

Stephen Preaches and Becomes the First Christian Martyr (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Review from Prior Lesson

- a. To solve the problem of the Greek-speaking widows being overlooked in the distribution of bread, the apostles asked the Christian disciples to select seven spiritual men, who they would appoint to take care of this need. (**Acts 6:1-7**)
- b. Stephen was the first of the seven men selected for this task.

II. Introduction to Stephen

- a. Read **Acts 6:3-10**.
- b. Things we learn about Stephen here.
 - i. He is listed first among the seven men selected by the people, who were known to be “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (**Acts 6:3**)
 - ii. He also is described as a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”. (**Acts 6:5**)
 - iii. He also is described as “full of faith and power,” and as one who is doing “great wonders and signs among the people”. (**Acts 6:8**)
 - iv. He is willing to dispute the faith with unbelieving Jews, but was so skilled in presenting the faith that his opponents “were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke”. (**Acts 6:10**)
- c. Character of Stephen
 - i. Highly respected by his fellow Christians; had an excellent reputation.
 - ii. Full of the Holy Spirit.
 - iii. A man having great spiritual wisdom.
 - iv. Entrusted by the apostles with an important responsibility.
 - v. Able to perform miraculous signs, through the Spirit.
 - vi. Bold and evangelistic; highly competent in presenting and defending the Christian faith to opponents.

- d. Stephen is a hero of the faith, an inspiring example of someone we can look up to as a great example to follow.
 - i. Irenaeus (an early Christian writer who was taught by Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John) described Stephen as the first martyr after the crucifixion of Jesus.
 - 1. "And still further, Stephen, who was chosen the first deacon by the apostles, and who, of all men, *was the first to follow the footsteps of the martyrdom of the Lord*, being the first that was slain for confessing Christ, speaking boldly among the people, and teaching them, says: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, ..."
 - 2. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 12; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 434.)
- e. Stephen's opponents
 - i. A group of religious Jews in Jerusalem known as members of the "synagogue of the Freedmen".
 - ii. These were Jews from other places, such as:
 - 1. Cyrene, North Africa (a Greek colony in what is today Libya)
 - 2. Alexandria, Egypt
 - 3. Cilicia (in southeastern Turkey)
 - 4. The Roman province of Asia (in western Turkey)
 - iii. I would assume these people were Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem.

III. The Charge Against Stephen

- a. Read **Acts 6:11-15**.
- b. The specific charges against Stephen:
 - i. "They also set up false witnesses who said, 'This man does not cease to speak *blasphemous words against this holy place and the law*; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.'" (**Acts 6:13-14**, NKJV)
 - ii. This reminds me of the charges brought against Jesus, before He was crucified.
 - 1. Read **Matthew 26:57-62**.

2. Brought before Sanhedrin, false witnesses, a charge related to destroying the temple.
- iii. **Question:** Is there *any grain of truth* related to the charges brought against Stephen?
 1. **Answer:** Perhaps. Consider the following.
 2. Jesus did bring in new teachings that superseded those handed down by Moses.
 - a. **Matthew 5**, "You have heard that it was said (quoting Law of Moses)...but I tell you," regarding:
 - i. Unrighteous anger
 - ii. Lust
 - iii. Permanence of marriage/divorce
 - iv. Swearing
 - v. Retaliation / nonresistance
 - b. Dietary laws (**Mark 7:18-23**)
 - c. Where to worship God (**John 4:21-24**)
 3. Jesus *did* say that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed.
 - a. "Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, 'Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.'" (**Matthew 24:1-2**, NKJV)
 4. On the other hand, clearly Stephen was not saying anything *blasphemous*.
- c. Stephen is in the Sanhedrin and is charged by the religious Jews with speaking against the temple and against the laws and customs handed down through their forefathers.
 - i. This is an accusation made by Jews, against a Jewish man (Stephen).
 - ii. To this point in the book of **Acts**, all members of the church, as well as all the opponents encountered, were Jewish.

- iii. In **Acts 7**, we will see how Stephen masterfully uses the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) to defend himself against these charges, and to go on the offense against his opponents.
- d. All eyes are on Stephen, and it says his face “was like the face of an angel”.
 - i. Did his face glow or radiate light, or was there some other physical phenomenon that everyone saw?
 - ii. Whatever it was, it must have been impressive and maybe more than a little *intimidating*.

IV. The Speech

- a. **Questions** (to consider as we read Stephen’s speech):
 - i. What is the main point Stephen is making in his speech?
 - ii. What is the evidence he uses to support that point?
 - 1. If you were making a simplified outline of Stephen’s speech, what would that look like?
 - iii. In going through the history of the Jews, why does he mention certain seemingly obscure details?
 - iv. Which books of the Old Testament does he quote from?
 - v. Which Old Testament books does he *allude to* (but not quote from)?
 - vi. What version of the Old Testament is Stephen reading, and what does he assume his opponents are reading? Does it line up better with the Masoretic Text (MT) or with the Septuagint (LXX)?
 - 1. Bear in mind that Stephen is speaking to other skeptical Jews, so he will need to present an argument based on Scriptures that *even his enemies* would accept as legitimate.
- b. Important Old Testament characters Stephen mentions in his speech:
 - i. Abraham, Isaac & Jacob (the patriarchs)
 - ii. Joseph
 - iii. Moses
 - iv. Joshua
 - v. David
 - vi. Solomon

- vii. “our fathers” (the Jews in general, who disobeyed God)
- c. The greatest emphasis, in terms of length of discussion (within the speech in **Acts 7:1-53**), is focused on three men:
 - i. Abraham (**Acts 7:1-8**)
 - ii. Joseph (**Acts 7:9-18**)
 - iii. Moses (**Acts 7:19-44**)
- d. Read **Acts 7:1-60**.
- e. Note ways in which the death of Stephen has similarities to the death of Jesus.
 - i. Before dying, Stephen says, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and “Lord, do not charge them with this sin”. (**Acts 7:59-60**)
 - ii. Jesus on the cross:
 - 1. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” (**Luke 23:34**, NKJV)
 - 2. “And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ Having said this, He breathed His last.” (**Luke 23:46**, NKJV)
- f. Note that we are introduced to Saul of Tarsus (later known as the apostle Paul) at the end of the account of Stephen’s stoning.
- g. **Question:** What was Stephen reading, and using as evidence to his skeptical opponents?
 - i. NOTE: Most modern English-language Bible translations have their Old Testament based on the Masoretic Text, a Hebrew (and Aramaic) text with earliest surviving manuscripts going back to the late 9th century AD.
 - 1. However, the early Christian church favored the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), a translation of the Old Testament into Greek that was made about 200 BC.
 - 2. The LXX is used as the basis for the Old Testament in some modern Bibles, including the Orthodox Study Bible (OSB), which we often use in our teaching.
 - ii. “Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, *seventy-five people*.” (**Acts 7:14**, NKJV)

1. "All those who were descendants of Jacob were *seventy persons* (for Joseph was in Egypt already)." (**Exodus 1:5**, NKJV, where the Old Testament is based on the MT)
 2. In the Septuagint, in **Exodus 1:5** it says: "*seventy-five*".
- iii. In **Acts 7:42-43**, Stephen quotes from **Amos 5:25-27**.
1. "You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship..." (**Acts 7:43**, NKJV)
 2. Compare what Stephen quotes here with what it says in the MT versus the LXX.
 - a. From the Masoretic Text: "You also carried Sikkuth your king And Chiun, your idols, The star of your gods, Which you made for yourselves." (**Amos 5:26**, NKJV, based on MT)
 - b. From the Septuagint: "You have carried the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of your god Raiphan, which you made for yourselves." (**Amos 5:26**, OSB, based on LXX)
- h. Outline of Stephen's speech.
- i. The conclusion:
 1. "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. 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, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it." (**Acts 7:51-53**, NKJV)
 - ii. The core of Stephen's speech can be seen in the following outline, consisting of *four points*:
 1. Your fathers rejected Joseph.
 - a. They rejected him out of envy.
 - b. However, God raised him up to deliver them.
 2. Your fathers rejected Moses.

- a. Initially: they did not want him to be ruler and judge over them.
 - b. Later, they rejected him by bowing down to the golden calf and turning to worship the hosts of heaven.
- 3. Your fathers also rejected and killed the prophets who foretold the coming of the *Just One* (or the *Righteous One*).
 - a. (Note that the Greek word Stephen uses herein **Acts 7:52**, lexical (dictionary) form: dikaios / δίκαιος, can be translated either “righteous” or “just”.) Compare how the NKJV and ESV translators render this passage:
 - i. “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,” (**Acts 7:52**, NKJV)
 - ii. “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the *Righteous One*, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,” (**Acts 7:52**, ESV)
- 4. *You are just like your fathers!* You have rejected the Holy Spirit, have not kept the laws of God, and now have rejected and murdered the Righteous One (the Christ).
 - a. No wonder the Jews in the Sanhedrin reacted so strongly to Stephen’s blistering speech, stopping up their ears and stoning him in rage!
- i. Joseph and Moses foreshadowed Christ.
 - i. For many years I wondered why there was so much text in the book of **Genesis** devoted to the story of Joseph (**Genesis 37, 39-50**). After all...
 - 1. Neither Jesus nor the priests were descended from Joseph.
 - 2. Joseph is hardly mentioned in the New Testament
 - a. Perhaps the most prominent mention of Joseph in the entire New Testament is by Stephen, here in **Acts 7**.

- b. Consider, on the other hand, the case of Melchizedek, who is mentioned in only about three verses in **Genesis 14**, and again in **Psalm 110**. However, his significance is explained through *three chapters* in **Hebrews**!
 - ii. Joseph was rejected by his brothers, the patriarchs.
 - 1. Read **Genesis 37:1-11**.
 - 2. They hated him because:
 - a. He was the beloved son of his father.
 - b. He exposed the sin of his brothers.
 - c. They were envious of him and did not want to bow down before him.
 - 3. Therefore, they plotted to kill him.
 - iii. The life of Joseph foreshadowed that of Christ. Consider these similarities:
 - 1. Beloved son of his Father.
 - 2. Hated by his jealous brothers because of his prophetic dream that they would *bow down before him*.
 - 3. Sold for money in betrayal.
 - a. Consider how Judas betrayed Jesus for money, in **Matthew 26:15**.
 - 4. Given a “robe of *colors*”.
 - a. The robe given to Jesus, which He wore before His crucifixion, is described as “purple” in **Mark 15:17-20** and **John 19:2-5**.
 - b. However, that robe is described as “scarlet” in **Matthew 27:28-31**.
 - 5. Betrayed, body cast into a pit, goes on a journey to strange land packed among the spices.
 - 6. A lie circulated by the Jews regarding the fate of his body.
 - 7. He was a righteous man who did nothing wrong and fled from temptation.

8. Comes out of 'prison' (consider **1 Peter 3:19**, where Jesus "preached to the spirits in prison", a figure for Hades).
 9. Raised up to be ruler over all the kingdom.
 10. All people from all nations must come to him for food. They must *give up everything* in order to obtain this life-saving food.
 11. Willing to forgive his brothers who sinned against him.
- iv. For more on Joseph/Jesus parallels, see the lesson on **Genesis 40-45** in our expository series on **Genesis**.
- j. The parallel with Moses
- i. Stephen discusses the life of Moses as consisting of three 40-year periods.
 - ii. In **Acts 7:37**, Stephen quotes from the **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** prophecy, which we discussed in the lesson where Peter also quoted this, in **Acts 3:22-23**.
 1. The Lord would "raise up" a man from among their brothers (a Jew) who would be "a prophet like Moses".
 2. All must heed what this prophet says when he comes, or they will be cut off by God!
 3. As Eusebius pointed out in *Proof of the Gospel* books 1 and 3, in order to be a prophet who was "like Moses", he must bring new laws.
 - a. Unlike all the prophets who came after Him (until Jesus), Moses alone brought new laws.
 - b. All the other prophets merely called the people to follow the law previously handed down through Moses.
 - iii. Stephen focuses on how the Jews rejected Moses.
 1. Read **Exodus 2:11-15**.
 2. Read **Exodus 32:1-6**.
- k. Their fathers killed the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ.
- i. "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...." (**Acts 7:52**, NKJV)

- ii. **Questions:** Where does it speak of “the Just One” (or “the Righteous One”) who will come? Also, is there any indication that the prophets who foretold this were killed by the Jews?

1. Read **Isaiah 53:7-11**.

- a. Isaiah spoke of the “the Righteous One”.
- b. According to Jewish tradition, Isaiah was killed by being put in a hollow log which was then sawn in two, under King Manasseh (described in a work called *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*).
- c. This tradition regarding the demise of the prophet Isaiah may have been alluded to in **Hebrews**.
 - i. “Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, *they were sawn in two*, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.” (**Hebrews 11:36–38**, NKJV)

2. Read **Zechariah 9:9**.

- a. This is a prophecy about the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the righteous king riding on a donkey, mentioned in all four gospels.
- b. Regarding the prophet Zechariah:
 - i. The prophet Zechariah (who was the author of the book named after him) was the *son of Berechiah*. (**Zechariah 1:1**)
 - ii. In the New Testament, Jesus says he was martyred between the temple and the altar.
 1. “that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of *Zechariah, son of Berechiah*, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” (**Matthew 23:35**, NKJV)

2. (Note that this is sometimes confused with another man named Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, who was slain in the temple area as recorded in **2 Chronicles 24:20-21**.)
3. Therefore, we have (at least) two prophets who spoke of the coming of the Just/Righteous One, who was killed by the Jews.
- l. Other Old Testament Scriptures alluded to (but not quoted)
 - i. Books quoted from:
 1. **Genesis**
 2. **Exodus**
 3. **Deuteronomy**
 4. **Amos**
 5. **Isaiah**
 - ii. Acts 7:45 (refers to events in **Joshua**)
 - iii. Acts 7:46 (refers to David's desire to build the temple), discussed in:
 1. **2 Samuel 7** (designated **3 Kingdoms** in the LXX)
 2. **1 Chronicles 17**
 3. **Psalms 89** and **132** (designated **Psalms 88** and **131** in the LXX)
 - iv. **Acts 7:47**, Solomon building the temple
 1. **1 Kings** (designated **3 Kingdoms** in the LXX)
 2. **2 Chronicles**
 - v. **Acts 7:51**, "you stiff-necked (people) uncircumcised in heart and ears"
 1. Read **Jeremiah 6:10**.
 - a. Refuse to listen (uncircumcised ears)
 2. Read **Jeremiah 9:22-25**.
 - a. These are warnings for us, as well.

- b. The Jews took pride in outward signs. However, God always has looked first and foremost at the condition of the ears (willing to listen to what He says) and hearts (willing to be humble before the Lord, to repent and obey God) of His people.
- c. **Challenge:** Don't focus merely on the outward signs of obedience. We must have open ears and soft hearts.

V. The Fate of Stephen and Lessons for Us

- a. Read **Matthew 23:27-36**.
 - i. Jesus said he would send out men who would be persecuted and even killed (as Stephen was).
 - ii. Jesus' spokesmen will be hated for speaking the truth, addressing inward sins and religious hypocrisy.
 - iii. The prophets in the past were hated and murdered; the same will happen to some Christians who follow in their footsteps.
- b. Many Christians have the idea that if we "do it right" in sharing our faith, the world will love us and be drawn to us. There are some cases where that will happen. However, let us consider the example of what happened to Jesus, Stephen, and the prophets!
 - i. Pray for boldness, and call people to repent.
 - 1. Jesus began his preaching with the message: "*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (**Matthew 4:17**)
 - 2. Peter preached, "*Repent* and be baptized..." (**Acts 2:38**)
 - ii. Know and use the Scriptures and be prepared to use them effectively when confronted.
 - iii. Be inspired by those who have gone before, such as Stephen.
 - iv. Consider the wonderful salute that Jesus gave Stephen, a man after His own heart who preached as Jesus did (appearing standing, at the right hand of the Father, in honor of the first Christian martyr).