

The Acts of the Holy Spirit and the early church

June 1st, 2014 Stephen's message, Part 10

Idol worship and continued rejection of God



Acts 7:37-43 (New International Version)

This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.' He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us. "But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. 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!' 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.

Let us now remember just what it was that brought Stephen to this point at what we know will soon be the end of his life here on earth. The charges that were brought against this great man of God although frivolous were nevertheless very serious in the minds of his accusers.

The charges against Stephen were that:

- 1) He spoke blasphemous things against Moses and against God.**
- 2) He spoke blasphemous words against the Holy Place and the Law.**
- 3) He said that Jesus would 'destroy this place' (the Temple), and change the customs of Moses which he delivered to them.**

So God's people having had to wait in faith for God to work, had previously as well as presently, rejected God's deliverers, and had then been able to give thanks because the deliverer had in God's sovereign will come again into prominence. Thus was Stephen to be seen as Moses' champion, not as a blasphemer against him.

Keep in mind that these same Jewish Leaders, also did in fact remember that it was their very own people, not the Gentiles that first rejected the Word of the Lord as given through one of their most valued people in history, that of Moses himself.

Stephen couldn't be accused of being one who thought the law was some kind of a dead issue. He believed it was living truth from the mouth of God. So Stephen defends himself against the charge that he was a blasphemer of the law. He recognizes God as the author, angels as the mediator and Moses as the recipient. So he acknowledges his belief in the law. It was God's law. It wasn't a dead law. It was a living, powerful revelation from a living, powerful God. That's not blasphemy.

Back to the future:



Notice that the New Testament church doesn't start until the Day of Pentecost, for there was no church in the wilderness as we know it today. The word used here in Acts for the church is the Greek word, ecclesia. It's a term that means to call out, or more specifically "the called-out ones".

The reason why God calls the group of Israelites the called-out ones is because they were called out of Egypt, not because they were the body of Christ, the church. So let's call them a called-out congregation, an early aspect of what our church should be today, that being a group of like-minded people called out and separated by God.

It's hard to understand that even after all the proofs of God's miraculous powers given in Egypt, and at the Red sea, these recently free people of God now acting more senseless and ungrateful than ever before. After waiting a mere 430 years, you would think that they would be so excited to get away from Egypt that they would be willing to endure anything!

But how wrong we would be to think that, for even after physically seeing all the great miracles of God right in front of their faces, they both in their hearts and affections and intentions are going back to slavery and torture, simply because just like any long term prisoner knows, it's easy to get conditioned to a routine, even if that schedule involved physical abuse. **Bible teacher and Pastor of Grace Community Church in California, Dr. John MacArthur** writes the following on these stubborn people:

They preferred their garlic and onions there, rather than the manna they daily received under the conduct of Moses, and the milk and honey they hoped for in Canaan. They murmured at Moses, mutinied against him, refused to obey his orders, and sometimes were ready to stone him.

These people having been living in a pagan society for the last four centuries really started believing in many gods of human creation, rather than the One true God. So, it really should not be that hard to believe, although I still shake my head at the thought of creating a golden calf as not only a god for the Israelites to worship, but also to prove to the Egyptians that they were willing to take back the old ways and forsake their new way. Let's look at the words of God as spoken through the prophet of Nehemiah, about what a good and loving God we serve today:

Nehemiah 9:9-21 (NIV)

You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for

you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.

You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.

Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

Joseph Benson (1749–1821) was an early English Methodist minister, one of the leaders of the Christian movement during the time of John Wesley. Below is Mr. Benson's take on the time when Moses went to be with God, and the people of Israel forgot about how much God had done for them:

Those very days in which they continued encamped in that remarkable situation; and offered sacrifice unto the senseless and dead idol — Which could neither see nor hear, nor take any notice of the worship offered to it; and rejoiced in the work of their own hands — In the god they had made, as if, instead of being a reproach and abomination, it had been an ornament and defense to them. Nay, so proud were they of their new god, that, after they had sat down to eat and drink, they rose up to play before it, and in honor of it.

Aaron and Hur, the co-regents of Israel:

Moses understood that his stay on the mountain was about to be a prolonged one. He therefore prudently determined to make arrangements for the government and direction of the people during his absence. This was to be Aaron his brother, and Hur, the father of Bezaleel, perhaps as some historians believe, his brother-in-law, seemed to him the fittest persons to exercise authority over the people during his absence. Some make Aaron the ecclesiastical head, and Hur the civil head, but we really don't know their respective gifts.

Exodus 24:13-17 (NIV)

*Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. **Aaron and Hur** are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them." When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.*

In talking specifically to the elders, Moses is giving directions to the seventy elders chosen out of the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses is not speaking to the 2 plus million total people that now resided in the wilderness under God's direction, but just the leadership team so to speak. It is not surprising, however, that, when the difficulty arose, we see that it was Aaron alone who was consulted.

Now the thinking behind the leaders going to Aaron might be because Aaron had been joint-leader with Moses from the first, and Hur had only very recently been advanced into a position of authority. It also could have been as some believe that Hur was stronger in his faith and belief toward God, while Aaron might have been easier to convince to do this dastardly deed.

In our many studies together throughout the years, I have often delved into traditional stories to help explain some thinking behind some of the texts in Scripture. Now there is a story told in Jewish tradition of the events surrounding this ordeal between Moses and the Jewish leadership.

When Moses went up on high, he said to the Israelites, at the end of forty days, at the beginning of the sixth hour I will come; at the end of forty days came Satan, and disturbed the world; he said to them, where is Moses your master? They answered him, he is gone up on high: Satan said to them, the sixth hour is come; they took no notice of him; for he is dead (says he); they had no regard to him;

The Golden calf:

In the Hebrew, This incident is known as *hēt' ha'ēggel* (חַטַּאת־הַעֲגֹל) or "The Sin of the Calf". The Scripture indicates that this was literally a young bull, literally, in the Greek. Indication of...the young bull would be the fact that the Egyptians worshipped Apis and Mnevis, two bulls. The history of this worship was that one bull was supposed to be Osiris reincarnated while the other was the sun god Ra reincarnated.

There is a school of thought that believes that Aaron may in fact have tried to stop these Jewish leaders and the people of Israel in the creation of this golden monstrosity, in what would be a very underhanded kind of ridiculous way, as if gods of Aaron's making, though of gold, would be sufficient to supply the place of Moses, or rather, of Jehovah God, imagine that!!

These historians believe that Aaron tried to get them not to do this thing by making it so expensive that they would refuse to part with all their golden plunder just recently acquired from Egypt. **Bible theologian and historian John Gill**, notes the following:

This is a proof of their disobedience to the law of Moses, and of their rejection of him, and of the inclination of their hearts to the idolatry of the Egyptians; which shows the gross stupidity, as well as ingratitude of this people, to think that gods could be made; and that those that are made could go before them, be guides unto them, and protectors of them; when they have eyes, but see not, and hands, but handle not, and feet, but walk not:

Now reading this many years after the fact kinda takes away some of the emphasis that Stephen was coming across with. Notice how he is just absolutely indicting the land of Israel and the nation of Israel for rejecting God all the way through history. They rejected God, They rejected Joseph. They rejected Moses. They rejected His law. And now notice the heartfelt feelings of God facing rejection as Moses was coming down off the mountain,

Exodus 32:9-14 (NIV)

I have seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?

Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in

the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever. Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster He had threatened.

So after Moses prays and God relents, however with a slight case of getting rid of the worst of the bunch you know. And notice that God didn't do it to save His reputation. God did it because He's gracious, merciful and kind. So God said, "I'll only slay 3,000, and let the rest live." But none of the rest ever entered the Promised Land, for all they did was live 40 years wandering all over the place while God provided for their needs both night and day.

Now we see that the Sanhedrin is claiming that they are the ones who actually love God and His law, and saying that Stephen, you hate the law." And Stephen says, "Oh, look at your history. Who are you kidding. This is one of the reasons that Stephen was stoned, for his unwillingness to compromise God's message, that being it does not matter what your race or nationality or heritage is, you can't rest on tradition to save you. Notice that even years later, the King of Israel, **Jeroboam** again brings out idol worship in the form of Golden Calves.

1 Kings 12:26–30 (NIV)

Jeroboam thought to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam." After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other.

In Closing:

The late great musician **Keith Green** really had the pulse of these ingrate Israelites, when he penned his lyrics of his song, **(So you want to go back to Egypt)** It sure reminds us of how easy falling off the wagon, or getting back into drugs, or whatever sinful lifestyle we were in, is truly hard to break away from. Only with the Lord God in our life and on our side can we survive.

So you wanna go back to Egypt, where it's warm and secure.

Are you sorry you bought the one-way ticket when you thought you were sure?

You wanted to live in the Land of Promise, but now it's getting so hard.

Are you sorry you're out here in the desert, instead of your own backyard?

Well there's nothing to do but travel, and we sure travel a lot.

'Cause it's hard to keep your feet from moving when the sand gets so hot.

And in the morning it's manna hotcakes. We snack on manna all day.

And they sure had a winner last night for dinner, flaming manna soufflé.

**Well I'm having so much trouble even now.
Why'd he get so mad about that cow, that golden cow.
Moses, he seems rather idle, he just sits around and writes the Bible.**