and nation - all who trust in Jesus.

Jim Elliot was much like Stephen, **“Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me.”** Are our lives

exhibiting Jesus to the point that those who come in contact with us face the crisis decision of accepting for rejecting Jesus?

The Messiah has come down from heaven, with forgiveness and advocacy and glory, and the light of God shining upon Jesus, then the first thing that will be seen is His shadow on the earth and so it was in the sacrifices and priestly service of the old temple. But as the reality of His second coming gets closer the shadow becomes smaller, and when the reality lands on its shadow, it swallows it up entirely and it is no more. But that does not mean that the reality was against the shadow or that it blasphemed the shadow. It fulfilled the shadow and, in this sense, Jesus destroyed the shadow.

Stephen saw the Jewish religion had become a religion of man and Christ came to fix the problem. Jim Elliot saw the Church of Christ was becoming a church of man, so he said, “We are so utterly ordinary, so commonplace, while we profess to know a Power the Twentieth Century does not reckon with. But we are ‘harmless’, and therefore unharmed. We are spiritual pacifists, non-militants, conscientious objectors in this battle-to-the-death with principalities and powers in high places. Meekness must be had for contact with men, but brass, outspoken boldness is required to take part in the comradeship of the Cross. We are ‘sideliners’ -- coaching and criticizing the real wrestlers while content to sit by and leave the enemies of God unchallenged. The world cannot hate us, we are too much like its own. Oh, that God would make us dangerous!” I pray God’s Holy Spirit will make me and you as dangerous as Stephen and Jim and the heroes of faith throughout the history of the church.

So, today we have the reality. Jesus Christ has come into the world to forgive sins once and for all, to be our mediator between believers and God the Father forever and ever, and to reveal the glory of God.

This is what Stephen died for. May God help us to see the purpose of our lives the way Stephen saw his purpose, and cherish Jesus our new temple more than anything in the world. Jim Elliot understood what Stephen understood, saying “I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you Lord Jesus.” My beloved, may we have a spiritually full life bringing glory to God! Amen!