

ACTS 6:8 thru 8:3
THE STORY OF STEPHEN – THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Today we are going to be focusing our attention on the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen. You've heard of him. We actually introduced him last time. He was one of those seven men chosen to serve in an administrative role in the church. Up to this point in the church's brief history there has been some persecution, but it's mostly been in the form of beatings and threats. That's about to get ramped up. Stephen's story is presented in Acts Chapters 6 and 7 and a little bit of 8, 71 verses. And we will cover it all this morning.

READ Acts 6:8

I want to remind you that Stephen is not an apostle. He is merely a lay person commissioned by the church. And yet here it says that Stephen is performing great wonders and signs. How is he able to do this without being an apostle? It says that he is "full of grace and power." But where does this grace and power come from? It comes from God the Holy Spirit. We can say, then, that Stephen is a man filled with the Holy Spirit.

READ Acts 6:9. Note: the "synagogue of the Freedmen" in the King James Version is called the "synagogue of the Libertines." Same thing.

These "freedmen" were slaves of the Romans who had been set free. They were Jews by birth and also proselytes of the Jewish religion (Gentiles who had been converted to Judaism). They are all part of this synagogue. It is a close-knit group who worshipped there in Jerusalem. The distinction made of the Cyrenians, Alexandrians and so forth draws attention to the fact that these freedmen had come from various places. These very devout Jews disagreed theologically with Stephen. At some point they enter into a debate with him more than likely about who Jesus was, arguing whether He was the Messiah or not. These men who are arguing with Stephen are well-educated and informed men.

READ Acts 6:10

These are really smart men, but they are no match for Stephen's wisdom. It's because Stephen is a man who is filled with the Holy Spirit. God has infused him with power and wisdom. Well, here's the deal – if you can't beat somebody in a one-on-one debate then what you do next is – it's an age-old playbook – you slander them. You talk bad about them. You trash their character. You misrepresent their position. Then, if that doesn't work, you resort to violence. We are going to see this on display here in this chapter.

Frustrated that they cannot refute Stephen's argument, these freedmen take the next step. They go to the Jewish leadership in the Temple and they bring charges of blasphemy against Stephen.

READ Acts 6:11-14

Of course, these men are completely lying about what Stephen had said. We know this because v 13 tells us that they "set up false witnesses" who claim that Stephen had said things he didn't say. This is the exact same tactic that had been used against Jesus when He had been "interrogated" by the Jewish leadership, that is, bringing in false witnesses.

I find it very interesting in v 14 that one of the charges they bring against Stephen is that he was claiming that "this place [the Temple]" would be destroyed and that "the customs of Moses" would be changed. Now we don't know exactly what Stephen had said, but as someone who likes history, I find it ironic that the very things they're accusing Stephen of saying actually DO come to pass. Thirty years later --- in 70 A.D. the Romans will destroy the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. When that event takes place, it effectively ends the Old Testament practice of sacrificing animals on the altar. So then, what they are mad about Stephen supposedly saying actually comes true!

READ Acts 6:15

John MacArthur says that Stephen possesses a "pure, calm, unruffled composure, reflecting the presence of God." He's right.

I just wanted to point out that our quarterly completely skips over Chapter 7. But we're not going to do that in this class. We are going to cover it all.

READ Acts 7:1-2

Stephen steps forward and he defends himself and his theological position before the council. What Stephen does here in Acts Chapter 7 is he preaches a sermon. Much of it recounts Israel's history – things we are familiar with from the Old Testament. His sermon is a long one, 52 verses. I'm not going to go through it verse by verse. Instead I will summarize Stephen's main argument and highlight key verses.

Point #1: Israel's history reveals God's sovereign and abundant grace. To make his point, Stephen focuses on the lives of Abraham, Joseph (from the Old Testament) and Moses. They are all familiar characters.

Stephen starts with Abraham...

READ Acts 7:2-5

God initiated the process of calling out a people for His name. He called Abraham while he was living up in Mesopotamia. We don't know much about Abraham's background other than that he was living in a pagan culture. Nothing mentioned about Abraham in Genesis hints as to why God chose him. By all appearances Abraham was just an ordinary man. All we know is that God sovereignly chose Abraham and then lavished His grace on him.

Stephen refers to God as "the God of glory," v 2, showing His majesty. Stephen obviously has a high view of God. God's sovereignty was underscored when God moved Abraham into "this land," v 4, the land we know as Israel. The nation of Israel owes its very existence to God's gracious promise to make a great nation out of Abraham's descendants and to eventually give them the land of Canaan.

Next, Stephen talks about Joseph. This is Joseph from the book of Genesis, Abraham's great grandson. God's hand was on Joseph from the

very beginning, from his youth. In spite of the wickedness displayed by his brothers in selling him into slavery, God continued to bless Joseph.

READ Acts 7:9-13

God sovereignly used "a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan," v 11. This eventually brought Jacob and all of his descendants into Egypt, where Joseph cared for their needs. God's sovereignty and grace continued long after Joseph's death as He protected the Israelites during their 400 years in Egypt. This is what Stephen is talking about

Next is Moses: When the time came for God's promise to Abraham to be fulfilled, He sovereignly raised up Moses to be the deliverer of His people. But Moses was born at the very time that Pharaoh had decreed the death of all male Jewish babies. By His sovereign grace, God protected Moses through Pharaoh's daughter.

READ Acts 7:22

God provided Moses with a good education. In spite of his learning and power, the people of Israel at first did not accept Moses as their deliverer. He had to flee for his life after he killed an Egyptian and then spent 40 years as a shepherd out in the wilderness of Midian. Then, God sovereignly appeared to Moses in the burning bush and promised to use him to deliver Israel out of slavery.

READ Acts 7:36-38

Through Moses, God predicted that He would raise up another prophet after Moses, v 37. We'll talk about this prophet some more in a few minutes. Despite God's sovereign, abundant grace, Israel rebelled against God and His servant Moses in the wilderness. They turned back to Egypt in their hearts and worshipped the golden calf. God gave the nation over to their idolatry, so that later they ended up worshipping the false gods of Canaan. Even so, by His grace God gave them the blueprint for the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, places where God would meet with His covenant people. Stephen emphasizes God's sovereign, abundant grace,

shown to the nation of Israel even though she was frequently rebellious and sinful. This leads to Stephen's next point...

Point #2: Israel's history reveals the nation's stubborn, rebellious propensity to reject God's gracious dealings with them. Stephen focuses on the rejection of Joseph by his brothers, the rejection of Moses by the Israelites, and the eventual rejection of the Messiah. What Stephen wants his listeners to understand from their history is that there is a pattern of the nation's rebellion and their rejecting of the deliverers whom God, by His grace, had sent.

READ Acts 7:9

Joseph's brothers (the patriarchs of the nation) at first wickedly rejected him, but later found him to be their "savior," if you will, from starvation.

READ Acts 7:35

Israel in slavery in Egypt at first rejected Moses as their deliverer, but later he was the very man whom God raised up to be both deliverer and ruler. The parallel with these wicked men to whom Stephen is speaking is obvious. They have rejected the very One whom God had sent as their Messiah and Savior.

Now Stephen is going to bring up that prophet Moses talked about.

READ Acts 7:37

The one Moses had told the people in Deuteronomy is quoted here by Stephen – "a prophet like me." This Person is simply referred to by the Jews as "the Prophet." One example of this is found in John 7:40. There is this debate among the people about who Jesus is. It says, "When they heard these words, some of the people said [speaking about Jesus], 'This really is the Prophet.'" Some Jews were starting to believe that maybe Jesus was the Messiah. Others were skeptical. Jesus's message, the message of the apostles and, by implication Stephen's message here, is

that Jesus IS the Prophet that was predicted by Moses. He IS in fact the Jewish Messiah.

Like Joseph's brothers and like the Israelite people under Moses, Jesus was rejected by God's people. God in His grace is now offering the Jewish nation (those in Stephen's day and even those in our day) another opportunity to repent and follow their Savior and Messiah!

Point #3: Israel's history reveals their pattern of limiting worship to a sacred place rather than to a sacred Person who made everything. Stephen focuses on two places considered to be sacred by the people of Israel – their land and their Temple.

The Jews in Stephen's day are fiercely loyal to the land, to Jerusalem, and to the Temple as the only center for worshipping God. So, throughout his message, Stephen repeatedly shows them that God historically had revealed Himself to His servants in Gentile territory, outside the land and apart from the Temple.

READ Acts 7:5-6

God called Abraham while he was living in the land of Mesopotamia (outside the land). He did not give Abraham any inheritance in the land, "not even a foot's length," v 5. God predicted to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land, but not until they were enslaved and mistreated in a foreign land for 400 years, v 6.

READ Acts 7:30

God revealed Himself to Moses in the foreign land of Midian through the burning bush. That ground was considered to be holy because the living God was there.

READ Acts 7:38

God was with Moses and the nation in the wilderness (outside of the land, they had yet to arrive there). God spoke directly to Moses on Mount Sinai (in the land of Midian). Stephen shows that the charge of him

speaking against the law was not true. He revered God's Law. Stephen refers to it as "living oracles" given to Moses by God.

Next Stephen brings up the Tabernacle and the Temple.

READ Acts 7:46-50

Stephen challenges the mindset that the Jews had toward their Temple. They boasted in the Temple as though it gave them special access to God, notwithstanding their wicked behavior. Stephen shows them that the main issue is not the place where they worship, but rather having their hearts right before a holy God.

While Stephen's sermon is a fairly straight-forward history lesson, his application of it hits a nerve. The entire atmosphere inside the council room is getting ready to change dramatically...

READ Acts 7:51-53

This rebellious nation, God's covenant people have repeatedly hardened their hearts against God's grace. Even though Israel had a history of spiritual privilege unlike any nation on earth, she had rejected her Savior and incurred God's judgment. Well, it would be an understatement to say that they didn't like Stephen's words one bit.

READ Acts 7:54-60

Stephen becomes the first in a long line of Christian martyrs for preaching the truth of the Gospel. He was an incredible man, filled with the Holy Spirit and he loved His LORD.

READ Acts 8:1-3

Here we get our first glimpse of another man named Saul who will become prominent later in the book of Acts.

The application from today's lesson seems obvious:

- We can expect opposition from the world to our message. That opposition could result in physical persecution or even death.
- The question we must ask ourselves is this: "Am I willing to die (or am even willing to feel a little bit uncomfortable) for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"
- "God, grant us wisdom, power and courage to be the witnesses that You have called us to be."

Reminder: Almost all of the Apostles were killed for their faith!

- Matthew was beheaded with a sword.
- Mark died in Alexandria after being dragged through the streets of the city.
- Luke was hanged on an olive tree in Greece.
- John died a natural death, but they unsuccessfully tried to boil him in oil.
- Peter was crucified upside-down in Rome.
- James was beheaded in Jerusalem.
- James the Less was thrown from a height then beaten with clubs.
- Philip was hanged.
- Bartholomew was whipped and beaten until death.
- Andrew was crucified and preached at the top of his voice to his persecutors until he died.
- Thomas was run through with a spear.
- Jude was killed with the arrows of an executioner.
- Matthias was stoned and then beheaded – as was Barnabas.
- Paul was beheaded in Rome.

Source: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/acts-5/>