



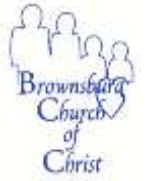
The Secret Messages of Stephen

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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AM Assembly



Introduction:

It is really popular today to look for secret codes in the Bible. Not satisfied with what the Bible plainly says, men go to crazy lengths to find secret and hidden messages. Several times a year, you will see the headlines of a tabloid make a spectacular announcement that secret messages have been uncovered in the Bible about when the world will end, about the president at the time, or even about the price of gasoline. Michael Drosnin wrote the book, The Bible Code. He claimed the Bible predicted in its secret code a global economic collapse in 2002. The code revealed this would be followed by unprecedented danger as nations with nuclear power became unstable. Finally, he reported the Bible code claimed 2006 would be a year of world war and atomic holocaust.¹ Of course, he claims it was a warning, not a prediction. Apparently, because he gave us the warning, we were able to avert that disaster.

Some guys have good intentions with this kind of stuff. Chuck Missler, author of Cosmic Codes, claims that translating the Hebrew names of the genealogy in **Genesis 5** and stringing them together produces a sentence that outlines the gospel of Jesus Christ.² He isn't satisfied with a real prophecy in **Genesis 3:15**, he has to resort to secret codes. Then there is Richard Prendergast who wants to convince Jews that Jesus is actually named as the Messiah in a secret code in **Psalm 22**.³ Instead of relying on the evidence God has really given, he has to resort to some hodgepodge of mathematical mysticism in the Hebrew text. Personally, I like what the fellows at linkydinky.com did with all of this.⁴ Go to their website in the footnote section and see if you can find their hidden message about all of this.

But, for all the craziness that is out there, I believe I've found two secret messages in Stephen's sermon in **Acts 7**. I want to share them with you today. Okay, I'll admit it. They aren't really secret messages. They are actually there in plain sight but I had simply missed them even through years of study until I overheard two other preachers talking about the sermon and I was prompted to reread it as if for the first time.⁵ You may already know what I'm going to share with you, but for those of you like me who had missed these messages from Stephen, I want to share them and then briefly explain the lessons that I get out of these two "secret" messages of Stephen.

Discussion:

I. The Two Secret Messages of Stephen

A. First, notice what Stephen was responding to.

1. In **Acts 6:8-15**, Stephen had been disputing with some of the Jews. When they could not stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking, they fell on old tactics. Just like they had done with Jesus, they stirred up false witnesses. Notice what the witnesses specifically accuse him of in **Acts 6:13-14**. They rebuked him for speaking against two things: 1] the holy place (the temple) and 2] the law and customs given by Moses. They accused Stephen of speaking against two sacred cows: the temple and Moses.
2. When teaching on this in the past, I would simply say this is just not true. Stephen wasn't speaking against Moses or the holy place, and then I would move on to discuss Stephen's obvious point about the Jews always rejecting God's messenger (cf. **Acts 7:51-53**). That is a powerful point and Stephen is definitely demonstrating all through the sermon how often the Jews rejected God's messenger. However, I've heard that point over and over again. We all know that point is here. But there is more to this sermon than that. You see, while Stephen did not speak against the holy place or Moses, he very much demonstrated that the Jews' fixation on the holy place and Moses was misplaced. He very much demonstrated that there is someone greater than the holy place and Moses. He very much demonstrated that the Jews had gotten so focused on the work of their hands that they forgot about Him. That one is God. Stephen (or perhaps we should say the Holy Spirit through Stephen, cf. **Luke 12:11-12**) actually makes two carefully crafted arguments. We must see them because if we are not careful, we can make the same mistake as the Jews.

B. *Argument #1: Don't focus on the man; focus on God who used the man.*

1. Interestingly, Stephen doesn't just come out and tell the Jews that Moses wasn't as important as they were making him. Instead, he tells the history of God's people. He tells a story that includes lots of people used by

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/2003/biblecodetrans.shtml>

² <http://www.khouse.org/articles/1996/44/>

³ <http://ad2004.com/Biblecodes/Hebrewmatrix/Psalm22article.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.linkydinky.com/EnglishBibleCode.shtml>

⁵ Thanks to Alan Yeater and Gary Fisher for letting me eavesdrop on their conversation about Acts 7.

God. The story starts with Abraham (**Acts 7:2-8**). The God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia (**Acts 7:2**) and called him. You see, Moses was not the only man called by God. Abraham was called by God first. Further, the Jews had pitched a fit about speaking against “the customs that Moses delivered to us” and in **Acts 7:8**, Stephen highlights that the most fundamental custom wasn’t given to the Jews through Moses, but through Abraham. But, here is the question. Who was really important in this part of the story? Abraham who was called, who travelled, who came to the Promised Land, who circumcised Isaac? No. The important one was God who did the calling, who brought Abraham to the Land, who gave the covenant of circumcision. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.

2. The story continues with Joseph (**Acts 7:9-16**). That story is amazing. Joseph was sold into slavery but ended up becoming the Prime Minister of Egypt. Now there’s a story of rags to riches. Here was a man for the Jews to be proud of. He seemingly single-handedly saved their entire people from starvation. If not for Joseph, the Jewish people would have become extinct long before becoming a nation. But, here is the question. Who was really important in this part of the story? Joseph who was ruler over Egypt, who revealed himself to his brothers, who brought his family to live in Egypt? No. The important one is God who gave him favor in the sight of Pharaoh and rescued him from all his afflictions. Joseph didn’t save the people; God did. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.
3. We’ll come back to Moses in a moment. Before that I want us to see that Stephen carries the story on after Moses is gone, which in and of itself says something. In **Acts 7:44-45**, the story continues with Joshua who led the fathers to drive the pagan nations out of the Promised Land and brought the tabernacle of God into it. But here is the question. Who was really important in this part of the story? Joshua who led the armies? No. The important one is God who actually did the driving out. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.
4. The story continues with David in **Acts 7:45-46**. David was the giant killer and their greatest king. He was a man after God’s own heart. Under David, the Jewish nation saw its glory days conquering far and wide and extending the borders of the Promised Land. David asked to find a dwelling place for God. But, here is the question. Who was really important in this part of the story? David who killed Goliath, who unified the people, who extended the borders of the kingdom, who brought the tabernacle to Jerusalem? No. The important one is God in whose sight David had found favor. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.
5. Stephen spoke of Solomon in **Acts 7:47**. He was the wisest of the wise. His reign was the golden age of Israel’s history. It was during his reign that the house of God was built. But, here is the question. Who was really important in this part of the story? Solomon who reigned so wisely and built the house of God? No. The important one is God who gave Solomon his wisdom and allowed him to build the house in Jerusalem. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.
6. In the middle of this history, Stephen addressed Moses and made his most powerful point (**Acts 7:17-43**). In fact, he made three points all driving this main theme home: Don’t focus on the man; focus on God who used the man.
 - a) In **Acts 7:20-22**, Stephen described how great Moses was. He was a beautiful baby, brought up in Pharaoh’s house as his grandson, instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and mighty in words and deeds. He was a great man. But notice what happened in **Acts 7:23-29**. Moses went out to deliver the children of Israel and it failed. Notice especially **Acts 7:25**. I love the way the ESV renders it. “He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand.” Of course! Surely God would give deliverance by the mighty hand of Moses. But God didn’t. Moses’ hand was not all that mighty. Yes, he could slay an Egyptian with his hand, but he could not deliver Israel with it. Once his foul deed was known, he fled Egypt and wandered in the wilderness becoming a shepherd, an anathema to his upbringing. But then one day he saw a burning bush (**Acts 7:30-36**). And that changed everything. Following that incident, Moses went back to Egypt and God did use him to deliver His people. But notice very specifically **Acts 7:35**. “This Moses...this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.” I love the play on words the ESV makes between this verse and the one we read earlier. The play on words is not in the original language, but the meaning of it is. When Moses thought God would deliver Israel by Moses’ hand, he failed. Moses was only able to deliver Israel by the hand of the angel of God. He was only able to deliver Israel by God’s hand. Who was really important in this part of the story? Moses who had been brought up in Pharaoh’s house, mighty in words and deed, who performed signs and wonders? No. The important one was God by whose mighty hand Moses was able to accomplish these things. When thinking God would use Moses’ hand, Moses failed. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.

- b) But, Stephen went further as he tells the story of Moses. The Jews were livid that Stephen might suggest that someone superseded Moses. But this very Moses had told the Jews, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers” (**Acts 7:37**, ESV). Moses himself had told the people not to put too much stock in him. He wasn’t the important one. God was the important one. Once Moses was dead and gone, God would raise up someone else for them. God would not abandon them even though Moses eventually would. Moses himself said someone would supersede him. That is the way it should be because Moses was not the important one in this part of the story, God was. Don’t focus on the man, Stephen is saying; focus on God who used the man.
 - c) Stephen went even one step further to make his point with Moses. In **Acts 7:37-43**, Stephen told about the rebellion of Israel against God and Moses. Despite the fact that Moses had in fact passed on the oracles of God to the Jews and had led them out of Egypt and had been with the angel of the Lord on Mt. Sinai, they rejected him and thrust him aside. Knowledge of the original story gives us a different picture than just the cursory reading of the Stephen’s words. If we didn’t know the story of what happened on Mt. Sinai, we might think the people threw Moses out and rejected him by refusing to follow him. That is not true at all. The problem was not that the people discounted Moses. The problem was that they put too much stock in Moses and discounted God. In **Exodus 32:1**, they had Aaron make the golden calf because Moses wasn’t coming down from the mountain. Without Moses, they didn’t have a leader. They didn’t know what to do, so they turned away from all that he had taught them and went back to the gods of Egypt. What then did Stephen mean by his statement that they refused to obey him and thrust him aside? In the context of Stephen’s sermon, the point is that Moses had told the people God would raise up a prophet for them. He wasn’t the important one; God was. God would take care of them. What if Moses had gone up on the mountain and died? What would that mean? Did that mean going back to the gods of the Egyptians? No it meant they should rely on the one true God and expect Him to raise up another prophet like Moses. In an amazing irony, because the Jews had put too much stock in Moses, they ended up rejecting what Moses had taught them. Don’t focus on the man, Moses had taught them; focus on God who used the man. But the Jews had focused on Moses and lost sight of God.
7. When we see this strand throughout Stephen’s sermon, we can see his point. The Jews in his day were doing exactly what the Jews in Moses’ day had done. They were putting so much stock in Moses that they were rejecting his very words. God had promised to raise up a prophet like Moses to lead them. While God had raised up numerous prophets to lead His people, the ultimate and final fulfillment of that promise was Jesus Christ (cf. **Acts 3:17-26**). Jesus is the one we need to focus on because he is no ordinary man. He is the fullness of the God who used all those other men (**Colossians 1:19**).
 8. What is Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the man; focus on God who used the man.
- C. *Argument #2: Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God Whose hands made the place holy.*
1. Stephen’s sermon is different from the kind of sermons we are used to hearing. We are used to hearing point 1, then point 2, then point 3. Stephen didn’t outline his sermon that way. Rather, he makes all his points simultaneously. We know he makes the point that the Jews had continually rejected God’s messengers and were doing the same right now. We have now seen that he is additionally making the point that we must not focus on the man, but on God who uses the man. However, that is not the end of Stephen’s point, there is more.
 2. The Jews had accused him of speaking against the holy place, the temple in Jerusalem. They returned to their old play book. Just as they accused Jesus of saying He would destroy the temple, they accuse Stephen of saying Jesus would destroy the temple. You’d think these guys could start being a little more creative. But Stephen responds to this in a very similar way as he did the last point. He tells the story of Israel’s history. But as he does so, he highlights all the holy places God had. Yes, the temple was important. It was the place where God’s name dwelt for the people of Israel once Solomon built it. It was the place where God met Israel through the priests each year. But it wasn’t holy because the place was holy; it was holy because the holy God declared it so. Stephen tells the people not to focus on the place, but to focus on the one whose hands made the place holy. Watch how Stephen’s point unfolds.
 3. Stephen doesn’t simply say that the temple was not as important as the Jews liked to think. Rather, he tells the history of God’s people highlighting all the places where God met His people and dwelt with His people. The story begins in Mesopotamia (**Acts 7:2**). Did God wait to meet with Abraham until the temple was built in Jerusalem? No. God met with Abraham in Mesopotamia, in the land of the Chaldeans. Was the place important? No, it was God whose hands made the place holy that was important. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
 4. In **Acts 7:6-7**, Stephen makes an extremely subtle point that will be lost on anyone who doesn’t know the history of God’s people. He actually mixes two stories. He refers to the time that God told Abraham about the

coming enslavement of his offspring in Egypt. This story is found in **Genesis 15:12ff**. However, when Stephen tells the story, he cleverly includes a statement that God did not make to Abraham, but to Moses. God did not tell Abraham, “After that they shall come out and worship me in this place” (**Acts 7:7**). God said that to Moses in **Exodus 3:12**. The sign that God was really with Moses would be that the Jewish nation would actually return with Moses to Mt. Sinai and worship God there. And that is indeed what happened. The sign was not that the people would worship at Mt. Zion but at Mt. Sinai. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.

5. Stephen continues in **Acts 7:9** with Joseph in Egypt. He was in the land of the enemy. He was in the midst of pagans and idolaters. Yet, who dwelt with him there in Egypt. God did. God is not limited to dwelling in one place. God was in Egypt as much as He was in Jerusalem. In fact, where did God’s people have to go for protection by God? They did not stay in the Promised Land. They had to leave the Promised Land (**Acts 7:11-15**). How shocking was it for these Jews to recognize that the blessing of God wasn’t in Jerusalem for their forefathers? The blessing was in Egypt. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
6. Stephen then told the story of Moses who had fled into the land of Midian and came to Mt. Sinai (**Acts 7:30-33**). Did God wait to talk to Moses until He had built a temple? Did Moses have to travel to Jerusalem to meet with God? No. God met Moses on Mt. Sinai in a burning bush. And to add insult to the Jews’ injuries, God very specifically said of Mt. Sinai and the burning bush, “Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (**Acts 7:33**). What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
7. Then in a stellar move of polemic dexterity, Stephen really rebukes the Jews in **Acts 7:42-43**. In the midst of talking about the Jews’ rebellion at Mt. Sinai as they turned to the golden calf, he doesn’t support his argument with a passage that actually was about that occurrence of idolatry. Instead, he quotes **Amos 5:25-27**. Read the context beginning in **Amos 5:21**. Amos was a prophet in the days of Uzziah (Azariah) king of Judah (cf. **Amos 1:1**). Where were these feasts that God hated taking place? In Jerusalem. Did being in Jerusalem at the temple make them holy? Absolutely not. Why? Because they were pursuing other gods. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
8. In **Acts 7:44**, Stephen reminds the Jews that the tabernacle, the tent of the Lord, wasn’t always in Jerusalem. Actually, it started at Sinai and then wandered around the wilderness for 40 years. God was with His people wherever they went. He didn’t wait for the temple to be built in Jerusalem. God met with His people wherever He wanted to. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
9. In **Acts 7:45-46**, Stephen reminds the Jews that even once the tabernacle was brought into the Promised Land, it hadn’t always been in Jerusalem. That didn’t happen until the days of David. According to **Judges 20:27-28**, the people inquired of the Lord in Bethel, because that is where the Ark of the Covenant was. Thus that is where the tabernacle was. In **I Samuel 1:3, 9**, we learn that the tabernacle was in Shiloh. Then in **I Samuel 7:1-2**, the Ark, and therefore the tabernacle, was in Kiriath-jearim. It is not until David is king in **II Samuel 6** that the Ark and the tabernacle were moved to Jerusalem. Which of those places was holy? All of them. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
10. Stephen brings the hammer down on the Jews in **Acts 7:48**. “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands...” (ESV). Don’t miss the importance of that statement. What was the temple? It was a house made by the hands of man. This harkens back to what Stephen had said in **Acts 7:41**. The Jews in Moses’ day were rejoicing in the work of man’s hands. What were the Jews in Stephen’s day doing? The exact same thing. They were rejoicing in the work of man’s hands. They were rejoicing in the temple that men had made and forgetting the God who had made the temple holy. They had gotten so caught up in the beauty and accomplishment of their temple that they had forgotten their God. Their devotion to the temple had gone beyond God’s will for them and become idolatry. What was Stephen’s point? Don’t focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.
11. Finally, Stephen makes his ultimate point in **Acts 7:49-50**. Quoting from **Isaiah 66:1-2**, which harkens back to Solomon’s prayer when the temple was dedicated in **I Kings 8:27**, Stephen really brings the point home. God’s throne is heaven. The earth is His footstool. How can the temple contain Him? How can the Jews think that the only place He can meet people is in the temple, on Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem? And then Stephen quotes, “Did not my hand make all these things?” (ESV). The Jews’ hands had made the temple, but God’s hands made the entire world. Whose hands are more important? If God made the entire world, He can meet His people and dwell with them anywhere in it that He chooses. He is not limited to meeting in the place that the

Jews had built with their hands. What was Stephen's point? Don't focus on the place; focus on the God whose hand made the place holy.

- D. I wish I could preach a sermon so subtly powerful. The Jews were being told to focus on God, not Moses and the temple. If they would focus on God properly, they would be led to Jesus. Stephen wasn't speaking against Moses and the temple. He was telling them that someone greater than Moses and the temple had been there. They needed to follow Him. They needed to follow Jesus, the Son of Man, who was standing at the right hand of God (**Acts 7:55-56**). But before we quit, we need to bring this message to our day. What should we learn from it?

II. The 8 lessons about God's hands

- A. Lesson #1: God doesn't rely on us; we must rely on God.
- B. Lesson #2: God doesn't need us; we need God.
- C. Lesson #3: God doesn't have success by our hands; we only have success by His hand.
- D. Lesson #4: We can't bring about victory; only God can.
- E. Lesson #5: Don't put too much stock in men and their plans; put your stock in God.
- F. Lesson #6: Don't put too much stock in what we've done and where we are; put your stock in God.
- G. Lesson #7: Don't get overly connected to our plans, programs, and places; stay connected to God.
- H. Lesson #8: Don't get cocky about your successes; give God the glory.

Conclusion:

No, the Bible doesn't contain secret messages for us to find. However, it doesn't spoon feed us either. That's why we need to keep studying. We will always be surprised by what new lessons we can learn from God's ever-deepening Word. Just because I had missed Stephen's messages doesn't mean they were secret. It just means I needed to keep studying. We must never forget Stephen's points. Don't focus on the man; focus on God who used the man. And don't focus on the place; focus on God whose hands made the place holy. Let's not make the same mistake the Jews did about the men and places in our lives.