

STEPHEN'S SERMON

[Acts 7:1-53](#)



Several weeks ago in our study of Acts 6 we met a man named Stephen. We only have a chapter and a half about Stephen in the whole Bible, yet he emerges as one of the most impressive characters in the entire Scripture. In the beginning of chapter 6 we saw that he was one of those leaders chosen to help with the issue related to the care of widows.

We learned then that Stephen was a brilliant and spiritual man. [Acts 6:5](#) says he was "*full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.*" Verse 8 says he was "*full of grace and power.*" Verse 10 says his opponents "*could not resist the wisdom and Spirit with which he spoke.*" And even after he was arrested, verse 15 says that "*his face was like the face of an angel*" as he was accused in the court.

The charges against him are given in:

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)



Earlier in verse 11 he had been accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. So Stephen is on trial for opposing Moses and his customs and God and His temple. In chapter 7 we have Stephen's response to these charges.

This sermon is the longest recorded sermon in the Book of Acts. Stephen's sermon is twice as long as Peter's sermon delivered at Pentecost ([Acts 2:14-36](#)). I think it is important to see that just like Peter's sermon it is filled Scripture.

The charges leveled against Stephen about "*this holy place*" and the "*customs handed down by Moses*" are two of the major themes in Stephen's sermon.

The Jews in Stephen's day were fiercely loyal to the land, to Jerusalem, and to the temple as the only center for worshiping God. So throughout his message, Stephen repeatedly shows that God had worked in many places and ways with His servants down through the centuries, and so worship is not limited to the land of Palestine or to the temple.

The content of Stephen's message is quite different from previous sermons in Acts. The emphasis upon Christ in this message is typological and not direct. There is no reference to Christ's resurrection. And the conclusion of the sermon is very unique. There is no call to repentance but only a very strong accusation of guilt.

The first section (vv. 2-16) deals with Israel's patriarchal period and refutes the charge of blaspheming God (6:11). The second major section (vv. 17-43) deals with Moses and the Law and responds to the charge of blaspheming Moses ([Acts 6:11](#)) and speaking against the Law ([Acts 6:13](#)). The third section (vv. 44-50) deals with the temple and responds to the charge of speaking against the temple (Act 6:13).

This is a long sermon, but because it is to be understood as a whole, and not merely in parts, I have decided to deal with whole sermon in one sermon. The whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts, and so we shall endeavor to work through the text in its entirety.

And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" (Acts 7:1 NASB)

The high priest, probably [Caiaphas](#) (he served in this capacity until A.D. 36; see [Acts 4:6](#)), the Sanhedrin's presiding officer, asks Stephen whether the charges of blasphemy are true.

The words of Stephen in this chapter are a powerful defense against the charges made against him. That is unquestionable. But they are not a defense made by his proving that he did not say the words that he was accused of.

At first sight his speech appears simply to be a review of the early history of Israel, but we should note that the use of this kind of approach was the normal style of the day.

What we see here in Stephen's sermon is an ongoing answer to the prayer prayed back in:

"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, (Acts 4:29NASB)

Stephen, like Peter before him, is not intimidated by this high court. He fearlessly and boldly proclaims a message that condemns his hearers. I'm sure that Stephen knew that he could be killed for what he was saying but that didn't slow him down a bit. God continues to answer their prayer for boldness.

And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, 'DEPART FROM YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' (Acts 7:2-3 NASB)

Stephen begins his reply in a conciliating way, ***"brethren and fathers"***. He is affirming his oneness with them as a Jew, and giving respect to those in authority.

Stephen initially answers the charge of blasphemy against God by his description of Him as ***"the God of glory"***. It was as the ***"God of glory"*** that Israel especially saw Him, and was how Stephen saw Him. This phrase would be well known to his hearers and is taken from [Psalm 29:3](#). No description of God could exceed what is in this Psalm. It expresses His position as the Lord of glory and as Lord over creation.

He begins by stressing that their whole history began with the idea of **deliverance**. He brings out that the first stage in that deliverance took place when God effectively called Abraham. He ***"appeared to Abraham."*** This was the first of a number of such [theophanies](#) which Abraham would be privileged to enjoy. God appeared to Abraham and it was while he was at Babylon, making clear by this his view that God was such that He could speak to men anywhere, even in Babylon (which is always synonymous in Scripture with all that is against God).

The Hebrew people were likely to say that God dwelt within their geographical city, within the temple. It was a very limiting factor. So Stephen is going back to Abraham as the father of the Hebrew people, and he is reminding them, Don't forget, Abraham was a pagan. Abraham was an idol worshiper. Abraham was from a foreign country, and God showed up and called Abraham out of a pagan lifestyle. God sovereignly chose Abraham and poured out His grace on him. Stephen quotes [Genesis 12:3](#).

"Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, God removed him into this country in which you are now living. ⁵ "And He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground; and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS OFFSPRING AFTER HIM. ⁶ "But God spoke to this effect, that his OFFSPRING WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. ⁷ "AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY SHALL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL

***JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.'*⁸ "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. (Acts 7:4-8 NASB)**

Verse 7's ***"In this place"***—in the original text means at the mountain of God in Midian ([Exodus 3:12](#)—***"in this mountain"***). This is thus the first instance where he stresses that ordained worship of God is to be away from the land in a place chosen by God.

The Jews were very proud of being ***"circumcised on the eighth day"***. We can compare Paul's similar claim for himself in Philippians 3:5. But as Stephen will later point out, in contrast to this God's people are later revealed as "uncircumcised in heart" because they were disobedient (Acts 7:51).

The Jews of Stephen's day needed to realize that God had not exhausted His promises to Abraham in giving them what they presently had and valued so highly. There was a greater inheritance in Christ. God sought to teach these Jews that there were spiritual descendants of Abraham who were not his physical descendants:

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:29 NASB)

The Abrahamic promise included ***"all nations"*** being blessed through faith in Christ ([Gal. 3:6-9](#)).

"And the patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. And yet God was with him,¹⁰ and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.¹¹ "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it; and our fathers could find no food.¹² "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time.¹³ "And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.¹⁴ "And Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.¹⁵ "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there passed away, he and our fathers.¹⁶ "And from there they were removed to Shechem, and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. (Acts 7:9-16 NASB)

Notice that it is through "jealousy" they sold into Egypt the one who had been revealed to them through dreams as a prospective deliverer. God had revealed through dreams that Joseph their brother was to rule over them. He was a prophet from God. But Joseph was rejected by his brothers, (the leaders of the covenant community), because of their jealousy, so that they sold him into Egypt.

They rejected Joseph but verse 9 says, ***"God was with him"***—so they were apposed to God, they were rejecting His deliverer. So Israel's first deliverer and prophet had initially been despised and rejected by the covenant communities leaders, and had been sold off, but had then been highly exalted by God in order that He might deliver His undeserving people. And although initially unrecognized (verse 12), he was finally recognized by His own people (verse 13). It was to be a pattern for the future.

Stephen undoubtedly has in mind here, and wants his listeners to have in mind, that Jesus came and prophesied, but was unrecognized. He also was despised and rejected by His brethren (by the religious leaders), and went into a foreign land (Galilee of the Gentiles). He was then sold for the price of a slave, but God raised Him to high status that He might deliver His people.

The relation of famine to spiritual depravity occurs often in the [Tanakh](#), and to those who were use to dealing in allegories the point would hardly be missed. Those who appeared to be God's faithful ones, who were suffering spiritual famine because they had refused to hear God's prophet.

There is a reason that Stephen mentions the jealousy of Joseph's brothers. The sin which they committed is now being repeated by the members of the Sanhedrin. They were motivated by a spirit of jealousy ([Acts 5:17](#)). And they are doing to Stephen the very thing that Joseph's brothers did to him. The brothers rejected Joseph, who was their redeemer. And that is exactly what they were doing in rejecting Jesus, who was their Redeemer. We must see it as very probable that the most discerning of his audience were already beginning to get his drift.

They wanted no prophet or ruler over them. It was the beginning of a pattern that would continue on through the ages. God's deliverers and prophets would regularly become the victims of the jealousies of the rulers of Israel.

Stephen now introduces a third man—Moses. Stephen spends most of his time on Moses:

"But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,¹⁸ until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH.¹⁹ "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race, and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.²⁰ "And it was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God; and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.²¹ "And after he had been exposed, Pharaoh's daughter took him away, and nurtured him as her own son.²² "And Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.²³ "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.²⁴ "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.²⁵ "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand.²⁶ "And on the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?'²⁷ "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US?'²⁸ 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?'²⁹ "And at this remark MOSES FLED, AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons. (Acts 7:17-29 NASB)

Here Stephen points out that it was when Moses, living in a foreign country, trained in all the wisdom of Egypt, had arisen as a deliverer they rejected him also. Once again, as with Joseph, they had rejected God's deliverer. It was thus they who had blasphemed God by rejecting the "judge" He had sent, by rejecting Moses.

Again it seems clear that Stephen is presenting in Moses a cameo of Jesus. Almost slain at birth ([Matthew 2:16](#)), a goodly child ([Luke 1:80](#)), exalted and established away from Judaea in Galilee of the Gentiles with what the Sadducees and Pharisees would see as "foreign" teaching, mighty in word and deed, despised and rejected when He offered Himself as Judge and Ruler, driven away (through death) until God brought Him back from the dead and established Him as Ruler and Deliverer, performing great signs and wonders (both before and after His death and resurrection), and leading His people through to the heavenly Kingdom.

Stephen seems to continually stress that God's deliverers were not brought up in the equivalent of mainstream Judaism. In the same way, he wants them to realize, the Prophet Who had come, who was like Moses (verse 37), was the man of Galilee, not the man of Jerusalem.

"And after forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH.³¹ "And when Moses saw it, he began to marvel at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:³² 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' And Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.³³ "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.³⁴ 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY

PEOPLE IN EGYPT, AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO DELIVER THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'³⁵ ***"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. (Acts 7:30-35 NASB)***

The Hebrew people had a tendency to isolate God's presence down to one geographical place. And yet God, in the wilderness of Midian, said, ***"Take off your sandals. You are on holy ground."*** Stephen is making the point that the ground is holy wherever God is. You cannot limit Him to one geographical space.

This encounter in the desert at Sinai should remind Stephen's audience, Luke's readers and us that wherever God chooses to make Himself known, there is holy ground. For a second time outside the Holy Land, God had appeared to a person of his choosing and made known a portion of his covenant promises and saving will. This presents a challenge to first-century Jews, so jealous for ***"this holy place,"*** the temple, and to all others who cling to certain sacred spaces of their religious heritage.

"This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ 'This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD SHALL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' ³⁸ 'This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. ³⁹ 'And our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ⁴⁰ SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT-- WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' ⁴¹ 'And at that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² 'But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? ⁴³ 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP THEM. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.' (Acts 7:36-43 NASB)

Moses did ***"signs and wonders"*** for forty years. Does that ring a bell? This is Exodus typeology. Stephen and the Church are now themselves involve in the second Exodus. Stephen quotes Moses as saying, ***"God shall raise up for you a like me from your brethren."*** Peter used this same verse in his second sermon ([Acts 3:22-23](#)). The implication of this verse in [Deuteronomy 18:15](#) was that Israel was to expect the coming of Another like Moses. He too would be long awaited, would be in danger at His birth, would be raised among the Gentiles (Galilee was called Galilee of the Gentiles), would then offer Himself as a Deliverer, would be despised and rejected, would perform many signs and wonders, would go away, and was One Whom God would inevitably raise up again to be their Deliverer.

Stephen is telling them that Moses himself had said that things were going to be changed, another Deliverer was coming.

Again in verse 36 we see this idea that God was not tied to a land or a Temple. He was the God of everywhere, as he had proved in Egypt and the Wilderness where he had performed His wonders.

The Israelites had rejected Moses as judge and ruler over them, and had worshiped first the calf in the wilderness (7:40-41) and then the host of heaven (7:42). Stephen characterizes the sin by quoting [Amos 5:25-27](#). They had turned from the Tabernacle of God to the tabernacle of Moloch. Moloch was the local god of the Ammonites, but was regularly worshiped in Canaan and warned against by Moses ([Leviticus 18:21](#); [20:2-5](#)). He was a god who required child sacrifice. And the star out of Jacob, God's promised deliverer ([Numbers 24:17](#)) had been replaced by the star of Rephan, the god of Assyria. These were the figures that Israel had made in order to worship them. What

was more blasphemous than that? Who was it now who had “changed the Law of Moses” and exchanged it for idolatry?

Just as rejection of Moses led to false worship and constant breaking of the law, so continued rejection of Jesus, the "prophet like Moses," will mean that the Jews will never be freed of their false worship (the idolizing of the temple) and false piety (the keeping of man-made customs).

It was this spirit of idolatry that would eventually lead to the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian Captivity (verse 43). In the same way, it will be this same spirit of idolatry and the refusal to recognize God's Righteous One which will result in the destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of the Roman Empire.

Stephen had answered his accusers' charge that he had spoken against Moses ([Acts 6:11](#), 13) by showing that he believed what Moses had predicted about the coming prophet. It was really his hearers who rejected Moses since they refused to allow the possibility of prophetic revelation that superseded the Mosaic Law.

We need to notice the repeated pattern of the nation's rejecting the deliverers whom God had sent. Joseph's brothers (the patriarchs of the nation) at first wickedly rejected him, but later found him to be their “savior” from death by starvation. Israel in slavery in Egypt at first rejected Moses as their deliverer, but later it was this very man whom God raised up to be both ruler and deliverer (7:35). The parallel with these wicked men to whom Stephen was speaking is obvious. They had rejected the very One whom God had sent as Messiah and Savior. And yet, like Joseph's brothers and like Israel under Moses, God was offering them another chance to repent and follow Jesus!

Now Stephen moves on to talk about the Temple. To the Israelites, the Temple had virtually become their god. No wonder Stephen's words seemed like blasphemy!

"Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. ⁴⁵ "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. ⁴⁶ "And David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. ⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: ⁴⁹ 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord; 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?' ⁵⁰ 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?' (Acts 7:44-50 NASB)

Stephen's audience boasted in the temple as if it gave them special access to God, in spite of their wicked behavior. Stephen is showing them that the main issue is not the place where they worshiped, but rather having their hearts right before God. The Jews in Jeremiah's day had done the same thing. Through the prophet, God said,

"Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known, 10 then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!'-- that you may do all these abominations? (Jeremiah 7:9-10 NASB)

They thought that having the temple gave them special privileges with God, no matter how corrupt their behavior.

The Temple is not the equivalent of the God-given and God-designed Tabernacle. Stephen's argument is that God himself, through the prophet Isaiah, had predicted that the temple would not always be an adequate place to worship God.

In quoting Isaiah's words, Stephen would appear to imply that, as Christ is the new Moses, he is also the new Temple. In him and through him alone can men approach God. Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin that the temple,

which they venerated excessively, was not the primary venue of God's person and work. He was arguing that Jesus was God's designated replacement for the temple, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews also taught.

In the context of this quotation of [Isaiah 66:1-2](#), several important truths are revealed. First, God would bring judgment upon Jerusalem and the temple. Second, that God would bring salvation to the Gentiles.

This assertion that the transcendent God is not confined to things "*made with human hands*" would have jolted his hearers. The Jews commonly used "*made with human hands*" to refer to idol worship ([Isaiah 31:7](#); [Wisdom of Solomon 14:8](#); [Sibylline Oracles 14:62](#)). To apply this phrase to the temple could well enrage them.

The final conclusion from his argument could only be that the Temple was not the final place to which man should look. He should look to the God who rules the heavens, to the eternal Tabernacle.

So the Tabernacle, which contained the covenant, came from the wilderness, from the very mountain of God. It was portable, as befitted a universal God, and was according to God's pattern and received in the wilderness at the mountain of God under God's instructions. No building is the house of God, or ever was. Even the temple, as Stephen points out here, was not rightly called the house of God.

Up to this point Stephen has on the whole aligned himself with them, notice for example "*our fathers*" verses 38, 39, 44, 45. But now suddenly he changes tone in order to apply his message. From this point on he disassociates himself from his listeners, and speaks firmly of "You".

"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. ⁵² Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." (Acts 7:51-53 NASB)

The Sanhedrin was guilty of unresponsiveness to God's word and of betraying and murdering the Righteous One (v.52). By rejecting Jesus the Sanhedrin was doing just what their forefathers had done in rejecting God's other anointed servants, such as Joseph and Moses.

They were "*stiff-necked*," a figure of speech for self-willed. Moses used this expression to describe the Israelites when they rebelled against God and worshiped the golden calf (cf. [Exo. 33:5](#); [Deut. 9:13](#)). While Stephen's hearers had undergone physical circumcision, and were proud of it, they were uncircumcised in their heart and responsiveness to God's Word.

Their guilt was all the greater because they had received God's law, which angels had delivered ([Deut. 33:2](#) [LXX]; cf. [Gal. 3:19](#); [Heb. 2:2](#)), but they had disobeyed it. They were the real blasphemers. Stephen, as an angel (cf. 6:15), had brought them new insight, but they were about to reject it too.

Notice verse:

you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." (Acts 7:53 NASB)

Does this sound familiar? In Romans 1 Paul says basically the same thing. Israel with all that God had given them had turned away:

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Romans 1:21-23 NASB)

Stephen's sermon, much like the ministry of Isaiah the prophet (cf. [Isaiah 6](#)), was not intended to turn men to repentance but to seal their doom. The judgment of God on Jerusalem is not far off, and for very good reason. Now that the gospel has been preached to the Jew first, it will go to the Gentiles.

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

"Cut to the quick" is a figure of speech that describes being painfully wounded. Stephen's words convicted and offended the members of the Sanhedrin. They retaliated fiercely. Gnashing (grinding) the teeth pictures brutal antagonism.

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;⁵⁶ and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55-56 NASB)

Those are almost the identical words that Jesus himself had used before this same group in Matthew 26:64.

This is at least the third time that the Sanhedrin, which was responsible for crucifying Jesus, had heard the gospel and had an opportunity to repent. They heard Peter preach after they arrested him and John in connection with the healing of the lame man in the temple ([Acts 4:1-12](#)). They again heard Peter and the apostles offer them repentance and forgiveness of sins after they had been arrested, miraculously freed, and re-arrested ([Acts 5:29-32](#)). Now, again, they hear Stephen powerfully set forth God's gracious dealings with the nation, in spite of their rebellion. While he never mentions the name of Jesus, he refers to Him as the Righteous One (Acts 7:52), and his vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God testifies to the Council again of His resurrection (Acts 7:56). If God had given these murderers just *one* chance to repent after crucifying Jesus, He would have been abundant in mercy. But to give them three opportunities shows His super-abundant grace!

But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse.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.⁵⁹ And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"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. (Acts 7:57-60 NASB)

This was a riotous mob that just was out of control and ended up stoning Stephen to death. Stephen becomes the Church's first martyr.

Stephen was steeped in the truths of God's Word. He saw the working and ways of God in the [Tanakh](#) as part of the whole redemptive plan of God, a plan which pointed to Jesus Christ and culminated in Him alone.

Stephen was a godly man who was able to face opposition courageously and to face death without fear. Why was Stephen so bold; why was he fearless of death? He was a man who gave himself to the study of God's Word. He read, memorized, meditated, studied, and thought-through on the only Bible available to him, the Tanakh. When the occasions came, Stephen was ready with the Word of God.

We must admit that Stephen's understanding of God's Word is a loud rebuke to our generation of Christians! In this message Stephen quotes from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos and Isaiah. One of the great tragedies of our century is our neglect of knowing and understanding the Word of God. You do not have to be a teacher to be a student of God's Word! You only need a love for the Word that will drive you to know it and fill your life on its riches.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. ³ And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season, And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers. (Psalms 1:1-3 NASB)

A life like Stephen's starts with spending time in God's Word.



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