

# The Book of Acts

## Lesson 19

### Stephen's Sermon (Acts 7)

#### Acts 7 - Introducing Stephen's Sermon

Acts 7:1 - Then the high priest said, "*Are these things true?*" Charges against Stephen...

Acts 6:11 - Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "*We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.* This charge was used to bring him to judgment.

Acts 6:13-14 - They brought forward false witnesses who said, <sup>13</sup>"*This man does not stop saying things against this holy place and the law.* <sup>14</sup>*For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.*"

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The conclusion of the sermon, the summary of its content is found in Acts 7:51 "*You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting (oppose) the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers (ancestors) did.*" (ESV)

*"You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, like your ancestors did!"* (NET)

The sermon is full of OT historical illustrations proving the nation had resisted the Spirit's leading, just as those within his hearing were doing presently by their animosity to Jesus, to His message, the Gospel, and by opposing the messengers that Jesus commissioned.

**What is the spiritual disease of a "stiff-neck?"** -- a hard-necked person. It is the spiritual condition of a person, when challenged to change one's behavior or to be open minded to the illumination of God's Word, refuses.

Those who are stiff necked may have at their core pride (Having or showing a high or excessively high opinion of oneself or one's importance), or be headstrong composing a habitual disposition to one's own rules and resist other authorities who ask for obedience), stubborn (tenaciously unwilling or marked by tenacious unwillingness to yield). Obstinate describes someone who is fixed and unyielding in their walk or purpose even though good has influenced them to change or adjust their course. They can adhere to an opinion, purpose, or course in spite of reason, arguments, or persuasion.

The picture of stiff necked is of a stubborn ox that cannot be broken; with a neck so strong that any pressure exerted by the master causes no change. The animal is useless, because it cannot be turned to the right or to the left.

Stephen was simply quoting from God when he called the leaders of Israel "stiff-necked." Exodus 33:3 "*Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate (sklerotrachelos (same word used by Stephen) in the Greek translation of the OT) people, lest I destroy you on the way.*"

Exodus 33:5 - *For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, You are an obstinate (sklerotrachelos) people...*

Deuteronomy 9:6 - *"Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn (sklerotrachelos) people."*

Proverbs 29:1 - *A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy.*

**A second spiritual disease was an uncircumcised heart.** The Jews placed great stress on their physical ritual of circumcision as the identification to Israel, forgetting that it was a sign which was meant to point to full surrender to God and their complete dedication to the will and purposes of God. Their hearts remained cold toward God and their ears were inattentive to His Word, so that God could not reach them.

"Uncircumcised in heart and ears" -- they were unregenerate, not born-again by faith through grace. The new birth provides this demand of God.

**Genesis 17:10-11** - *10 "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you."*

The Jews were driven from the land because of an uncircumcised heart. God had declared, Leviticus 26:40-42, *"If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me-I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies-or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land."* This is also the only way God will reinstate Israel to the land and to His covenant. This is also a prophecy, because God will "remember" His covenant which causes the return of their King to protect them to inherit the land.

Jeremiah 9:25 - *"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised—*

The NET accurately paraphrases Jeremiah 9:25...*The Lord says, "Watch out! The time is soon coming when I will punish all those who are circumcised only in the flesh.*

Romans 2:28 – *"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh."*

Colossians 2:11- *"...and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ..."*

Physical circumcision was an outward act which testified that the individual had experienced an inner "circumcision" of their heart. While God is calling on Israel to "circumcise" their hearts, clearly no human being can carry out such an act without supernatural intervention. As the new ESV Study Bible says that *"Circumcision of the heart comes from renewal through the Spirit of Christ."* God's charge is not just for Israel to "get a grip" and change their rebellious attitude toward Him!

Our hearts are deceitful and sick (Jeremiah 17:9). Human beings naturally (in need of supernatural power) are hard hearted, stiff necked and in rebellion to the Person and laws of God and His Word. When He graciously brings about an individual's "heart circumcision" in response to that individual's faith - in other words, "spiritual circumcision" is by grace through faith, which sounds like salvation in the NT, because it is! This circumcision comes at the instant of one's salvation.

For many professing Christians believe that baptism, confirmation, church membership, or participation in the Lord's Supper automatically guarantees their salvation, like the Jews thought that physical circumcision saved them. As meaningful as those things are, the Christian's assurance and seal of salvation isn't a physical ceremony or an act like baptism but a spiritual, supernatural, invisible at its time of happening, work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. This is not experiential. One lives it by faith and this circumcision is the basis of motivation for sanctification. The will to do God's will come with conversion.

However, believers can become slow to hear, resist doing the Word. An uncircumcised heart means one's will has become hardened through willful sinning resisting God's commands.

These sins were particularly obvious and committed by the Jews during the period when God was revealing His Word and His will in His Son.