

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Five – Acts 6:8-7:60
Stephen the Martyr

Stephen was the first. Many have followed in his steps to martyrdom—those who live and speak truth that is intolerable on this planet of evil. Stephen was described as full of the Spirit and wisdom, full of grace and power. When enemies of the message of Jesus could not stand up against this Spirit and wisdom, they stoned him to death. Stephen was a gift to the church but could not be tolerated by her enemies.

Stephen’s greatest gift to the church was not the mere fact that he was her first martyr, but also his vital role in promoting the mission and the life of the church.

Open

- How do you respond to the possibility of dying because you are a follower of Jesus?

Study

1. *Read Acts 6:8-15.* What do you learn about Stephen?

He was full of grace and power, and he was doing great wonders and signs among the people (8). He was disputing the Jews and they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking (9b-10).

2. What were the accusations made against Stephen (6:13-14)?

That he never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, saying that Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs that Moses delivered to the Jews.

The accusations against Stephen were extremely serious. Nothing was more sacred to the Jews, and nothing more precious, than their temple and their law. The temple was their “holy place,” the sanctuary of God’s presence, and the law was “holy scripture,” the revelation of God’s mind and will. Therefore, since the temple was God’s house and the law was God’s word, to speak against either was to speak against God or, in other words, to blaspheme.

3. *Read Acts 7:1-53.* When asked if the charges were true, Stephen responded with a sermon. List the people mentioned and the part they play in the history he is retelling (briefly).

<u>Person</u>	<u>Key Facts</u>
Abraham	Called by God to bless all nations
Isaac	Son of the promise
Jacob	Father of the twelve sons (tribes)
Joseph	Preserved the Jews in Egypt
Moses	Led the Exodus, ruler and redeemer (35)
David	Favor with God, wanted to build temple
Solomon	Built the temple of God

Stephen needed to defend himself against them in such a way as to develop a defense for his radical gospel. What he did was not just to rehearse the key features of the Old Testament story, with which the Sanhedrin were as familiar as he, but to do so in such a way as to draw lessons from it which they had never learned or even noticed. His concern was to demonstrate that his position, far from being “blasphemous” because it was disrespectful to God’s Word, actually honored it. For Old Testament Scripture itself confirmed his teaching about the temple and the law, especially by predicting the Messiah, whereas by rejecting him it was they who disregarded the law, not he. Stephen’s mind had evidently soaked up the Old Testament, for his speech is like a patchwork of allusions to it.

4. What was God’s promise to Abraham, and how did he fulfill this promise (7:5, 17, 30, 36)?

Promised to give him a possession as inheritance and to his offspring, though he had no children. Gave him Isaac in his old age. Increased the Israelites in Egypt. Brought the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the promised land.

5. How does Stephen communicate his respect for Moses (7:20, 22, 30-38)?

Called in “beautiful in God’s sight” (20). Called him “mighty in his words and deeds” (22). Recognized Moses’ interaction with God in the burning bush (30-31). Affirmed that Moses was chosen by God to lead the people (35). Called Moses a “prophet” (37).

6. How did the people respond to Moses in the wilderness (7:39-43)?

They refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt (39). Worshiped idols in the wilderness (40-41).

7. What is the significance of the words “Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground” (7:33), and “The Most High does not live in houses made by men” (7:48)?

The Jews were angry because Stephen was supposedly claiming that Jesus would destroy the temple. For them, the temple was where God dwelled. Yet, centuries before the temple was built, Moses spoke to God in the burning bush. So, the Jews were worried about the temple, but the reality is that God doesn't dwell in a temple.

Several psalms bear witness to Israel's love for the temple. This was right. But many drew a false conclusion. They conceived of God as so completely identified with the temple that its existence guaranteed his protection of them, while its destruction would mean that he had abandoned them. Long before them, however, as Stephen pointed out, the great figures of the Old Testament never imagined that God was imprisoned in a building.

The God of Israel is a pilgrim God, who is not restricted to any one place. If he has any home on earth, it is with his people that he lives. He has pledged himself by a solemn covenant to be their God. Therefore, according to his covenant promise, wherever they are, there he is also.

8. How did Stephen's sermon speak to the accusations against him?

The Jews claimed he spoke against the temple and the Law, but in his sermon he demonstrates how he is actually preaching truth. He shows that God does not live in temples made by hands. He also shows that he is not speaking against the Law, but rather trying to obey it. He is preaching the fulfillment of the Old Testament: Jesus.

9. How are Stephen's accusers guilty of that which they accused him (7:51-53)?

They are resisting the Holy Spirit just as their fathers (OT Israelites) did. They are persecuting the prophets (Jesus) and the apostles and disciples. They received the Law but have failed to keep it.

10. *Read Acts 7:54-60.* What do you discover about Stephen’s character in this section?

He was full of the Holy Spirit (55). He was humble, submitting his spirit to the Lord instead of fighting those who stoned him (59). He was compassionate, asking that God forgive his murderers (60).

11. How did Stephen promote the mission and life of the church?

He proclaimed the Gospel, which is the foundation of the church. His death serves as an example of what the Gospel requires: total abandonment. His death teaches us that persecution may take our lives, but it is worth it. His endurance also stirred up the church to continue taking the Gospel to all nations.

Summary: What interests many people most about Stephen is that he was the first Christian martyr. Luke’s main concern lies elsewhere, however. He emphasizes the vital role Stephen played in the development of the worldwide Christian mission through both his teaching and his death.

Stephen’s martyrdom supplemented the influence of his teaching. Not only did it deeply impress Saul of Tarsus and contribute to his conversion, which led to his becoming the apostle to the Gentiles, but it was also the start of “a great persecution” which led to the scattering of the disciples “throughout Judea and Samaria” (8:1).

The church was shocked, even stunned by the martyrdom of Stephen and by the violent opposition which followed. But, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see how God’s providence used Stephen’s testimony in word and deed, through life and death, to promote the church’s mission.

Apply

- When have you experienced being “on holy ground”?

In what ways are you, like the Israelites in the wilderness, tempted to turn your heart back toward Egypt?

I know that God is the only One who satisfies the desires of my heart. However, I am too often tempted to seek pleasure and satisfaction in things of the world, my “Egypt.”

There are several parallels between the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen. In both cases false witnesses were produced and the charge was one of blasphemy. In both cases the execution was accompanied by two prayers, as each prayed for the forgiveness of his executioners and for the reception of his spirit as he died. Thus did the disciple—whether consciously or unconsciously—reflect his Master. The only difference was that Jesus addressed his prayers to the Father, while Stephen addressed them to Jesus, calling him “Lord” and putting him on a level with God.

How would you like the way in which you follow Jesus to be influenced by Stephen’s example?

Pray

- Ask the Holy Spirit to keep you steadfast, having always in mind his will and mission for the world and the church.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.