

Stephen: The Messenger & Martyr

Devotional

In 1777, William Dodd, a well-known London clergyman, was condemned to be hanged for forgery. When his last sermon, delivered in prison, was published, a friend commented to Samuel Johnson that the effort was far better than he had thought the man capable of. Dr. Johnson replied, "Depend upon it, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully."

I cannot say whether Stephen sensed that he was about to be stoned to death when he delivered this message before the Sanhedrin, but his mind was wonderfully concentrated! More than just speaking well because of the threat of death, Stephen spoke powerfully because he was filled with the Holy Spirit (7:55). It is the longest sermon in Acts, and so the Holy Spirit thought it to be important enough for Luke to record it to the extent that he did.

Perhaps Luke wanted his largely Gentile audience to get a brief history of God's dealings with Israel. The sermon also serves as a transition to the Gentile mission that follows this chapter, in that it shows Israel's continued stubborn rejection of God's message and messengers. It shows that God had worked in many places and ways with His servants down through the centuries, and so worship is not limited to the land of Palestine or to the temple. Like Abraham, who obediently followed the Lord, so God's people must go where He leads.

Stephen was charged with speaking against Moses, against God, against the temple, and against the law and the customs handed down by Moses (6:11, 13, 14). While overall his message shows the charges to be false, it is more a sermon that traces God's historical dealings with Israel, Israel's history of rebellion against God, and a climax that indicts his hearers of the very charges that they were bringing against him. They were guilty of rejecting Moses and the law, and even worse, they had just killed the Righteous One whom God had sent for their salvation. Thus the overall theme is that ...

Stephen's sermon points us to the sovereign, abundant grace of God toward rebellious sinners, but also to the danger of hardening our hearts against God's grace.

Open it

1. Describe a time when you had to give a speech in front of a group of people. What was it about, and how did you feel during the speech?

Read it

Acts 7:1–8:3

Explore it

2. What scenes from Israel's history does Stephen speak about?
3. What was Stephen's description of the religious leaders?
4. What did Stephen do and see as he was being stoned?
5. Who oversaw the murder of Stephen and what did he do after that?

Apply it

Once the Sanhedrin heard all the charges, the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" (7:1), though he was not really interested in anything Stephen had to say—a mockery of a trial. What followed was one of the most amazing and most potent sermons ever preached. Stephen knew his Bible and his Bible history.¹

6. Look at Stephen's sermon. In what ways did Stephen show his aptitude for the Scriptures? Why is it important for Christ followers to have a grasp on the Scriptures?

¹ Hughes, R. Kent. Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 1811-1815). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

7. How well do you know the Scriptures? What keeps Christians from knowing their Bible and theology better?

Where have you gone to gain the knowledge and understanding of Scripture up to this point in your life?

8. Stephen preached a message entirely from the Old Testament. What can we learn about God and Jesus through the Old Testament narrative?

In this lengthy chapter, Stephen is giving a “defense” to the charges made by “false witnesses” in the synagogue Stephen attended. Specifically, his accusers said that he spoke “blasphemous words against Moses and God” and that he said, “This Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:11, 14). The gospel is under attack, specifically because of the honor it gives to Jesus.²

9. What noble things in our lives can attack the place Jesus deserves? How do we know if such things are attacking the honor that is due to Jesus alone?

² Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (p. 175). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Stephen's sermon seems to address three major errors of Judaism:

GOD'S PRESENCE AND WORK ARE NOT RESTRICTED TO THE GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES OF ISRAEL.

According to popular opinion, God gave special spiritual privileges to those living on the real estate of Palestine. The resulting veneration of the land and the status that went with it left little room for the saving work of Jesus the Messiah. Stephen argued that this was wrong. To prove his point, Stephen cited the case of Abraham in verses 2–8. Abraham spent considerable time in the land but did not live as if he had arrived at the height of God's purpose for him. Stephen began by saying in verse 2: *"Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran."* God revealed himself to Abraham even before he was living in the land. Stephen made a similar point in verses 4–5: *"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground."*

The point is, God blessed Abraham even though he did not yet occupy as much as a foot of the Holy Land. The land is not the blessing. In verses 9–16 Stephen went on to show that the same was true of the twelve sons of Jacob. God blessed them through Joseph in Egypt even though the only part of the Holy Land they possessed was the family tomb.

Stephen's clinching example was Moses, described in verses 17–36. God met and took care of Moses and his people outside the Holy Land. Moses was raised in Egypt (vv. 17–22). He matured in Midian (v. 29). He was commissioned near Mt. Sinai, and God called the area "holy ground" (vv. 3–34). "Holy ground" is wherever God meets His people, and not just inside the borders of Palestine. The greatest miracles of Israel happened in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert—not in the Promised Land.³

10. What about Stephen's background might have made his statements about the Holy Land hard for the religious leaders to hear? (See Acts 6:1–7.)

11. Why would land be so important to the Jewish people? In what ways should Americans be careful about boasting of God's blessings in similar ways?

12. Stephen says that God shows up to bless His people in the most unique of circumstances and places. In what unique situations and places have you experienced God?

³ Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 1828-1832)*. Crossway. Kindle Edition.

HOLINESS WAS FOUND IN ADHERENCE TO THE LAW OF MOSES.

Stephen's opponents had accused him of speaking against the sacred law of Moses, but the history of Israel revealed that the nation had repeatedly broken that law. God gave the law to His congregation ("church") in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, His living Word through the mediation of angels (see Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). No sooner had the people received the law than they disobeyed it by asking Aaron to make them an idol (Exodus 32), and thereby broke the first two of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-6). The Jews had worshipped idols in Egypt (Joshua 24:14; Ezekiel 20:7-8), and after their settlement in the Promised Land they gradually adopted the gods of the pagan nations around them. God repeatedly disciplined His people and sent them prophets to warn them, until finally He carried them off to Babylon, where they were finally cured of idolatry.

In outward form, they were worshipping Jehovah, but in their hearts, they were worshipping foreign gods! The form of the question in Acts 7:42 demands a negative reply: "No, you were not offering those sacrifices to the Lord!" God's law was given to the Jews to protect them from the pagan influence around them, and to enable them to enjoy the blessings of the land. It was the law that made them a holy people, different from the other nations. When Israel broke down that wall of distinction by disobeying God's law, they forfeited the blessing of God and had to be disciplined.⁴

13. What types of things did the religious leaders of Stephen's day tell people to do in order to be holy? How do we fall into similar traps today?

14. While God's law was never intended to make a person completely holy, it was there to protect people. How does obeying God's laws protect the Christian?

ISRAEL HAD A HISTORY OF REJECTING GOD BY REJECTING HIS REPRESENTATIVES.

Note the repeated pattern of the nation's rejecting the deliverers whom God had sent. Joseph's brothers (the patriarchs of the nation) at first wickedly rejected him, but later found him to be their "savior" from death by starvation. Israel in slavery in Egypt at first rejected Moses as their deliverer, but later it was this very man whom God raised up to be both ruler and deliverer (7:35). The parallel with these wicked men to whom Stephen was speaking is obvious. They had rejected the very One whom God had sent as Messiah and Savior. And yet, like Joseph's brothers and like Israel under Moses, God was offering them another chance to repent and follow Jesus!⁵

⁴ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Dynamic (Acts 1-12) (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 111). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-18-stephen-message-acts-71-53>

15. What caused the Israelites to reject those God would use to lead His people? What things cause unbelievers to reject Christ as the religious leaders did?

The godly manner in which Stephen died is contrasted here with the grisly wickedness of these supposedly respectable Jewish leaders. **He was calm, clear-headed, articulate, and kind, even as the rocks were crushing his body.** But these normally dignified members of the high council were out of control with rage. They gnashed their teeth, they screamed at the top of their voices, they covered their ears so as not to hear what they considered Stephen's blasphemy. They rushed upon him, drove him out of the city, and stoned him to death. The Greek word for "rushed" is used of the herd of demon-possessed swine rushing off the cliff into the ocean after Jesus cleansed the Gerasene demoniac.⁶

16. What about the gospel can induce such a visceral response from the unbelieving world? Have you experienced such a response?

17. How can we know if we are being mistreated for our faith or simply because we are being obnoxious towards others?

Death drew from Stephen one final Christlike grace. He prayed that his accusers might be forgiven: "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (Acts 7:60). Once more, there is an echo of words heard from the cross (Luke 23:34). It is important to note that Stephen did not bestow forgiveness himself. It would have been an empty gesture, despite the temptation to think it a Christian thing to do. Stephen, while showing a willingness to forgive, asks the Lord that forgiveness be given...Stephen's willingness to forgive his slayers comes as an arrow in our hearts. Most of us hardly face what Stephen faced! The injustices rendered against us seem small and trifling by comparison. Yet we often harbor deep-seated resentment and hardness against those who have committed them. **Is there within us an unforgiving spirit that nurtures bitterness and anger toward others?** Stephen shows us the way to be Spirit-filled and Jesus-like.⁷

⁶ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-19-stephen-martyr-acts-754-83>

⁷ Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (pp. 210-211). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

18. In what ways can you grow in your love for unbelievers? What types of sins should we be asking God to forgive in those who stand opposed to the gospel?

Death made Stephen more like Jesus. **It made him appreciate that there is a heaven to be gained on the other side of death. It drew from him the holy desire to be with Jesus.** It brought forth from inside him, by the power of the Spirit, Christlike graces that sweetened this wretched scene. There, in the midst of the blood and gall, was someone who was filled with the Spirit and who shone with the brightness of one who is close to Jesus Christ.⁸

19. Is every believer called to such resolute and courageous stands for Christ, or does He just call some to such a task? If called, how do we know if we are equal to that task if it is required of us?

20. Stephen gets a glimpse of heaven as he dies that enables him to proclaim Christ even in his last moment of life. How does having a clear view of eternity enable us to be confident to preach Christ no matter the outcome?

⁸ ibid

Note: This study was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups