

RELEARNING ANCIENT BIBLE STORIES IN A BRAND-NEW WAY

EPIC TALES

TOO



The martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 6-8



Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve [addition of Matthias] summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables [food]. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of **good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom**, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” Acts 6:1-4

*A problem developed in the church’s program of providing for its needy widows. There were natives of Israel who spoke Aramaic. There were also Hellenists, Greek-speaking Jews who originated outside Israel but now had come to reside in Jerusalem. All were Jewish believers in Jesus. The problem arose because the Aramaic-speaking apostles were responsible for the food distribution to all the Christian widows. The Greek-speaking widows were being neglected because of the language barrier. - Holman Concise Bible Commentary

The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and **they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit**, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte [a Gentile convert to Judaism] from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. **The word of God kept on spreading**; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the [Jewish] priests were becoming obedient to the faith. Acts 6:5-7

And Stephen, **full of grace and power**, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men [not followers of Jesus] from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians [north Africa], and some from Cilicia [location of Tarsus, Saul/Paul's hometown] and Asia [modern day Turkey], rose up and argued with Stephen. But **they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.** Acts 6:8-10

Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council [Sanhedrin]. Acts 6:11-12



They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks 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.” And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council [the 71 members of Sanhedrin] saw his face like the face of an angel. Acts 6:13-15

- Although Yeshua did not say that He personally would destroy the Temple, He did correctly predict its destruction, see Matthew 24:2 and Luke 21:6.**
- Stephen has been charged with having taught against Moses, God, the Temple and the Torah... everything Judaism stands for. – Jewish New Testament Commentary**

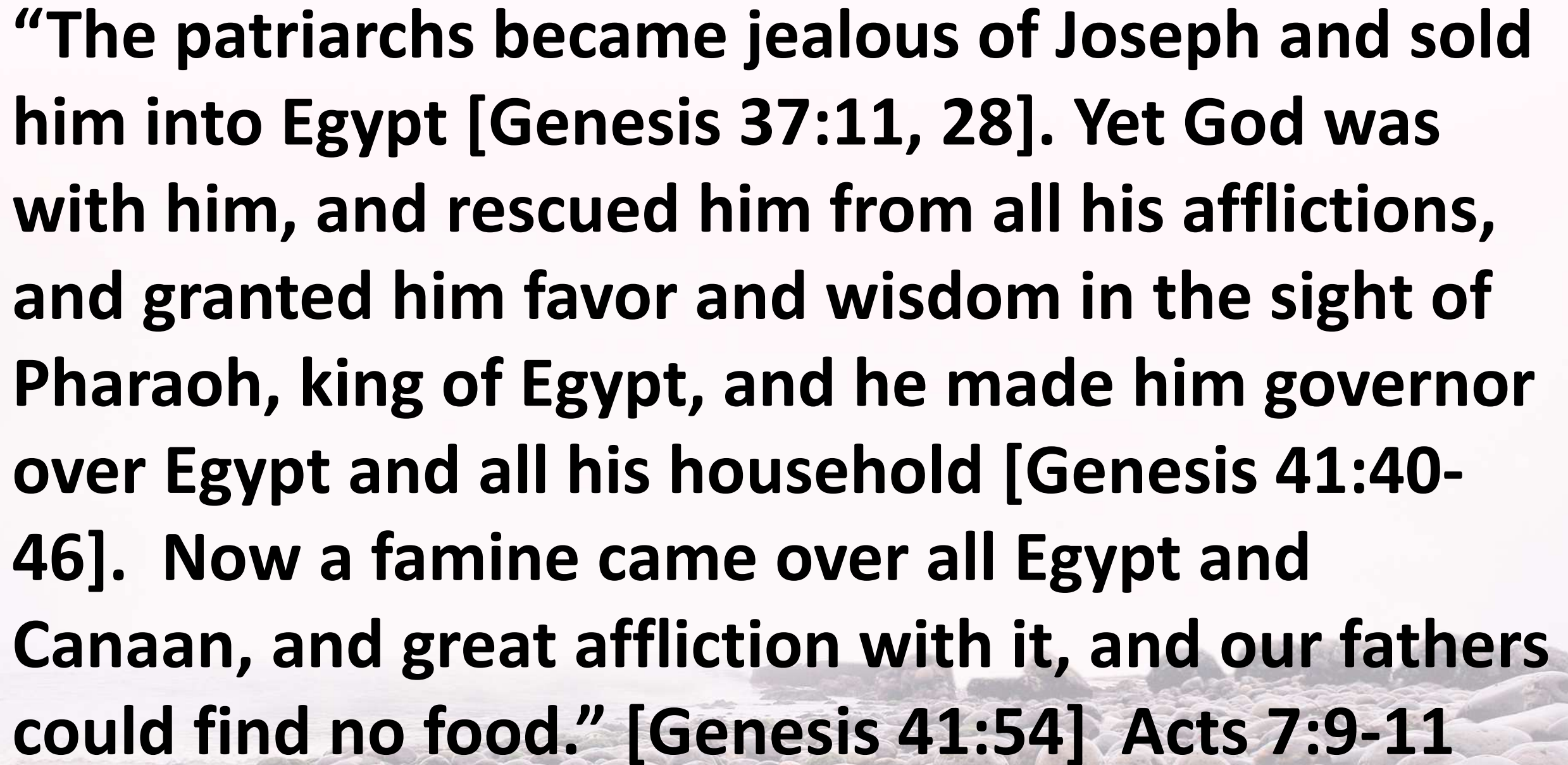
Stephen's speech, the longest in the Book of Acts, can be divided into five main sections.

- 1. The Promises to Abraham (Acts 7:2–8)**
- 2. The Deliverance through Joseph (Acts 7:9–16)**
- 3. The Deliverance through Moses (Acts 7:17–34)**
- 4. The Spiritual Struggles of Israel (Acts 7:35–50)**
- 5. The Coming of the Promised Messiah (Acts 7:51–53)**

The high priest [possibly Caiaphas] said, “Are these things so?” And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers [fellow Jews]! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia [Ur of the Chaldees], before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ [Genesis 12:1] Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.” Acts 7:1-4

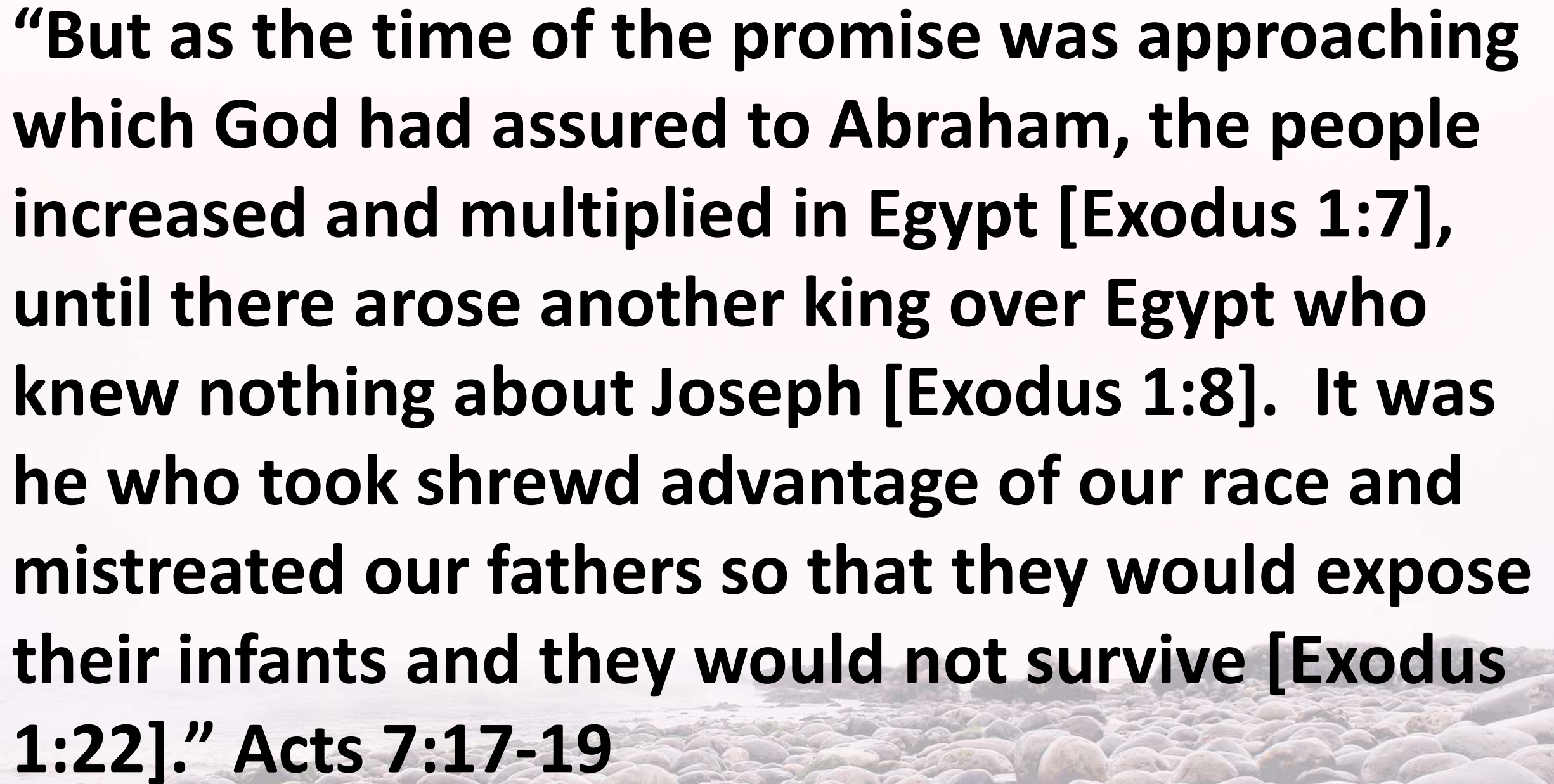
“But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him. But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years [in Egypt]. ‘And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge,’ said God, ‘and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.’ [Genesis 12:7, 15:18, 17:8] And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac [Genesis 21:2-4], and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.” Acts 7:5-8

“The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt [Genesis 37:11, 28]. Yet God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household [Genesis 41:40-46]. Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.” [Genesis 41:54] Acts 7:9-11



“But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. [Genesis 42:2] On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh [Genesis 45:1-4]. Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died [Genesis 46:1-7]. From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.” Acts 7:12-16

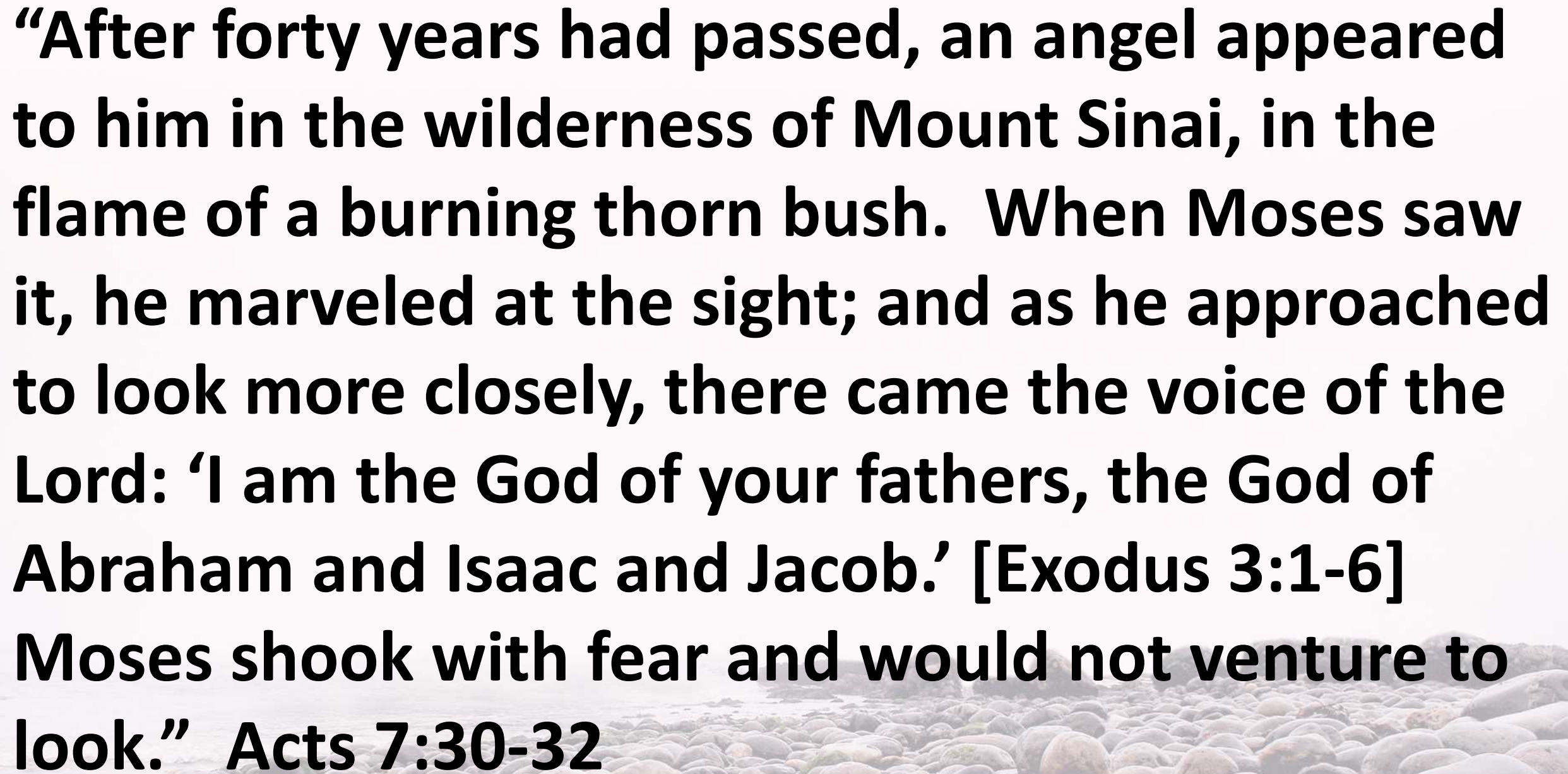
“But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt [Exodus 1:7], until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph [Exodus 1:8]. It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive [Exodus 1:22].” Acts 7:17-19



“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 [Exodus 2:2]. And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. [Exodus 2:10] Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian [Exodus 2:11-14].” Acts 7:20-24

“And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 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?’ 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?’ [Exodus 2:14] At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.” [Gershom and Eliezer, Exodus 2:22, 18:4] Acts 7:25-29

“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush. When Moses saw it, 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.’ [Exodus 3:1-6] Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.” Acts 7:30-32



“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.’ [Exodus 3:10] This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.” Acts 7:33-36

“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.’ [Deuteronomy 18:15, 18] This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles [Torah] to pass on to you. Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what happened to him.’ At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.” [Exodus 32] Acts 7:37-41

“But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the [minor] prophets, ‘It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.’” [Amos 5:25-27] Acts 7:42-43

“Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. [Exodus 25:40] And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. David found favor in God’s sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.” [2 Samuel 7:8-12]

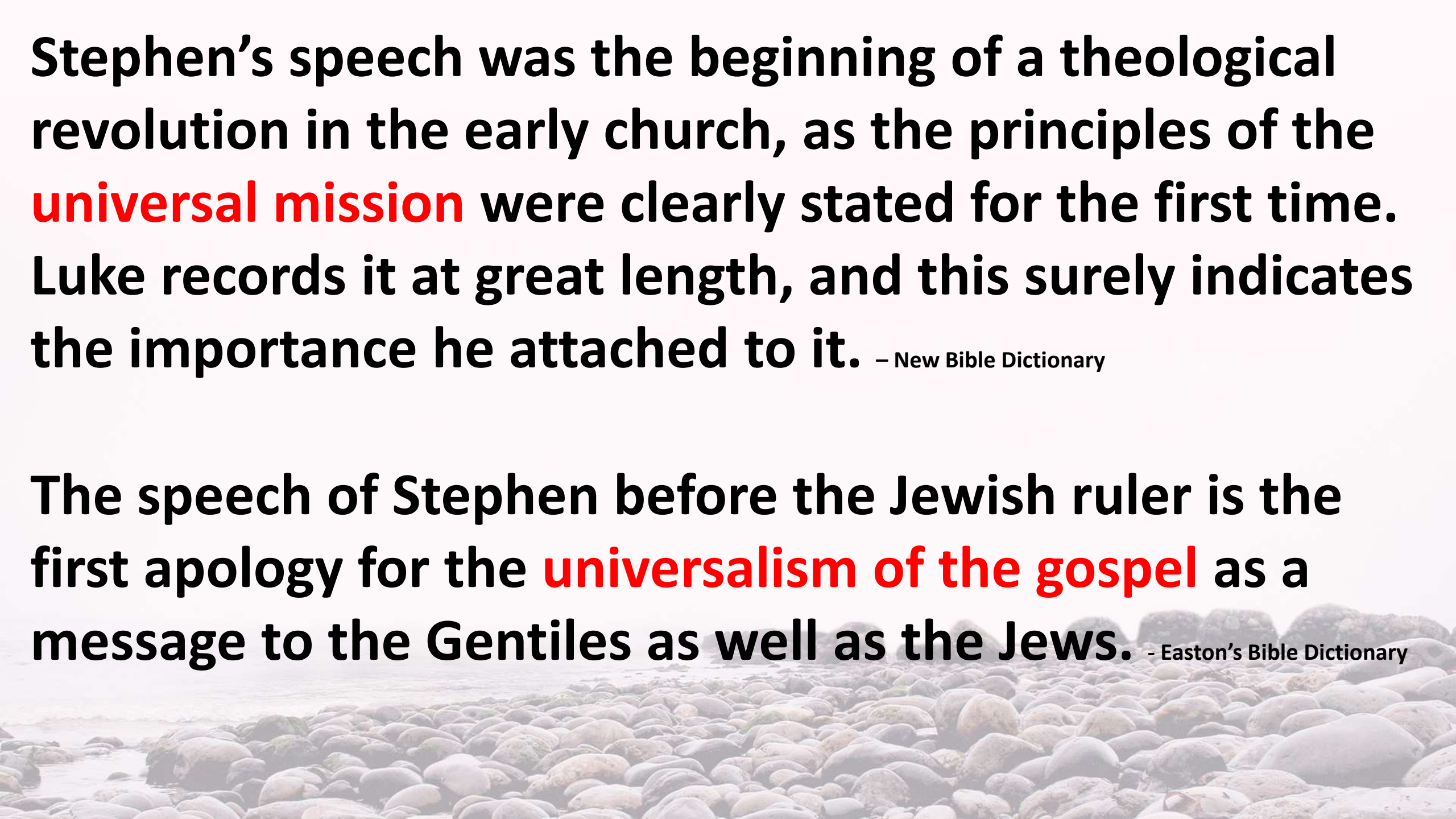
Acts 7:44-46

“But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. [2 Samuel 7:13] However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord, ‘Or what place is there for My repose? Was it not My hand which made all these things?’ [Isaiah 66:1] You men who are **stiff-necked [Exodus 32:9, 33:3, 33:5; Deuteronomy 9:6, 9:13] and **uncircumcised in heart and ears** [Leviticus 26:41, Deuteronomy 10:16, Jeremiah 6:10, Jeremiah 9:26, Ezekiel 44:7, 44:9] are **always resisting the Holy Spirit**; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”**

Acts 7:47-53

Stephen's speech was the beginning of a theological revolution in the early church, as the principles of the **universal mission** were clearly stated for the first time. Luke records it at great length, and this surely indicates the importance he attached to it. – New Bible Dictionary

The speech of Stephen before the Jewish ruler is the first apology for the **universalism of the gospel** as a message to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. – Easton's Bible Dictionary



Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But **being full of the Holy Spirit**, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man [title for Messiah given in Daniel 7:13-14] standing at the right hand of God.” [quoting Jesus in Mark 14:62]

Acts 7:54-56

*Jesus at God’s right hand in heaven – see Psalm 110:1; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22

But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.

[1 Thessalonians 4:13, 15] Acts 7:57-60

Where did Stephen learn this kind of faith?

- **Nebuchadnezzar said, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?” Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”**

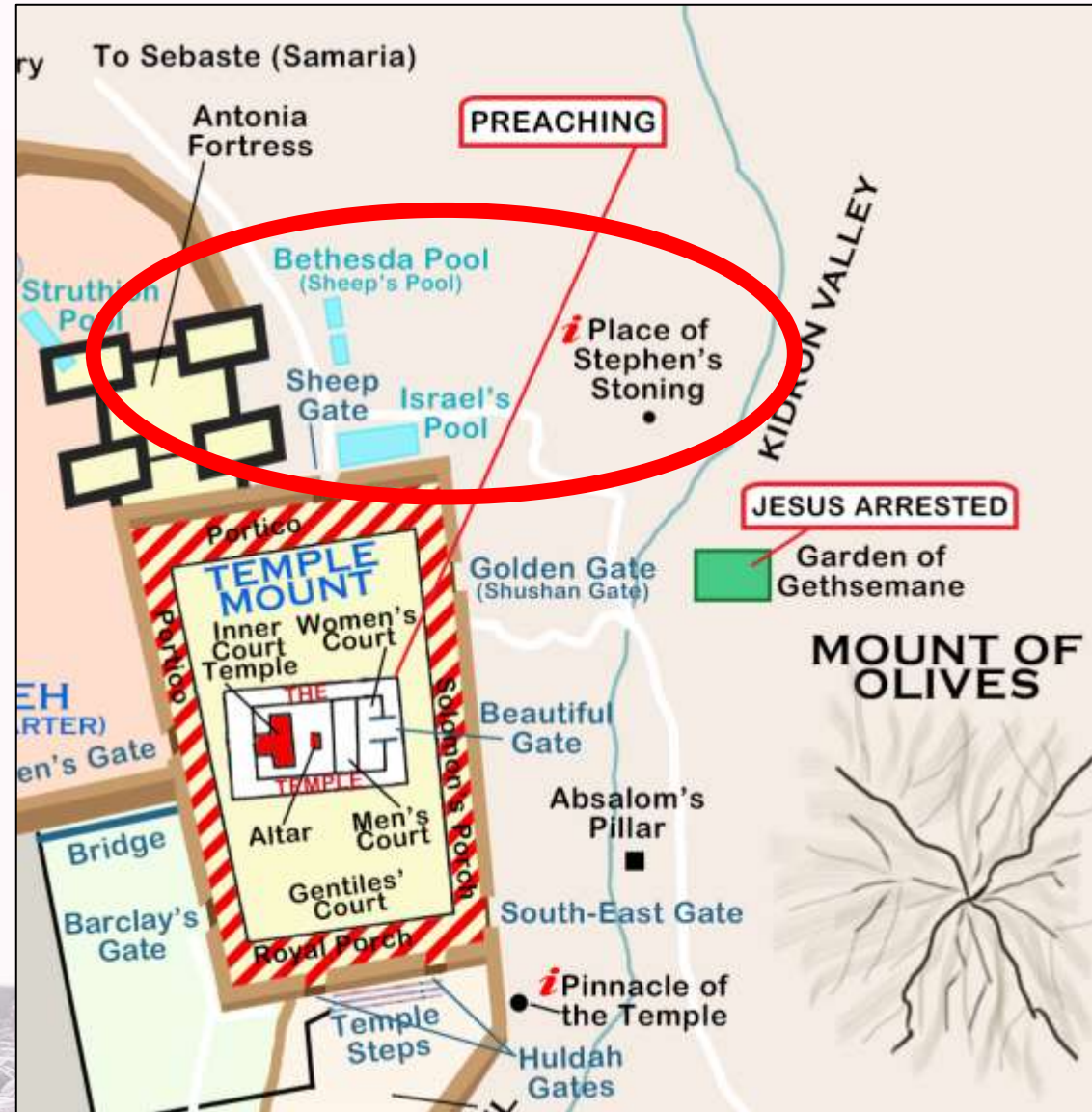
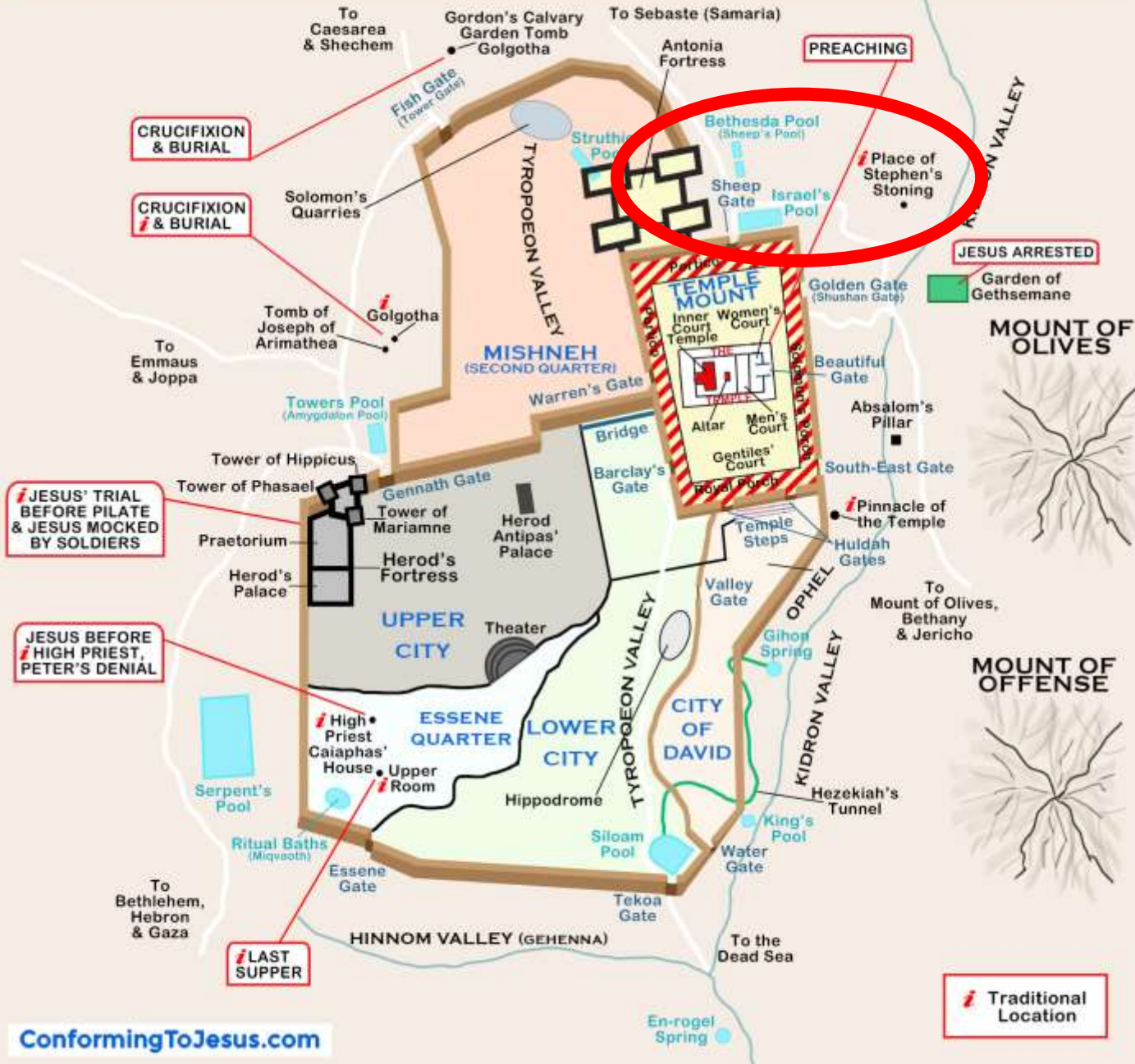
Daniel 3:14, 16-18

- **Jesus said on the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34**



The Stoning of Saint Stephen is the first signed painting by Dutch artist Rembrandt, painted in 1625 at the age of 19. It is currently kept in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

JERUSALEM IN THE TIME OF JESUS

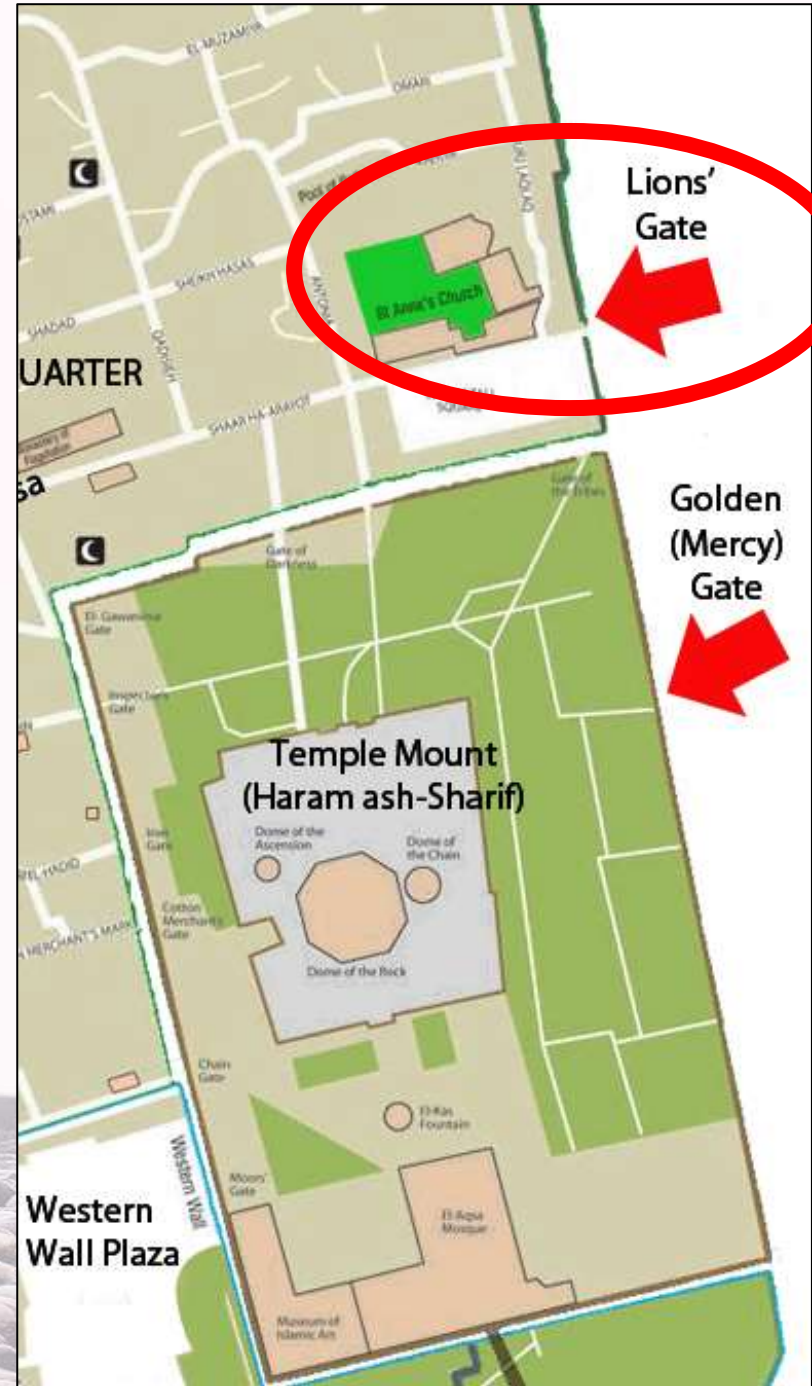
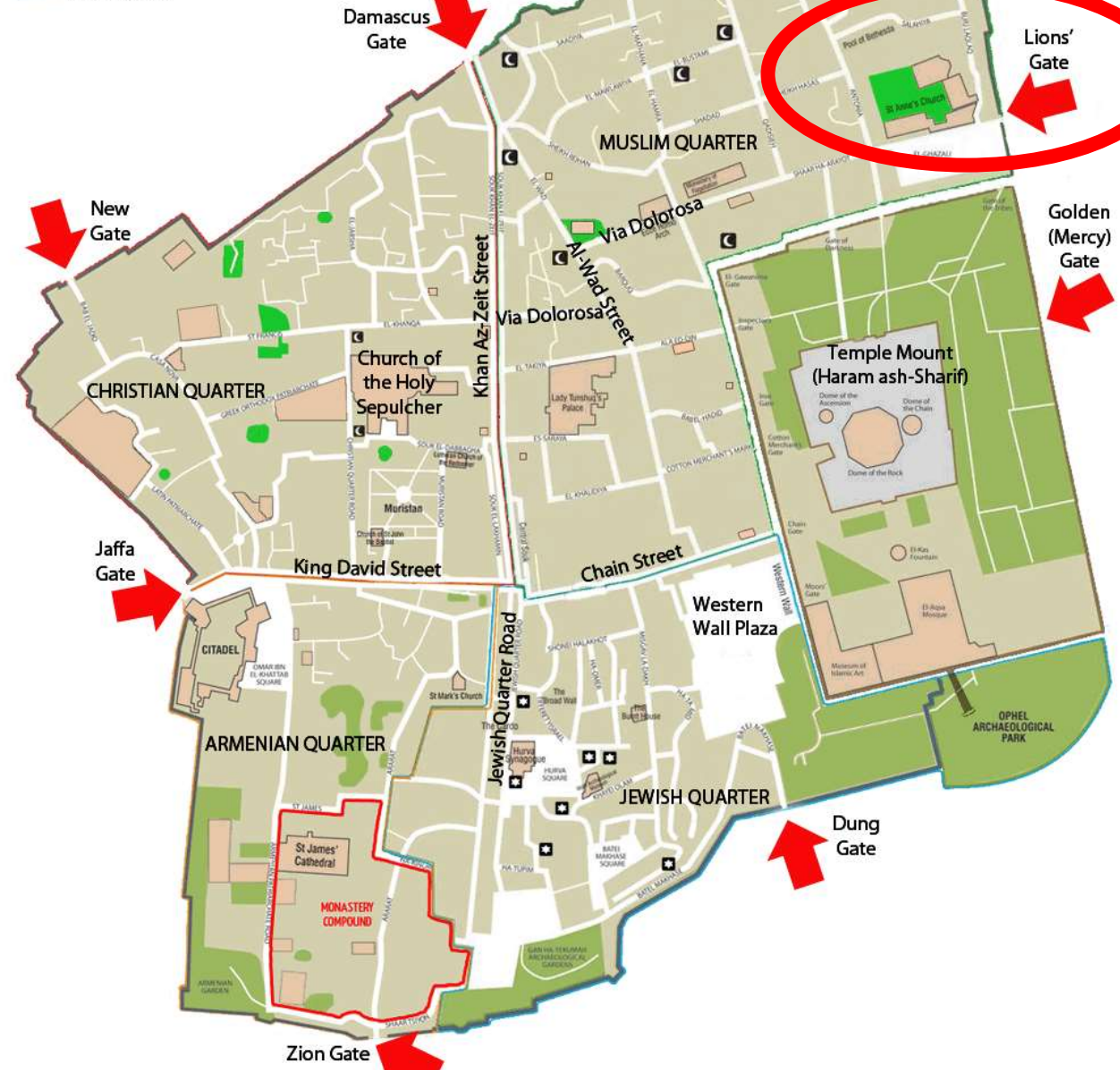


JERUSALEM OLD CITY

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Old City Gates & Walls

— Old City Walls







Scholars are divided as to whether Stephen was formally sentenced to stoning, the customary Jewish method of execution, or whether he died by mob violence. The latter seems more likely. Under the Romans, the Jews could not carry out executions. What began as a formal trial deteriorated into a lynch mob, so furious were the Jewish leaders at Stephen's words.

We call Stephen the first Christian "martyr." The word martyr comes from the Greek word martus, which means "witness." Like all martyrs, Stephen was a witness to his Lord, even to the death.

- Holman Concise Bible Commentary

Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great **persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Acts 8:1-3**

- **Two things directly resulted from Stephen's martyrdom. First, the Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted and scattered. The apostles and the rest of the Aramaic-speaking church seem to have remained in the city. It was the Hellenists, Stephen's fellow Greek-speaking Christians, who had to flee. Among them was Philip, who proceeded to Samaria. Second, Saul came forth as the prime persecutor of the Christians. He too was a Greek-speaking Jew. His life was soon to change radically (see Acts 9). - Holman Concise Bible Commentary**

What happened later?

What was Stephen's legacy?

So then those who were scattered because of the **persecution** [Greek word θλίψις *thlipsis* appears 45 times in the New Testament, translated as “affliction” and “tribulation” in many verses, including the “great tribulation” of Revelation 7:14] that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. **And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.** Acts 11:19-21

What about followers of Jesus today?

Do believers in Jesus face affliction?

Do believers in Jesus face tribulation?

Do believers in Jesus face death for their faith?



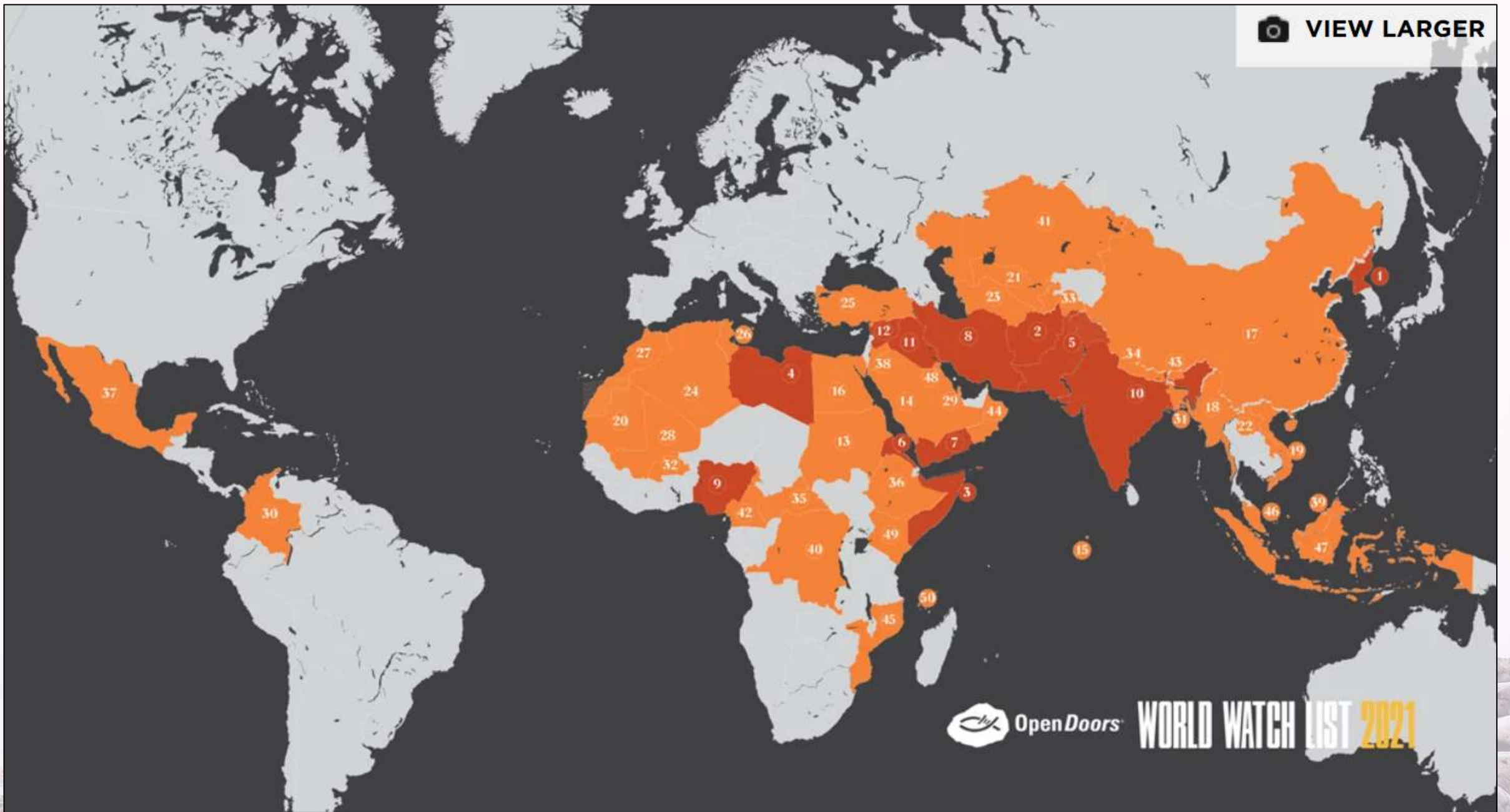
The 50 Countries Where It's Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus in 2021

Latest report on Christian persecution finds 3 in 4 martyrs are in Nigeria, ranked among 10 worst persecutors for first time.

CT EDITORS | JANUARY 13, 2021 06:00 AM

- Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed for their faith.
- Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.
- Every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned.
- Every day, another 5 Christians are abducted.
- The 50 listed nations contain **309 million** Christians living in places with extreme levels of persecution.

VIEW LARGER



OpenDoors WORLD WATCH LIST 2021

The 50 Countries Where It's Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus in 2021

Where Christians Face the Most Violence:

1. Pakistan
2. Nigeria
3. Democratic Republic of Congo
4. Mozambique
5. Cameroon
6. Central African Republic
7. India
8. Mali
9. South Sudan
10. Ethiopia

Where Christians Were Martyred Most:

1. Nigeria: 3,530
2. Democratic Republic of Congo: 460
3. Pakistan: 307
4. Mozambique: 100*
5. Cameroon: 53
6. Burkina Faso: 38
7. [name withheld]: 36
8. Central African Republic: 35
9. Mali: 33
10. [name withheld]: 20

The 50 Countries Where It's Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus in 2021

Where Churches Were Attacked or Closed Most:

1. China: 3,088
2. Nigeria: 270
3. Angola: 100*
4. Democratic Republic of Congo: 100*
5. Ethiopia: 100*
6. Rwanda: 100*
7. Bangladesh: 90
8. India: 76
9. Pakistan: 68
10. Mexico: 61

Where It's Hardest to Follow Jesus:

1. North Korea
2. Afghanistan
3. Somalia
4. Libya
5. Pakistan
6. Eritrea
7. Yemen
8. Iran
9. Nigeria
10. India

Open Doors categorizes the sources of Christian persecution

Islamic oppression: main source of persecution that Christians face in Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Iran, and Syria.

Clan oppression: main source of persecution that Christians face in Afghanistan, Somalia, Laos, Qatar, Nepal, and Oman.

Dictatorial paranoia: main source of persecution that Christians face in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Brunei, and Kazakhstan.

Religious nationalism: Christians are primarily targeted by Hindu nationalists in India, and by Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar and Bhutan.

Communist and post-communist oppression: main source of persecution that Christians face in North Korea, China, and Vietnam.

Christian denominational protectionism: main source of persecution that Christians face in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Organized crime and corruption: main source of persecution that Christians face in Colombia and Mexico.

- **Worldwide registered martyrdoms rose to 4,761 in the 2021 report**, up 60 percent from the 2,983 tallied the year before and surpassing the 4,305 deaths noted in the 2019 report.
- **Nine in 10 Christians killed for their faith were in Africa, the rest in Asia. Nigeria led the world with 3,530 martyrs confirmed by Open Doors for its 2021 list.**
- **Abduction of Christians rose to 1,710, up 63 percent from the 1,052 tallied the year before. Nigeria tops the list with 990.**
- **Pakistan led the world in forced marriages with about 1,000 Christians married to non-Christians against their will. Asia accounted for 72 percent of the forced marriages tallied by Open Doors, with Africa—led by Nigeria—the remaining 28 percent.**
- **China arrested, jailed, or detained without charge 1,147 Christians for faith-related reasons, out of a total of 4,277 worldwide.**
- **Attacks and forced closures of churches numbered 4,488 worldwide, with the vast majority recorded in China, followed by Nigeria.**

What does the future of American Christianity look like?

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these.

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 3:1-5, 12-15

Could this our legacy as followers of Jesus?

Stephen was known by his associates as:

- **Full of faith (Acts 6:5)**
- **Full of the Holy Spirit (6:5, 7:55)**
- **Full of grace (6:8)**
- **Full of power (6:8)**
- **Speaks with wisdom (6:10)**
- **Speaks with the Spirit (6:10)**

Descriptions of Stephen BEFORE and DURING tribulation