

7:54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

Verse 54 is the response to Stephen's defense against the charges of blasphemy against God, the law, and the temple that had been brought against him. Stephen's charges that they are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears and are always resisting the Holy Spirit (7:51) causes a visceral reaction in the hearers. "Grinding" their teeth describes the level of their anger. The trial is *not* over, but the crowd is overwhelmed with hostility. They will hear no more of Stephen's defense.

7:55 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;

7:56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

By stating that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, Luke makes it clear that Stephen was seeing and speaking what God intended. Gazing into heaven describes a revelatory experience, not a literal one.

In verse 56 Stephen sees God's glory and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. Although the title "Son of Man" is Jesus' most commonly used self-designation, it is the first time outside the gospels that anyone uses it. None of the disciples ever called Him this. The title reminds us of Daniel 7:13-14 which is linked to Messiah's role in the establishment of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 16:27-28; 24:27, 30-31, 36-44; Lk. 18:8). Daniel records, "And behold, with the clouds of heaven *One like a Son of Man* was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed." Later in Jesus' ministry He used the title to refer to Himself as the One who has authority at the right hand of God to judge (Matt. 26:64; Mk. 14:62; Lk. 22:69). In John 5:27 Jesus said that God has given Him authority to execute judgment, "*because He is the Son of Man.*" And in John 5:22-23 Jesus said, "He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father."

Jesus' position at the right hand of the Father in heaven is a divine vindication of Christ, but there are a number of different opinions as to why Jesus is *standing* and not sitting at the Father's right hand (see for example Matt. 22:44; 26; 64; Mk. 16:19; Acts 2:33, 34; Eph. 1:12; Col. 3:1; Heb. 13:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). Bock suggests that Jesus rises as the judge to receive Stephen's testimony or to be his advocate (Bock, 312). In the context of a legal court setting, and in light of the imagery in Daniel 7, these are good suggestions. Also in verse 60 when Stephen cries, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" it is evident that forgiveness is given by a judge. Jesus said in Luke 12:8-9, "And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God." Perhaps Jesus rose to plead Stephen's case before the Father (cf. Psa. 109:31).

Stephen's vision would be considered blasphemous by Jews, for no one was considered worthy to stand at God's right hand; to do so would involve sharing God's glory (Bock, 313). At Jesus' trial Jesus said to the High Priest, "You shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64-66). This is what led to His death. Upon hearing this the high priest tore his robes saying, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death!" The same comment led to Stephen's death as well. What is glorious to God is blasphemous to the Jews.

Stephen's vision of the exalted Christ no doubt gave him the strength to endure the trial he was facing. 1 Peter 4:13 says that when you suffer with Christ, "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." There is a special grace given to dying Christians. Hebrews 12:1-3 says, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart." Jesus endured death by seeing beyond it to the glory that followed; Stephen endured it by fixing his eyes on Jesus. In a gracious act, the Holy Spirit turned the hour of death into a revelation of the glory of God and of Jesus.

7:57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse.

7:58 And 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.

The mention of seeing Christ at God's right side generated a violent reaction. Crying out in a loud voice and covering the ears indicate that blasphemy has taken place. It is not a surprising reaction; Stephen had already said that they were uncircumcised in their ears (Acts 7:51); they were unable to hear the truth and receive it.

Although stoning was the OT penalty for blasphemy, at this point in Israel's history, Rome had the exclusive right to execute someone convicted of a capital offense. Luke doesn't tell the story as if Jewish justice was taking place; the trial hadn't even finished. No verdict was given! The scene before us is not the outcome of a legal trial; it is a lynching.

7:59 And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Stephen sees Jesus as the mediator by which one enters into heaven. His prayer reveals a high view of Christ and echoes Jesus' words on the cross: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Lk. 23:46).

7:60 And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep.

8:1a And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.

Lastly, Stephen called out to Christ that He might forgive the sins of those who were stoning him. This also recalls Jesus' words at the cross where He had prayed a similar prayer (Lk. 6:27-28, 46; 23:34: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"). Some say that the conversion of Saul was Stephen's answer to this prayer. "The devil designs for your death to produce despair and hopelessness and self-pity and resentment and bitterness. But the design of the Holy Spirit is very, very different. He destroys the power of death, and makes death into an occasion for showing the beauty of Christ. 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" (Piper)

In Philippians 3:10 Paul said that he desired to know Christ "and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." One wonders if Paul's words came from having seen Stephen's example. Stephen was being conformed to Christ's death even to the degree that they dragged him outside of the city limits to kill him (7:58, cf. Heb. 13:11-13).

7:56-60 reveal a dramatic turnaround in the legal proceedings. Initially, Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin and was standing trial, being accused of blasphemy. Stephen not only gave a brilliant defense of his own innocence, but ended by insisting that they, not he, were the ones who denied Moses and blasphemed God. The accused became the prosecuting attorney; the judges became those who were standing trial. Christ, whom they had rejected, was approved by God, standing at God's right hand as their judge.

8:1b And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The early church has moved from warning, to martyrdom, to persecution. Other believers suffered as a result of Stephen's fearless faithfulness. The church is scattered from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria (cf. Acts 1:8). It was Stephen's brutal death that became the catalyst in the wisdom and purposes of God for the spread of the gospel from the borders of Jerusalem into both Judea and Samaria. Through Stephen's death we see that God will fulfill His purposes, but we also see that God's purposes are often not fulfilled apart from great personal cost. Jesus had said in John 12:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

The Bible doesn't tell us why the apostles stay back, but Bock suggests that it may be because the attack was primarily leveled against the Hellenistic Jews of whom Stephen was a representative (Bock, 318). The apostles may have been too well known to have been openly persecuted or they may have considered it their duty to stay behind and take the risk. After the death of James (Acts 12) the apostles also left to engage in a wider mission.

8:2 And some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.

The Jews did not permit lamentation when a person was killed by being stoned for a crime. The men who buried Stephen lamented. Their actions were defiant and evidenced that they did not see Stephen's stoning as just.

8:3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

This is the turning point for Saul where he begins to feel that he personally needs to be involved in protecting Judaism from the growing Christian influence. Thus, he begins to persecute the church severely, a fact that is mentioned many times in the New Testament (Acts 22:4–5; 26:10–11; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 22–23; Phil. 3:5–6; 1 Tim. 1:13).

8:4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

Verse 4 is a bridge that could be connected with either the previous or the next section. It introduces new material, but it also goes back to the people who were dispersed in 1b.

The result of the dispersion is that the word of God spread in ever-widening circles. What we see is another example of God's sovereign overruling providence.

"In sum, this brief unit prepares us for Philip and the positive effects of persecution. Faithfully, the persecuted church disperses and preaches the word of the Gospel. Luke notes the principle and then gives an example in Philip" (Bock).

8:5-40 is divided into two parts. The first is the work in Samaria and the encounter of the magician, Simon Magnus (8:5–24). The summary of this is in 8:25. This is followed with Philip meeting the Ethiopian eunuch. After this there is no more mention of Philip. The passage continues to demonstrate how God is leading the spread of the gospel, whether by persecution or by direct guidance.

The second important aspect of this section is that the gospel is spreading from Jews to Samaritans and even Ethiopians. The gospel is reaching beyond Judaism in fulfillment of Jesus' command to reach the nations (Acts 1:8).

8:5 And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.

8:6 And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing.

8:7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed.

8:8 And there was much rejoicing in that city.

Philip goes to Samaria and begins preaching Christ. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews because they were unfaithful and had mixed marriages with the Gentiles. They also had their own Scriptures (the Samaritan Pentateuch) and worshipped at Mt. Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem. Although they did not hold the predominant Jewish view of the Messiah, they were surprisingly responsive to the Gospel.

8:9 Now there was a certain man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;

8:10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God."

8:11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Prior to Philip coming to Samaria, Simon enjoyed the attention of the Samaritans as a magician. He was known by the people as "the Great Power of God." He was evidently syncretistic in his thinking, combining Judaism with the magic arts. His magic enthralled the crowds.

Simon calls himself great, drawing attention to himself and his own work. By contrast, Philip points to Jesus, not himself; his deeds are Christ's, not his own.

8:12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

The message about Christ is called good news about the kingdom. This shows the relationship between the two ideas (Bock, 328); Christ's kingdom and His kingship go hand in hand. Those who believed were baptized, as is the pattern of the church.

8:13 And even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip; and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Simon was among those who responded to Phillip's message. It says he believed, but based on what follows, the reality of his faith is debated. Some think that because Simon later barter for the gift of the Holy Spirit, his profession of faith was not real. Others believe that his faith was real but confused.

Although Simon was acquainted with supernatural acts of magic, he was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that Philip was performing.

8:14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

8:15 who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

8:16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

8:17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

The scene turns to the news of the Samaritans' conversions reaching Jerusalem. Peter and John were sent to Samaria as representatives of the apostolic band to ascertain if this was true. Their presence and response endorsed Phillip's work.

The reception of the Spirit through the laying on of hands is not typical, rather as Bruce suggests, the conversion of the Samaritans required apostolic witness (just as conversion of the Gentiles will) in order to prove to the church that non-Jews could be full participants in the New Covenant. In other words, although the apostles heard that the Samaritans believed (8:12) and had been baptized (8:16), it was not clearly understood if all participated in the New Covenant equally. It was the reception of the Spirit through the hands of God's authoritative leaders (the apostles) that provided the evidence that was needed by the predominantly Jewish church to accept the Samaritans as a part of the New Covenant community.

At that stage of history, the Spirit's *incorporating grace* was separated from His *regenerating grace* in order to provide apostolic attestation that the non-Jews were co-heirs with Christ. To state it differently, the Samaritans were regenerated by the Spirit *before* the apostles arrived; they were incorporated into the church *after* the apostles arrived. This is similar to what happens in Acts Chapters 10 and 11. As the gospel goes beyond the Samaritans (who were half Jew/ half Gentile) to Cornelius (a full Gentile), we see this two-stage ministry of the Holy Spirit repeated (see 10:34-48; 11:16-18). The Book of Acts is recording each successive stage of redemptive advance; as the gospel moves beyond the Jews to Samaria, and then beyond the Samaritans to the Gentiles, the apostles, as God's representatives, are present to validate the new advancement of the gospel. They do this by personally seeing the Spirit rest upon members of each group of people.

The dispensing of the Spirit is an event awaited in Acts 2 but comes automatically with faith in Acts 10. Here it is the result of prayer and the laying on of hands, as also in Acts 19 with Paul's ministry. There is no set pattern to dispensing the Spirit in Acts. At various junctures God acts in different ways for different purposes. The reason for the delay here may well be to make clear to the apostles, as the witnesses, that God has acted. The one constant in the first three bestowals of the Spirit is the presence of an apostle. Normally the Spirit comes with faith in the New Testament, but these are special circumstances that make a break in the pattern to underscore a fresh move of God. Jervell speaks correctly of a "special legitimization" taking place here because of the potential controversy of Samaritan inclusion. The Spirit is described as a gift in 2:38; 10:45; and 11:17 as well as by Peter in verse 20. The description here makes clear that the coming of the Spirit is God's work.

The laying on of hands leads to the reception of the Spirit, an act made evident to all. As with the coming of the Spirit with the apostles' ministry, so the addition of the laying on of hands with the coming of the Spirit here points to a special situation. Acts 8:38 and 10:44 show that baptism and the Spirit do not require an apostle or the laying on of hands. Exactly how this manifestation of the Spirit is recognized is not indicated. Do they speak in tongues, or is it

through some other unspecified indicator? Although this text is not explicit, an experience like Acts 2 and 10 is likely (Bock, 331,332).

8:18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

"The apostolic laying on of hands has an impact on Simon Magnus. Here the apostolic role is designed to help the Jerusalem church accept what is happening outside its home, in a land that might not be seen as a beneficiary of grace. Paul will lay on hands in 19:6 for some of John the Baptist's disciples. Ananias, a non-apostle, does likewise so that Paul can receive the Spirit (9:17). These are the only three places the Spirit is bestowed through the laying on of hands. Each is a case where doubts might exist about the experience's authenticity. It is an exceptional activity, as there are many places where people believe, and the laying on of hands is not described. Acts 2:38–39 declares the normative pattern. Marshall notes that on other occasions joy accompanies the Spirit, not charismatic experience (13:52; 16:34; 1 Thess. 1:6)" (Bock, 332).

8:19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

8:20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"

8:21 "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God."

8:22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you."

8:23 "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

8:24 But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Simon asks to have the authority to give the Spirit and even offers to pay for it. Peter makes it clear that the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be purchased. Unlike Ananias and Sapphira, sudden death does not follow. There is still room for forgiveness and repentance.

Simon is told that he has no part or portion in the matter unless he repents. Furthermore, Peter says that Simon's heart is not right before God. The onus is on Simon to make things right. Peter's response to Simon is why some people believe that Simon was not a genuine believer. Others see it as a solemn warning.

The nature of Simon's response in verse 24 is also debated. Some argue that it was sincere; others say he was unregenerate, for he refuses to pray for himself.

Although we cannot be sure, the overall impression is that Simon does not respond to Peter's warning; instead of praying for himself he asks Peter to pray for him. Peter can pray, but Simon will not. "Perhaps

the account concludes in an open-ended manner to allow the reader to ponder the proper response" (Bock, 336).

8:25 And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Luke 9:51-56 tells the story of Jesus sending the disciples ahead of Him to make arrangements for Him in a town of the Samaritans, but the Samaritans denied the disciples' request. When James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus rebuked them and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went on to another village. After the resurrection, John was a changed man; in verse 25 he is preaching the gospel to those whom he once wanted to destroy. The gospel makes us new people. It transforms attitudes. It changes hearts. It is manifested in how we treat others.

In sum, this unit shows the gospel as it begins to move away from an exclusive concern for Israel. The gospel is for every person, for each one to consider, it is hoped, with ears and a heart that responds. This is as true today as it was then. Here we see Jews moving out to engage marginal Jews with the Gospel. Crossing racial and ethnic lines with the message of hope and taking the initiative to do so are part of the church's calling.

In Simon Magnus we also see the idea that not all spiritual power is positive. Simon can do wondrous things, and yet they are not of God. There is false as well as true spiritual power, what Fernando calls 'miraculous but wrong.' Pointing out false spirituality is not an act of hostility, as our diverse culture often wants to suggest. It is a warning that not all spiritual activity is beneficial. To point out such error is an act of love for one's neighbor (Bock, 336,337).