

Stephen on Trial

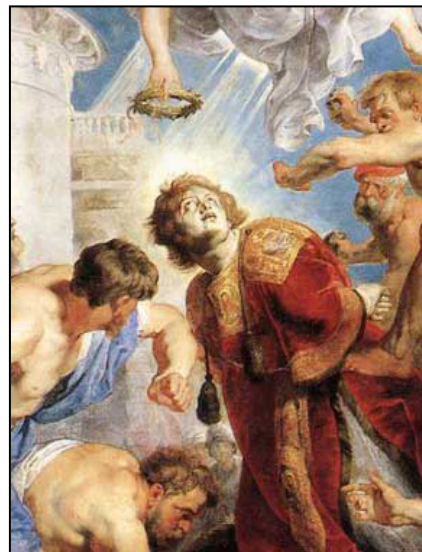
[Acts 6:8-15](#)



Last week we looked at the first [7 verses of Acts 6](#), where the Apostles were looking for some men to rid themselves of the administrative burden of “*servicing tables*” which involved making sure the needy Hellenistic widows were provided for. This would free them for the priority of preaching and teaching and praying. They accomplished this by appointing seven men to perform the task, one of whom was a man named Stephen.

Up to this point, our focus in the book of Acts has been upon the Twelve and specifically upon Peter and John. But now there is a change. Stephen now becomes the main subject for the remainder of the 6th Chapter and the entire 7th Chapter.

In this next major section of Acts, Luke narrated three significant events in the life and ministry of the early church. These events were the **martyrdom of Stephen, the ministry of Philip, and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus**. Luke's presentation of these events was primarily biographical. In fact, he began his account of each event with the name of its major character ([Acts 6:8](#); [8:5](#); [9:1](#)).



So in our text this morning we see Stephen, whom we were introduced to last week, preaching to the Hellenistic Jews. Because of his preaching about Jesus' destruction of the Temple and His changing the customs of Moses he is brought to trial before the Sanhedrin.

Now you may be thinking, “Does any of this matter? Is this a vital issue to us today? How does Stephen's trial before the Sanhedrin affect my life?” Well consider this; Stephen died for the truth about Jesus' destruction of the temple and his changing the customs of Moses. In fact he chose to go on speaking this truth when he knew that it would cost him his life.

Stephen was the Church's first martyr. Before the death of Stephen the opposition of the Jews had been limited to threats of imprisonment, verbal abuse, and finally to imprisonment and beating, but now it burst forth with a raging kind of madness that results in the execution of Stephen by stoning.

Stephen's death is very significant especially when we understand the character of this man. So let's let look at what the Bible says about him, which is only found in Acts 6 and 7. What we see here is all we know about the man but it is significant.

Stephen's Character—despite what we heard during the Clinton administration character does count. How we live affects the world in which we live. Evangelism is primarily a matter of character and content. It's not just what you say, it's what you are. What you are gives you a platform for what you say. The man who shared the gospel with me was able to do so because his life demonstrated the reality of what he believed.

We often fail to realize how crucial the behavior of God's people is relative to his purposes. As God's children, we are to live lives of character. And Stephen is a great example to all of us:

"But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."⁵ and the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit... (Acts 6:3-5 NASB)

At this time there is probably somewhere between 20 and 30 thousand Christians in the church. And out of those 20 to 30 thousand Christians they were to pick seven men full of the Holy Spirit and who is the number one name on the list? Stephen. Now that gives you a little idea of what kind of a man that man was. His name is Stephanos, which means: **“victor’s crown.”**

Stephen was a man of **“good reputation.”** His integrity and reputation were blameless, not only among the church but also in the eyes of the unbelieving world ([1 Tim. 3:7](#)).

Stephen was also **“full of the Spirit.”** The word “full” here is from the Greek word [pleres](#) [pl h/rhv], which has the idea of: **“controlled by.”** Stephen was a man who was controlled by the Spirit.

The Spirit's control is not an automatic, mechanical control. As I understand the Scriptures the Spirit's control is brought about by means. We must take possession of the divine strength He has made available to us in Christ. We appropriate the controlling grace of the Spirit through the means of letting the word of Christ richly dwell within us.

Believers, we need more than a casual acquaintance with the Bible if we are going to be controlled by the Spirit. God's word is to dwell in us abundantly—it is to saturate us. It must become part of our very being, transforming the way we think and act. To use an illustration from the area of computer technology, it must be the program always running that controls everything else. Everything depends on it. This was Stephen he was filled with the Word of God and thus controlled by the Spirit.

Paul says to every Christian, **“Be filled with the Spirit,”** Ephesians 5:18.

Stephen was also **“full of wisdom.”** The Greek word for “wisdom” [sofiā—[Sophia](#)] is used only four times in Acts, twice of Stephen ([Acts 6:3, 10](#)) and twice in his message before the [Sanhedrin](#) ([Acts 7:10, 22](#)).

Biblically wisdom is not so much what you know but how you live. It is like being taught to drive. What matters in driving is the speed and appropriateness of your reactions to things, and the soundness of your judgment as to what scope a situation gives you. You don't ask yourself, "Why is this road so slippery" or "Why is the turn so sharp" or "Why is that car parked where it is" or "Why did they suddenly stop right in the middle of the road?" Does the "why" really matter? Instead of asking "why," you simply try to see and do the right thing in the actual situation. Divine wisdom enables you and me to do just that in the actual situations of life.

To drive well, you have to keep your eyes focused to notice exactly what is in front of you. To live wisely, you have to do the same thing. Wisdom is properly evaluating circumstances and making right decisions. It's the ability to respond correctly to the circumstances of life. Stephen shows us a life of a wise man.

Stephen was also a man **“full of faith”**—the word “full” here is also [pleres](#). It is the idea of domination or control. When it says he was full of faith it means that, that which totally controlled him was faith. For example, the Bible talks about people who were full of rage, full of sorrow, full of joy, full of love, full of madness, full of anger, and what that means is that they were controlled at that moment by that thing.

Stephen's life was dominated by his faith. He believed God. If you want to know what he specifically believed, study his sermon in Chapter 7. In that sermon we see that he believed in the [sovereignty of God](#), he believed that God ruled history. The whole 7th Chapter is his great sermon on how God rules history. Stephen believed God is in control.

You can only be full of faith if you believe in a sovereign God who uses even the wicked deeds of people to accomplish His eternal purpose. If God's predestination means, as many say, that God looked down through history and saw in advance who would believe in Him, and put them on His list of the elect, then man's will, not God's will, is the sovereign determiner of what happens. Can you imagine, God seeing that I would choose Him, so He says, “Well, good, that's what I wanted anyway!” Or, when Israel stoned her prophets, God saying, “Well, I'd really

rather they wouldn't do such things, but I guess I'll have to work it into *My* plan somehow!" How could we trust a God who did not work *all things* after the counsel of His will ([Eph. 1:11](#))?

As we move to our text for today we see that Stephen was also full of grace:

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8 NASB)

This grace is demonstrated in Stephen's dying words:

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. (Acts 7:60 NASB)

Rocks are smashing against his head and shattering his body and he looks up to heaven and he cries with a loud voice, ***"Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"*** Now that is nothing short of graciousness, is it? That is bestowing favor upon those who kill you.

Stephen was also full of power—God gave Stephen the ability to perform ***"great wonders and signs among the people"***

The mention of Stephen's ability to perform ***"signs and wonders"*** is very significant. It seems to imply that Stephen was, or at least functioned similarly to, an apostle. Up to this point, only the apostles were said to have worked signs and wonders. Apart from the 12 only Stephen, Philip ([Acts 8:6-7](#)), and Barnabas ([Acts 15:12](#)) in the early church are reported to have performed miracles. The tense of the verb (***"was performing,"*** [Acts 6:8](#)) indicates that Stephen was doing these miraculous works frequently.

Now neither Philip nor Stephen did signs and wonders until they had the hands of the apostles laid on them. Luke frequently uses the placing on of hands to signify conveying miraculous powers.

The biblical evidence is that the gift of performing miracles was limited to this transitional period for the purpose of confirming the testimony of the apostles ([Heb. 2:3-4](#); [2 Cor. 12:12](#)). They were for the purpose of confirming something being introduced for the first time. They did not continue in the church, and they do not continue to this day.

But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. (Acts 6:9 NASB)

Synagogue—The synagogue is not the temple; the synagogue is a completely different place. During the 400 silent years (which is what we call them), from the end of the book of Malachi to the beginning of the Gospels, is when the whole concept of the Rabbis and the synagogue arose. The Hebrew people in that time period had a new passion for the Hebrew Scriptures, and they wanted to learn what God had to say. They needed a place where the Scriptures could be read and taught, so they developed the synagogue.

In larger cities such as Jerusalem there would be a number of synagogues catering for different classes of Jews. There was a synagogue located in every city in which there were 10 Jewish males. No less than seven men would be called upon to read portions of the Law and the Prophets. Then the Ruler of the Synagogue could and would call on any competent distinguished visitor to speak. Jesus and the Apostles took advantage of this practice in order to preach the gospel.

It is supposed, also, that these synagogues had theological schools attached to them; and that it was the disciples or scholars of these schools who came forward to dispute with Stephen, and were enraged because they were confounded.

The [Talmud](#) said there were 390 synagogues in Jerusalem before the Romans [destroyed the city](#). Like local churches today, they tended to attract people with similar backgrounds and preferences.

This introduces to us a community of Jews known as [Freedmen](#). The Roman general [Pompey](#) in 63 B.C. had gone into Israel and taken slaves from the Jews. He had hauled them off to Rome and after a certain number of years had released them. Some of them moved out of Rome and established a community of these freed slaves and they were called the Libertines.

Some scholars believe that as many as five synagogues are in view in this reference, but the best interpretation seems to be that there was just one.

These people had their roots in North Africa (Cyrene and Alexandria) and Asia Minor (Cilicia and Asia). Thus these were Hellenistic Jews, the group from which Stephen himself probably came.

Now it is interesting that the capital of Cilicia was [Tarsus](#), and undoubtedly in this synagogue was a young man named Saul of Tarsus who was among those who disputed with Stephen when he came preaching Jesus Christ.

This is the first occurrence in Acts of someone presenting the gospel in a Jewish synagogue. Until now we have read that the disciples taught and preached in the temple and from house to house ([Acts 5:42](#)).

So Stephen boldly went into the Hellenistic Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem and proclaimed Christ. And the description suggests that there he disputed with many who disagreed with him. When it says they argued with Stephen, it is not a word that means they quarreled with him. It is a word that means they formally debated him.

Up to this point the main opponents of the new born church have been the [Sadducees](#), for the witness of the church appears to have been focused through the Temple, although they had no doubt taken up opportunities to speak elsewhere. However, on the whole the Pharisees appear to have tolerated them. But now Stephen would take his witness into the synagogues and there he would be in direct confrontation with the Pharisees. Thus the Sadducean opposition would now be bolstered by the Pharisees.

And yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. (Acts 6:10 NASB)

These unregenerate Jews were no match for Stephen who was empowered by the Spirit.

Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." (Acts 6:11 NASB)

So they hired false witnesses. The word “secretly” here is the Greek word [hupoballo](#), [hoop-ob-al'-lo] It is used only here in New Testament. The verb originally means: ***“to put under, as carpets under one's feet; hence, to put one person in place of another; to substitute, as another's child for one's own; to employ a secret agent in one's place, and to instigate or secretly instruct him.”***

What these men are doing here is nothing new. Remember Jesus at his trial? What did they do? Hired false witnesses. What did they accuse Jesus of? **Blasphemy**. Same thing. Verse 11 says that they accused him of blasphemous words against Moses and God. It seems kind of strange that they put Moses first.

Blasphemy—this was the most deadly charge they could bring against him. Blasphemy, when against GOD, signifies speaking impiously of his nature, attributes, or works; and, when against men, it signifies speaking injuriously of their character, blasting their reputation. It was any slanderous or scurrilous word spoken against humankind or God or anything associated with his majesty and power:

*and they blindfolded Him and were asking Him, saying, "Prophecy, who is the one who hit You?"⁶⁵
And they were saying many other things against Him, blaspheming. (Luke 22:64-65 NASB)*

It was, of course, the Sanhedrin's duty to examine any serious charge of blasphemy. A Sanhedrin trial for blasphemy required witnesses, and the Hellenistic Jews make sure they are present here—though, as Luke is careful to point out, these are false witnesses. They are not false simply because they are opposing God's spokesperson. Rather, their testimony is a subtle and deadly misrepresentation of what was intended. Stephen had his words twisted, and a false accusation was brought against him.

Why would they make such accusations? Why would that say they "have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God"? Because Stephen was clearly teaching that Jesus was greater than Moses; that Jesus was God; that Jesus was greater than the temple; that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law; and that Jesus was greater than their religious customs and traditions.

And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council. (Acts 6:12 NASB)

They were in fact so effective in what they said that even "*the people*" (a vague term meaning part of the general population) became stirred up. This is the first time that "*the people*" are represented as taking part against the disciples. During the first two persecutions the "*fear of the people*" had restrained the violence of the persecutors, which renders their present opposition the more remarkable. But the Sadducees, who had conducted those persecutions, had little popular influence. The Pharisees were more influential with the people.

And remember that it was the result of trouble in the synagogues rather than in the temple, that got the Pharisees involved, it had begun to affect them personally. That is why later Saul, a disciple of the [Pharisaic doctor Gamaliel](#), will be involved. It is now for the first time since the crucifixion the Pharisees who are influential in opposing the infant church.

It would seem from the fact that Stephen alone was affected by this that the council was in general following its own decision to leave the Apostles alone. But they clearly saw this outspoken Hellenistic Jewish Christian as different, especially in view of the severe charges being set against him.

So here is Stephen, standing before the same Sanhedrin that condemned the Lord Jesus to death and that had just had such difficulty with Peter, John, and the other apostles.

And they put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law; (Acts 6:13 NASB)

"*They put forward false witnesses*"— may simply indicate that they set up as witnesses the ones who had been spreading false rumors and were demanding that something be done. It does not necessarily mean that the council was involved, actually fabricating evidence. And even then we must recognize that there was probably some partial truth in what the false witnesses had to say.

These false witnesses claimed that he had spoken against "*this holy place*" (the Temple) and against "*the Law*". This would be seen as an attack on both the things that were important to the chief priests (the Temple) and to the Pharisees (the Law).

Stephen appears to have stressed that in Christ "the land" and the Temple had ceased to hold a position of prime importance. Now it was Christ, the Corner Stone of the new and living temple, Who was to take central stage.

The general charge against Stephen was speaking blasphemy "*against Moses and God,*" otherwise expressed, "*against this holy place, and the law.*" The change of phraseology arises from the fact that the temple and law were

the visible representatives of Moses and of God.

The charges are remarkably like those which were leveled against Jesus when He was arrested, tried and turned over to the Romans for crucifixion. Indeed, there is a correlation between these two events. Both were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. Both are accused by false witnesses. Both were accused of speaking against the Temple and the Law. Both were put to death.

for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." (Acts 6:14 NASB)

They accuse Stephen of saying, *"This Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place* [i.e., the temple in Jerusalem], *and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us."* My first question is: Did Jesus say this? Did Jesus say that he would destroy the temple?

Yes, He did!

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. ² And He answered and said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down." (Matthew 24:1-2 NASB)

Here Jesus clearly predicts the destruction of the Temple. Drop down to verse:

and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. (Matthew 24:30 NASB)

In order to understand what Jesus is saying, we need to understand the idea that is behind "[coming on the clouds.](#)" God's *"coming on the clouds of heaven"* is a symbolic way of speaking of His presence and judgment. All through the Tanakh we see God coming "on clouds," to bring judgment on His enemies.

The oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them. ([Isaiah 19:1 NASB](#))

We know from [chapter 20](#) that God used the Assyrians as instruments of His wrath on Egypt, yet it says, *"The LORD rides on a swift cloud..., Egypt will totter at His presence."* God came to Egypt in judgment. His presence was made known in judgment. But it was the Assyrians who were literally present. This is the idea behind Christ's coming on the clouds. He is saying that He will come in judgment and destroy the Temple bringing an end to old covenant Israel.

When did He say He would do this? In their generation:

"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matthew 24:34 NASB)

Everything that Jesus talked about in this chapter was to happen within forty years. So Yes Jesus clearly said He would destroy the Temple.

Did Jesus predict that he would change the customs Moses handed down? Absolutely! Notice what Jesus says:

there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed

out of the man are what defile the man. (Mark 7:15 NASB)

This is radical! Jesus is setting aside the dietary laws of the Mosaic covenant. That is defiantly a change in the customs of Moses. This word "defiles" is from the Greek word [koinoo](#) [koino/w], which means: ***"to make common, defile, pollute, unclean."*** It is used 16 times in 12 verses in the New Testament. It is used 13 times in relation to food defiling a person. Koinoo is used in:

And on the next day, as they were on their way, and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry, and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; ¹¹ and he beheld the sky opened up, and a certain object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, ¹² and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ And a voice came to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." ¹⁵ And again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy [koinoo]." (Acts 10:9-15 NASB)

The word ***"unholy"*** in verse 15 is the Greek word koinoo. Peter in effect says, ***"I don't want to become unholy by eating the wrong foods."*** And God replies to Peter, ***"What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."*** So here God is teaching Peter the same thing that Jesus taught him about 10 years earlier—all food is now clean.

These Hellenistic Jews, who may have spent their life's earnings to return to the "holy land" (including, especially, the temple), must have believed that no one could worship God as well from foreign soil as from the sacred soil of Israel and from the sacred temple. This worship, they would have insisted, was rooted in the Law of Moses.

Then Stephen comes along preaching that Jesus had said that the Temple was shortly to be destroyed which would appear blasphemous enough to those who believed in the sacredness of the Temple.

Jesus himself was taking the place of everything in the temple. Jesus became our one and only high priest who lives forever to make intercession for us ([Hebrews 7:25](#)). So the temple and the priesthood was going to be "destroyed."

Jesus offered himself and his own blood once for all to make an eternal redemption ([Hebrews 9:12, 25–28](#); [10:10–12](#)). So all the animal sacrifices of the temple are going to stop when it is "destroyed."

And so within that generation temple in Jerusalem was "destroyed." We have a new temple, a new priest, a new sacrifice, a new access to glory and fellowship with God. So when John has a vision of the New Covenant he says,

And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. (Revelation 21:22 NASB)

Stephen died for the truth that Jesus was about to destroy the Temple. He continued to speak about it even when he knew that it would cost him his life. So he chose to die rather than not speak about Jesus' destruction of the temple and his changing the customs of Moses. May God help us to see it the way he saw it, and cherish Jesus our new temple more than anything in the world.

And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15 NASB)

When Stephen came before them they were astonished, for when they gazed at his face it looked like the face of an angel. Sayings like this are frequent among the Jewish writers, who represent God as distinguishing eminent men by causing a glory to shine from their faces. Rabbi Gedalia said that, ***"When Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh, they appeared like those angels which minister before the face of the Lord; for their stature appeared greater, and the splendor of their faces was like the sun, and their eyes like the wheels of the sun; their beard like clusters of***

grapes, and their words like thunder and lightning; and that, through fear of them, those who were present fell to the earth."

What does an angel's face look like? This probably means that he was so filled with the sense of the presence of God that his face in some way shone:

And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. ³ And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; (Matthew 28:2-3 NASB)

Luke was with Paul in Rome when he wrote Acts. By that time, Paul had seen an angel and knew what one's face was like. [Acts 27:23](#). God was here giving the Sanhedrin a huge opportunity, speaking through His "*angel*" (messenger), as He had previously to Israel when He gave them the Law. The point is that in the end they responded to neither. Here was God's angel bringing a greater covenant, but they missed their opportunity once again.

They accused Stephen of speaking against the Law, and yet in violation of the ninth commandment, they used false witnesses to slander him! Why couldn't these men see what Stephen saw, that Jesus Christ is God's Messiah and Savior? Why weren't they persuaded by the great wonders and signs that Stephen performed? Why weren't they convinced by his superior logic and debating skills? The biblical answer is:

in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4 NASB)

They are:

being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; (Ephesians 4:18 NASB)

Jesus asked the Jews who did not believe in Him, "Why do you not understand what I am saying?" He answered His own question:

"You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies. (John 8:44 NASB)

He also said:

"No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44 NASB)

Thus when we talk to people about the Lord, we must pray that He would open their hearts to respond to the message ([Acts 13](#); [16:14](#)). Miracles, logic, or wisdom are not enough to make converts; only God can do that.

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