

The Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 6:8-8:3

Up until chapter 6 of the book of Acts, the Church as a whole had only experienced sporadic persecution – most of that coming to the apostles as they continued to boldly preach the message of the Gospel on the Temple grounds at the area of Solomon’s Porch. The Apostles had been threatened, beaten and even jailed, yet they continued on in the mission to proclaim the hope and salvation found in Jesus Christ, the true Messiah of Israel.

Last week we looked at the need to set-up or appoint individuals to be in charge of caring for the physical needs of not only the widows, but also those within the Church who were in need of physical resources. It wasn’t the call or ministry direction for the Apostles to take care of these things, so they appointed the “*Group of Seven*” to head-up or manage this area of ministry. According to Acts 6:3 this “*Group of Seven*” were *men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.*

And so, they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

Verse 7 tells us

Acts 6

⁷ Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Again, everything seemed to be going well. But that exactly when the enemy of your souls will look to attack you. That is why we need to continually be on guard against his attacks.

As we continue on in chapter 6 we find that one of the “Group of Seven” Stephen was doing more than food distribution.

Acts 6

⁸ *And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.*

We need to quickly understand that Stephen and Phillip, as well as the other “*Group of Seven*” were so much more than simply table waiters. Their ministry wasn’t confined to handing out food boxes to the Christian widows, or making sure the physical needs of the Body were being met – they had that responsibility, but they were so much more. Theirs was a ministry to God and His people, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, to be a witness of the power and love of God to all the people they came in contact with.

These Seven men weren’t novice or new Believers, They seemed to be well versed in their understanding of both Judaism and of the Christian faith. And God used them mightily. Just as in verse 6 we read that Stephen (empowered by the Holy Spirit) *did great wonders and signs among the people*. We’ll also see in chapter 8 where God was using Phillip in powerful ways; not only did he have the gift of *evangelism*, but many miracles and signs were done through him, including casting out of demons (8:5-13).

It was truly a powerful time in the Church. Multitudes were still being saved as the Gospel was being shared in a powerful and open way. Everything seemed to be going well.

Acts 6

⁹ *Then there arose some from what is called the **Synagogue of the Freedmen** (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*

We have no idea how many days had passed since Stephen and the others were appointed to the task of the physical care of the Body. But sometime after (days, weeks or months), while in the midst of his ministry and sharing the Gospel, Stephen gets into a debate with a group of men from the ***Synagogue of the Freedmen***, *this synagogue was made up of men from Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as those from Cilicia and Asia.*

This Synagogue of the Freedmen was located there in Jerusalem. There's been a lot of speculation about this particular synagogue and the men who were a part of it.

Cyrene is on the northern coastline of Libya.

Alexandria is on the coastline of Egypt and the Hellenistic capital of Egypt.

Cilicia was not a city but a region or state within the area of Asia or Asia Minor which is modern day Turkey.

Apparently, because these men were not from Jerusalem, they had set up their own place of worship, their own synagogue. Many believe that since they were called the *Synagogue of the Freedmen* that perhaps they had been former slaves of the Roman Empire. The problem is, there's just not much information about this group other than what we read right here in Acts.

Of all the cities or places spoken about here, the most interesting to me is the region of Cilicia. When you look at that particular region more closely, you realize that the major city in Cilicia is the coastal city of Tarsus. At this point your brain ought to be moving towards the name of someone we know of in the New Testament who was from Tarsus: Saul of Tarsus, later to be known as Paul.

This is what Paul himself declared about his own heritage:

Acts 21

³⁹ *But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city..."*

Enough on that point for now, but we will return.

What we read here in Acts 6:9-10 is that as they debated with Stephen **they couldn't get around the wisdom of God working in Stephen**. Luke makes it very clear that it was **with wisdom and the Spirit that he spoke and debated these men**.

So since they couldn't **out debate him** on the matter of the Scriptures, they decided they would attack him another way.

¹¹ *Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."* ¹² *And they stirred up the*

people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.

By false witnesses and false testimony they stirred up the people against **a man who had done nothing wrong... a man who was being led by God to do the right thing...** Satan continues to do that today.

When it speaks of bringing Stephen to the council, it was to bring him to the Sanhedrin the counsel of the 71. In every Jewish city there was to be a lesser Sanhedrin of 23 judges. But there was **only one Great Sanhedrin of the 71 judges** and they acted as the Supreme Court of Israel and they met in the Temple in Jerusalem, convening every day except festivals and the Sabbath.

The High Priest would be in the center of the judges, with 35 judges on either side. The Accused would stand in the middle and plead their case. Here the Synagogue of the Freedmen had stirred up such a controversy that they were able to bring Stephen before them on this day.

¹³ They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Several things are interesting at this point. The whole scenario reminds us of **the trials of Jesus with false witnesses**, and being brought before the Sanhedrin on **trumped up charges**. Here Stephen is being accused of going against the customs of Moses and now his face is shining like the face of Moses after he had seen God.

Warren Wiersbe tells us:

Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin would recall Moses' shining face (Ex. 34:29–30). It was as though God was saying, "This man is not against Moses! He is like Moses—he is My faithful servant!"¹

Stephen is there before the counsel, the charges had been placed and now in 7:1 we read –

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, [The Bible Exposition Commentary](#), vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 430.

Acts 7

¹ *Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"*

Very possibly and most likely, the High Priest Luke speaks of here is Caiaphas, the High Priest over the trials of Jesus.

Stephen, rather than directly answering the false charges against him, uses this opportunity **"to school" these teachers of Israel** on the history of Israel and the move of God in their midst all through the years: *And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen..."*

Beginning with Abraham and going all through the Fathers of Israel, all along the way he reminds these leaders of Israel how often they and the whole nation rebelled against the plan purpose and words of God.

Stephen developed this thought in five points: (a) The promise to **Abraham** (vv. 2–8). From working with the entire human race, the Lord sovereignly called Abraham, father of the Jews, from **Mesopotamia** to the land of promise, and gave him **12** great-grandsons who became the progenitors of Israel's 12 tribes. (b) The sojourn of **Joseph** (vv. 9–16). This move to **Egypt** was the fulfillment of God's prediction recorded in verses 6–7. It too was a radical change for Jacob's descendants. (c) The deliverance under **Moses** (vv. 17–43). A major portion of Stephen's discourse pertained to **Moses** and the Exodus, another important aspect of Israel's history. (d) The building of **the tabernacle** (vv. 44–46). Constructing the tabernacle so that it was portable implied it was temporary. (It was called **the tabernacle of Testimony** because it testified to God's presence among them.) (e) The construction of the temple (vv. 47–50). Even the temple was to be a symbol of God's presence and not the very home of God.²

(7:2-8) First he spoke of God's promises and the inheritance of the land to the Children of Abraham even though there would be times of trials and bondage. He also spoke of the covenant God made with Abraham and his children.

(7:9-16) Then he shared with them about the wickedness of the patriarchs as they went against Joseph. Yet, at their second meeting with Joseph, God provided for them.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, "[Acts](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 369.

(7:17-36) He shared with them about the fulfillment of God's promise to deliver them, out of bondage by the hand of Moses. He spoke of Moses being rejected by the people and yet how God used him when the time came. Upon Moses second return, the people received him.

Stephen reminded them that it was Moses himself who told them:

³⁷ 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.'

(7:38-43) He brought back to their remembrance the way that, even though God had cared for them and looked over them through the days in the wilderness, they still rebelled against God AND against Moses.

(7:44-50) From their rebellion in the wilderness Stephen then moves into a discussion about the tabernacle and finally the Temple itself. God can never be contained in a manmade Temple or even the limited boxes of our own theology... He is God Almighty and who can know Him in His fullness?

Stephen was telling them, that the sins of Israel far outweighed anything that he himself had said or done. He told them straight out that the nation itself and in particular their leaders were far from God... this did not win him any friends (7:51-53).

Acts 7

⁵¹ "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, ⁵³ who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

When they heard Stephen's statement that was it. That was all they could stand (7:54-60)

Acts 7

*⁵⁴ When they heard these things **they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.** ⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"*

⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸ and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Truly, he passed right into the arms of Jesus.

Speaking the truth cost Stephen his physical life. But that's not the end of the story – that's never the end of the story for the Believer and the Kingdom work of God. Our God is eternal and He works with an eternal game plan. This plan begins to unfold in chapter 8.

Look at just the opening verses in chapter 8 as we finish

Acts 8

¹ Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.

And **you would think that was a bad thing** – persecution, and being uprooted from your home and family, but look what verse 4 tells us

⁴ Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.

The worst that the enemy can do to us cannot be compared to the marvelous plan of God. God used the wickedness of the enemy of the Gospel to further spread the Gospel... isn't that just like our God? It may not look good at the moment, ah, **“but God.”**

When the enemy comes against you, understand our God has something far greater in store for you. The attacks of the enemy are only preparations for us to be used for God's Kingdom – in whatever way He determines.