

# Acts 7:17-34

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/acts/acts-7/acts-717-34/>

*Stephen continues his sermon recounting the history of his people. The time of the Hebrews' bondage had come. A Pharaoh rose to power and feared these people, so he enslaved them. Moses, a Hebrew raised in the Egyptian court, tried to help the Hebrews when he saw an Egyptian abusing them. He killed the Egyptian in defense of the Hebrews. But the Hebrews rejected Moses, so he fled east to Midian and started a family there. God appeared to Moses in the form of an angel standing in a burning thorn bush. God reveals Himself as the God of the patriarchs of the Hebrews: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The time has come to rescue the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt.*

Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy Pharisees and Sadducees, and the High Priest. The charge against Stephen is that he is an enemy of the Temple and the Law of Moses. But Stephen is taking this opportunity, led by the Spirit, to confront these religious leaders. He gives a sermon that summarizes relevant sections of the Old Testament, answering the accusations against him concerning the Temple and Moses and leading up to a confrontation with the ruling council's rejection of the truth.

He has talked through the history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, and Joseph, and now describes the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt.

*But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the time of bondage in a foreign land (v. 6), the people of Israel increased and multiplied in Egypt.*

God always makes good from bad (Romans 8:28). Abraham's household was nomadic and ultimately, by the end of his grandson Jacob's life, the tribe only added up to seventy-five people (including servants) when they immigrated to Egypt (Acts 7:14). It is difficult to build a nation with a nomadic lifestyle. The population has insufficient density. But in Egypt it was a river culture, so the people of Israel were able to concentrate in a small area and build up to be a great nation.

At some point, *there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.* It no longer mattered that Joseph had helped preserve the lives of thousands for seven years of famine due to his planning, while he served as a governor. Rather, this new pharaoh merely sees that he has this large and growing workforce of non-Egyptians, the Israelites. It seems he reasoned that this increasing number of foreigners can either become a threat or an asset., so he enslaves them. *It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers.*

This new Pharaoh that arose was apparently concerned that the Israelite population would grow too large and become a threat, even though they were slaves. So he ordered the midwives to *expose their infants* so that *they would not survive.* The Pharaoh wanted the male children destroyed, because he feared the vast numbers of the Israelites and worried they might rise up

and fight against Egypt (Exodus 1:10, 1:22). If he killed the males, he would eliminate the potential for fighting men.

The Israelites became so numerous that he instructed the Israeli midwives to *expose* the babies so that they wouldn't live. One of the ways they would do this was to take the babies to the Nile and leave them there to die. This brings Stephen's narrative to Moses: *It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.*

*And after Moses had been set outside in a basket among the reeds, Pharaoh's daughter found him, took him away and nurtured him as her own son. Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, he was given the most elite upbringing and education among one of the most powerful nations of that age, so that he became a man of power in words and deeds. God prepared Israel as a nation, and He prepared Moses as a leader of that nation even in the midst of suffering and slavery.*

*But when Moses was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.*

Apparently Moses knew he was an Israelite, though this fact was hidden from Pharaoh, even though Moses was raised in his household. Pharaoh's daughter knew that the baby she found was an Israelite, since the order had been given to drown Israelite male infants in the Nile (Exodus 2:6). Furthermore, Moses's mother served as his nurse and raised him until he was old enough to be weaned and adopted by the Egyptian princess (Exodus 2:7-10). Moses and his brother Aaron seemed to know one another already when God called them to confront Pharaoh (Exodus 4:27). Somehow he was able to retain his identity as a Hebrew while being raised by Pharaoh's daughter.

*But when Moses visited his brethren, the sons of Israel, he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.*

Moses thought he had done something heroic by *striking down the Egyptian* in defense of the Israelite. He already had a sense that his people were *oppressed* by the Egyptians, but he saw this oppression only as an outsider, *and he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.* They interpreted Moses's action, possibly, as random violence done by another Egyptian.

Stephen points out that *they did not understand* Moses' intentions. Despite the wrongness of his killing an Egyptian, Moses was beginning to look to his own people and see them as needing salvation from slavery. Moses was a forerunner of Christ's, and was obviously still a deeply flawed man, as are all humans. But he sought to save his people, just as Christ came to do for the Jewish people.

*On the following day Moses appeared to the Israelites again and witnessed two of them fighting together. He tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?'*

His fellow Israelites fear him and challenge his approach: *But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?'*

*At this remark, Moses fled.* He thought his murder had been done secretly, that he had gotten away with it. But the fact that others knew what he had done terrified him, so he *fled and became an alien in the land of Midian*, to escape punishment for his crime. *Midian* was a country east of Egypt and south of Canaan, populated by the Midianites, descendants of Abraham's son, *Midian* (Genesis 25:2). There in the land of *Midian*, *Moses* married and *became the father of two sons*.

So Moses too was rejected. Just as Joseph was rejected and exiled. Moses is rejected by his own countrymen, and pushed out from their midst, but God will call him, bring him back, and through him deliver the Israelites. Israel did not recognize Moses as their deliverer. They rejected Joseph as firstborn over them, but he "rose again" and saved them. They rejected Moses as their deliverer, but he went away for a long time then returned and delivered them. Jesus is the second Joseph and the second Moses. He is God's firstborn that the Jewish leaders rejected. He is Israel's deliverer that they are rejecting.

*After forty years of living in Midian*, God speaks to Moses. An *angel*, a messenger from God, appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush.

God and His angelic messengers often appear with fire. God appeared as a flaming torch when He made the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:17). When God leads the Israelites through the wilderness, He moves in the shape of a pillar of fire during the night to show them the way (Exodus 40:38). God speaks from the midst of fire on Mt. Sinai when giving the Law to Israel (Deuteronomy 4:11-12). Fire is symbolic of judgement, of something dangerous and powerful, something that tests the strength of what it burns, yet is also an element that provides light and warmth.

*When Moses saw the flame of the burning thorn bush*, He is amazed. He *marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:*

*'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.'* *Moses* shook with fear and would not venture to look.

In Exodus 4, when this encounter happens, Moses asks God how he is to persuade the Israelites that their God is revealing Himself to them, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?'" (Exodus 3:13). This seems to indicate that the Israelites had all but forgotten about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or at least were not actively worshipping or praying to Him. For the rest of Moses's life, he will be educating the Israelites and establishing to them who God is and what He requires of His people. Moses is a bridge between man and God, and will mediate the covenant which God will make with the Israelites, just as Jesus has mediated the new covenant between God and us (Hebrews 9:15).

*But the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'*

The *Lord* speaks to *Moses*, telling him that the *ground* surrounding the burning bush, where *Moses* is *standing*, is *holy ground*. *Moses* needs to *take off* his *sandals* from his *feet* out respect for the *holy* presence of *the Lord*. God reveals that He is not ignorant of the Hebrew people's suffering. He says, *I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'*

He has both *seen* and *heard* the *oppression* of His *people*. The time has come to *rescue* His people, to redeem them from their slavery and misery. The time of their bondage has ended. Thus He is sending to them *Moses* to be His agent of salvation, and through *Moses*' obedience to God, the Israelites will be saved from their desperate condition. That He will *send* *Moses* correlates with the definition of a Messiah, a "sent one" from God. A deliverer whom the Israelites formerly rejected, *Who made you a ruler and judge over us? You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?*

Stephen tells all of this to the Sanhedrin, who accused him of speaking "against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6:13-14).

Stephen is showing them that he is quite informed on *Moses* and his legacy. Stephen knows the saviors of the Old Testament which God sent to Israel, all of whom were rejected by the people they meant to save. He also knows the ultimate savior, Jesus, whom the Pharisees and Sadducees rejected to the point of killing Him. He will soon make the connection that he, Stephen, is accepting God's firstborn and God's deliverer, Jesus, the second Joseph and the second *Moses*, while the council is rejecting Him, just as their fathers rejected Joseph and *Moses*.

## **Biblical Text**

**17 "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18 until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. 19 It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. 20 It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. 21 And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22 Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. 23 But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26 On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are**

brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? 28 You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?' 29 At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. 30 "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush. 31 When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33 But the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.'