

STEPHEN'S SACRIFICE

[Acts 7:54-60](#)



For the past several weeks we have been looking at a great man of God, Stephen. 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. After Stephen is chosen to help make sure that the widows are cared for Scripture says of him:

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

Stephen is part of a very elite group of men who are able to perform signs and wonders to confirm the word that they are preaching. We also see in the text that Stephen is debating with the Freedmen and they are not able to cope with his wisdom and spirit. They couldn't handle Stephen in a debate so they trumped up some false charges and had him arrested.

Stephen is now standing before the [Sanhedrin](#), Israel's high court. He is on trial accused of speaking blasphemy against Moses and God. This court can have him put to death. Stephen's defense is quite long as he goes over the history of Israel in order to show that God had given the Law, and they disobeyed. God sent His prophets, and they rejected them. These prophets spoke of the coming Messiah, and they were killed, just as these people were guilty of the blood of Jesus, the Messiah who had come just as the prophets had promised. The "holy Law," which they claimed to revere and to defend, was not kept throughout Israel's history, and it was not kept by Stephen's accusers either. It was not Stephen who was worthy of death, but his audience.



In his address Stephen had pointed out that though Joseph had been refused by his brethren, he became their savior and ultimately they all had to bow down to him. He also reminded them that though Moses was at first rejected, he ultimately became both ruler and deliverer of Israel. Now he testifies a similar, but vastly greater thing in connection with Jesus the Righteous One whom they had murdered, is to become their Judge, and ultimately, for those who receive Him, their great and final Deliverer.

By the time he is done with his defense, they are the ones on trial being accused of blasphemy. In his sermon, he says, in effect, *"I believe in God, but you've put Him in a box. You think He can only work in Jerusalem. I believe in Moses, but you continually break the law that he gave. I believe in the Temple, but if your forefathers hadn't desecrated it with idolatry, it wouldn't have been destroyed."*

Notice how Stephen concludes his sermon. Now remember he is standing before the Sanhedrin, these men have the power to whip him and even have him killed and he says to them:

"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)

When Stephen calls them *“stiff-necked”* it reminds me of:

A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy. (Proverbs 29:1 NASB)

This high court had been reproofed many times but they just hardened their necks and soon, within a generation, they would be *“broken beyond remedy.”*

Stephen is not trying to win this court over; he is not trying to make them like him. He is condemning them for their sin. Remember back in chapter 4 that Peter preached to this same court in a similar manner. They thought they walked with God. But Peter boldly informed them otherwise. You killed Jesus, but God raised Him up. You are at odds with the God you claim to worship. Stephen is even harder on this court; he blasts them for their sin. This is biblical preaching!

It's sad to me that the pastor of the largest church in America, [Joel Osteen](#), is out of sync with Peter and Stephen. He never preaches against sin. He never condemns lost sinners. Listen to what Osteen had to say about sin during the June 20, 2005 interview with Larry King:

KING: "How about issues that the Church has feelings about? Abortion? Same-sex marriages?"

OSTEEN: "Yeah. You know what, Larry? I don't go there. I just ..."

KING: "You have thoughts, though."

OSTEEN: "I have thoughts. I just, you know, I don't think that a same-sex marriage is the way God intended it to be. I don't think abortion is the best. I think there are other, you know, a better way to live your life. But I'm not going to condemn those people. I tell them all the time our Church is open for everybody."

KING: "You don't call them sinners?"

OSTEEN: "I don't."

KING: "Is that a word you don't use?"

OSTEEN: "I don't use it. I never thought about it. But I probably don't. But most people already know what they're doing wrong. When I get them to Church I want to tell them that you can change. There can be a difference in your life. So I don't go down the road of condemning."

Well Joel might not go down that road but Stephen sure did. Joel's message has made him rich, but Stephen's message made him dead. Stephen fearlessly preaches the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He preaches fallen mans sinfulness and his need of a Savior. This message is still biblical and still needed today.

Judges do not like those who are on trial trying to convict them of being criminals, and as they were unwilling to admit that they were wrong the result was inevitable. The uneasy feeling that had grown as Stephen's defense had gone on had now become outright anger.

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

The verbs here are very powerful. *“Cut to the quick”* indicates that his words had gone home. They were moved to the very depths of their beings. Every nerve was stretched. And it was revealed by their outward expression and behavior, the gnashing of their teeth is especially descriptive.

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; (Acts 7:55 NASB)

Notice the great contrast between Stephen and the Sanhedrin. They were completely controlled by anger, and Stephen was controlled by the Holy Spirit. He was full of the Holy Spirit in chapter 6, when he was chosen, and he's still full of the Holy Spirit in chapter 7. This continual filling was the point Paul was making in [Ephesians 5:18](#), when he gave the command to ***"...be filled with the Spirit."*** The Greek could actually be translated, ***"Be being kept filled with the Spirit."*** We are to be continually being controlled by the Spirit, and that was precisely what characterized Stephen—he was full of the Spirit all the time. It wasn't some sudden shot; it was a continual state for him.

Stephen began his sermon describing the God of glory (verse 2), and now he saw something of the revelation of that glory. And he saw Jesus standing on His right hand as God's Messiah. This is an illusion to:

(A Psalm of David.) The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet." (Psalms 110:1 NASB)

When David speaks of the Messiah as being seated at the right hand of the Lord, he's saying that the Christ is to be given a position of great power and authority, a place of unequaled honor and blessing.

The description must not be taken too literally. There is no reason to think that he saw two figures. The glory of God would probably be a blinding and all enveloping light. And the figure of the Son of Man was necessary in order to stress that the Christ had been resurrected.

The indefinable was being expressed. What could not be explained was being revealed. And Stephen was simply trying to explain in human terms the wonder of what he saw. It was not a time for definition but for awe. Stephen was so awed by this vision that he started to excitedly describe what he was seeing:

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

Stephen says, ***"I see the heaven opened up"***—He was being given a vision of what was usually veiled. He is being allowed to see into the spiritual world. Heaven opened up for his view, and he saw the glory of God, and Jesus ***"standing on the right hand of God."*** The situation was getting tense; the Sanhedrin was very angry and about to erupt so Stephen looked to the Lord. And the Lord gave him a heavenly vision.

Many times in the Scriptures we see that when men are in grave trouble, when they are afraid of their circumstances God opens their eyes to see His glory. This happened to Isaiah:

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. (Isaiah 6:1 NASB)

Israel's king had died, he was a great military man who had defeated her enemies and brought them peace. What would happen now that he was dead? Well, God is still on the throne. He is still ruling and all is well.

In 2 Kings 6 the king of Aram sends his army to Dothan to get Elisha:

And he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city. ¹⁵ Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶ So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." (2 Kings 6:14-16 NASB)

Elisha's servant must have thought he was nuts! He didn't see anyone but the king of Aram's army. He was only seeing the physical.

Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.¹⁸ And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Strike this people with blindness, I pray." So He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.

(2 Kings 6:17-18 NASB)

When God opened the servant's eyes he saw the army of God. God gave him a glimpse into the spiritual realm and he could now see that all was well. Believers, God may not give us the ability to see into the spiritual world but we know it is there. We know from the Scripture that God is on the throne, He is ruling the universe and everything that happens in it. So when our circumstances are not good, when it looks like our world is falling apart—God is still ruling, even though you can't see Him trust Him.

This vision that Stephen sees positively culminates the climactic thesis of his sermon: God dwells in heaven, not in temples made with hands ([Acts 7:48-50](#)).

These words that Stephen speaks out loud would have immediately brought to the minds of every member of the Sanhedrin Jesus' words when He had been on trial before them. The same high priest, [Caiaphas](#), had asked Jesus,



*"...Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"⁶² And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see **THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.**" (Mark 14:61-62 NASB)*

They considered that the epitome of blasphemy and pronounced the death sentence for it. Now when Stephen saw Jesus in heaven, he verified that what Jesus had said was true. It revealed that the Son of Man had truly come in the clouds to the throne of God and had received His everlasting dominion and Kingly Rule ([Daniel 7.13-14](#)), and it was in those terms that he expressed it.

No wonder the council reacted so violently—Stephen had hit the nail on the head. They were forced now to kill him as well, because either they had to kill Stephen, or admit that they were wrong in killing Jesus. Stephen was making the same claim for Jesus that Jesus had made for Himself.

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

Stephen here uses the term **"Son of Man"** this is the only use of this term outside the Gospels, where it is restricted to Jesus using it of Himself. Except for two times in Revelation ([1:13](#); [14:14](#)), which use the phrase **"one like a son of man."** It confirmed that Jesus was the glorious Messiah, having been given all authority in heaven and earth. And He was standing because He was ready to receive His servant.

You might be thinking, *"I thought the book of Hebrews said that after Christ had accomplished redemption, He went to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father. What's He doing standing up?"* Well, He sat down in terms of redemption, but here He it is possible that Jesus was standing up ready to greet Stephen. Luke may intend us to contrast this open welcome by the Lord of glory with the rejection of the Sanhedrin. The prime authority in heaven welcomes Stephen even while the authorities on earth murder him.

Stephen's last words were the straw that broke the Sanhedrin's back. They absolutely lost all rationality at that point. To them, Jesus was a criminal. And there was something even worse than that. He had died on a cross. But Stephen

saw that Jesus was at God's right side. This meant that Jesus had the same authority as God.

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. (Acts 7:57-58 NASB)

The description of the crowds is one of near insanity. They were out of their minds. Logic and reason would have agreed with Stephen, for his message was merely a recitation of the [Tanakh](#). But they would have none of it or of him.

The Greek word for "rushed" is used of the herd of demon-possessed swine rushing off the cliff into the ocean after Jesus cleansed the [Gerasene demoniac](#).

With cries of anguish the members of the Sanhedrin blocked their ears at this blasphemy, a symbolic gesture indicating their horror, and rushing at him, dragged him through the street to outside the city, where they stoned him.

And in spite of their fury they appear to have observed the rules given in the [Torah](#) for a stoning. [Leviticus 24:14](#) said that execution by stoning had to take place outside the city. [Leviticus 24:16](#) identified stoning as the punishment for blasphemy. So, they had the right punishment for the court decision they had made. They had heard the testimonies of two witnesses, the minimum that were required for an execution to take place. They followed the instruction of [Deuteronomy 17:7](#), which states:

"The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deuteronomy 17:7 NASB)

Stephen had dared to point out to them that they had rejected and slain the prophets (verse 52). So now they stoned him. The only actual record we have of the death of a prophet was of Zechariah and they stoned him ([2 Chronicles 24:21](#)). This was their way of getting rid of prophets, and they proved themselves adept at it. The irony of the whole situation is obvious. They sought to prove that he was wrong by proving that he was right.

"They began stoning him"—The [Mishnah](#), the Jewish codification of law, tells us that the drop from the stoning place was twice the height of a man. It was a precipice of at least ten feet with rocks below. One of the witnesses would push the criminal off from behind so that he fell face forward onto the rocks. Then, he would be turned over on his back. If he died from the fall, that was sufficient. If not, the second witness was to take a large stone and drop it on his heart. If this caused death, that would be the end, but if not, then the accused would be stoned by all the congregation of Israel.

"The witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul"—he is mentioned, not so much because he guarded the coats but because of what that indicated. It indicated a position of some authority, and direct identification with the deed even though he did not participate. While he would not himself cast stones, possibly because he felt that it was not the position of a would-be Rabbi to do so unless he were a witness, he was very much one with those who did it. Here we have the picture of the implacable enemy. He never forgot this moment. It burned its way into his soul. Later in Acts Paul says,

'And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.' (Acts 22:20 NASB)

Stephen had been arguing in the synagogue of the people from Cilicia, and Saul was from Cilicia, it's very likely that he had been arguing with Saul.

And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59 NASB)

Stephen's death is the only death scene and martyrdom described in detail in the New Testament, except for that of Jesus Christ. We can compare here Jesus' own words on the cross:

***And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT."
And having said this, He breathed His last. (Luke 23:46 NASB)***

Stephen was going like his Master.

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"—the use of “Lord” here is very significant. Throughout his sermon “the Lord” has been cited from the Tanakh and has meant Yahweh. Here he now refers the same title to Jesus. He has no doubt whom the One He has seen really is.

***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)***

We can hardly doubt that he had in mind again the words of Jesus on the cross.

***But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast
lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. (Luke 23:34 NASB)***

Stephen, like his Savior, called upon God to receive his Spirit. His last words, like those of Jesus, were words of compassion. He prayed for the forgiveness of those who had sinned by taking his life.

The Czech martyr, [Jan Hus](#), whose statue and church is in Prague, was promised safe passage to discuss his criticisms against the Catholic Church. But they betrayed him and burned him at the stake. He died, not cursing at his persecutors for their deception and brutality, but singing praise to God as the flames consumed his flesh.

Stephen cries out with a loud voice, asking that Jesus not ***"hold this sin against them"*** of his executioners. How will this happen? Only if they will hear and receive the good news ([Luke 24:47](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [3:19](#); [5:31](#); [10:43](#)), then their sins will be forgiven, and they will not have to face the just judgment of God.

If he can die for his Lord like that, confidently, forgiving his enemies, there must be something to this Jesus who he says reigns at God's right hand.

In 2 Chronicles 24, Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, while being stoned for confronting the sins of the people, the last prayer he breathed was:

***Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness which his father Jehoiada had shown him, but he
murdered his son. And as he died he said, "May the LORD see and avenge!" (2 Chronicles 24:22
NASB)***

It was a similar circumstance, but a very opposite prayer. Stephen was like Jesus in life and in death.

What an illustration we have here of ***"dying grace."*** The death of Stephen can rightly be called, ***"Spirit-filled dying."*** It was a peaceful death, even though the surroundings and the circumstances were violent and chaotic. It was a time of great intimacy and communion with God. Stephen was enabled to see the heavens opened and to see the Savior standing at God's right hand, ready to receive him into His presence. The grim scene around Stephen faded away in the light of the glory of God before him.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Stephen sacrificially laid down his life, but as Tertullian observed, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The persecution that arose against the church scattered the seed of the gospel. Watching Stephen die had a profound and unforgettable effect on Saul.

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)

"He fell asleep"—sleep is a euphemism for death.

This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep."¹² The disciples therefore said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep.¹⁴ Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead." (John 11:11-14 NASB)

That's it, Stephen is gone. He was a godly man who had committed much of the Scripture to memory. He was fearless in the face of the Sanhedrin. He boldly confronted them with their sin and it cost him his life. One and a half chapters and he is gone.

The sovereignty of God is evidenced in the results of this sermon. In previous sermons in Acts, many have been saved. Here (and for the first time), the preacher is put to death. God prospers some sermons in the salvation of many, but He also uses sermons for other purposes, as here. We also see that there is an evangelistic thrust, resulting from this sermon. This is an evidence of God's sovereign control. Those who are saved are not the audience of Stephen, but the Samaritans and Gentiles who will be saved because of the persecution resulting from Stephen's death. Without knowing it, these Jews are propelling the gospel beyond Jerusalem to the very places from which they have come. Many will be saved because of the sermon and the death of Stephen.

What a God we serve! How His ways are beyond ours (cf. [Romans 8:31-39](#); [11:33-36](#)).

WHAT HAPPENED TO STEPHEN AT DEATH?

Where did he go? Well I believe that the Scriptures teach that before the Cross, all who died went to Hades, the place of the dead. From Pentecost to at AD 70, those believers who died also went to Hades unless they died a martyr's death.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4 NASB)

These are clearly martyred believers from the transition period. They didn't worship the beast or take his number.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. (Revelation 20:5 NASB)

No matter what your theological persuasion, there is a problem in this verse. If those of verse 4 lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years, then how can those of verse 5 be the first resurrection? They can't be. The simple solution here is to see that they put the verse number in the wrong place. Verse 5 is a parenthesis that he will take up later in the chapter. It should read like this:

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. (Revelation 20:5 NASB)

So the martyrs, which would include Stephen, lived and reigned with Christ during the transition period (the thousand years) but the rest of the dead (everyone else who died) did not live again until the end of the transition period. Let's leave verse 5 out and read from 4 to 6.

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years...⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.
(Revelation 20:4, 6 NASB)

So, the martyrs of the transition period went to heaven as part of the first resurrection. But everyone else went at the general resurrection at the end of the age. These first resurrection martyrs went to Heaven, but they were not in the Holiest of all, the presence of God, until the temple was [destroyed in AD 70](#).

The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing, (Hebrews 9:8 NASB)

Then at A.D. 70, when Christ returned, the believers in Hades (First Testament saints and transition saints) were resurrected into the presence of God, and those in heaven went into the presence of God.

When Paul was comforting the Thessalonians about their deceased loved ones, notice what he said:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.¹⁵ For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 NASB)

Paul doesn't say, "Don't worry about your loved ones who recently died, they're in heaven. Remember what I taught you, 'to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.'" What Paul did say was at the second coming their dead loved ones would "rise," they would be resurrected.

WHAT HAPPENS TO BELIEVERS TODAY AT DEATH?

Since the resurrection is past, what happens to believers when they die? Their physical body goes back to dust from which it came:

All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. (Ecclesiastes 3:20 NASB)

That's it, at physically death we part with the body forever. Notice what Jesus said:

"For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. (Mark 12:25 NASB)

As little as this verse tells us about the afterlife, it tells us more than any other verse that I am aware of. What do we know about angels that will apply to us after physical death? They are [incorporeal](#)—they don't have bodies:

But to which of the angels has He ever said, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE THINE ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR THY FEET"?¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14 NASB)

Angels are spirits, and spirits don't have bodies:

"See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:39 NASB)

So at death the believer's body goes to dust and their spirit goes to heaven to forever dwell with the Lord. Those of us who have trusted Christ in the New Covenant age, have life and do not need to be resurrected.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26 NASB)

Jesus is saying, "He who believes in me shall live (spiritually), even if he dies (physically), and everyone who lives (physically), and believes in Me, shall never die (spiritually)."

Two categories of believers are discussed: those who would die before the resurrection and those who would not. For those who died under the Old Covenant, He was the Resurrection, but for those who lived into the days of the New Covenant, He is the Life. When a believer dies his body goes to dust and his spirit goes to heaven to forever be with the Lord.

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on November 23, 2008. Media #439.



Berean Bible Church provides this material free of charge for the edification of the Body of Christ. You can help further this work by your prayer and by sending a contribution to:

[Berean Bible Church](#)
2000 Centerville Turnpike
Chesapeake, VA 23322