

Stephen, the Unwavering Martyr

Devotional Reading: Luke 23:32–43

Background Scripture: Acts 6–7

Today's Scripture: Acts 6:7–10; 7:54–60

I. The Growing Church

Acts 6:7–10

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

7. This verse highlights two important aspects of the growth of the first-century church. First, its development is driven by the dramatic *spread of the word of God*. As the influence of the gospel message increases among people, so does *the number of disciples*. When the gospel falls on willing hearts, spiritual fruit results, often in abundant measures.

Second, the fact that the church's number *increased rapidly* implies exponential growth. A comparison of the number of believers in the early chapters of Acts highlights this expansion (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; see also 2:47; 5:14; 6:1; 16:5).

Counted among these believers are numerous *priests*. These men serve in the temple when their lot is chosen. We may find this surprising since chief priests opposed Jesus and his message in conjunction with both Pharisees (Matthew 21:45; 27:62; John 7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 18:3) and Sadducees (Acts 4:1–4; 5:17–18, 27–28).

8. The display of miracles that accredit Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:22) and confirm the message of the apostles (2:43; 5:12) now also certify God's approval of the ministry of *Stephen*. These signs confirm the presence of God's grace and the empowerment of his servants.

The book of Acts does not specify the nature of Stephen's miraculous work *among the people*. His calling before this was to be one of seven men to oversee a first-century version of "Meals on Wheels" (see Acts 6:1–4). We presume that Stephen's ministry in that regard did not involve miracles. Therefore, the *great wonders and signs* he now performs indicate relief from suffering from both physical and spiritual ailments, as has been true of the apostles. Although he is not one of the apostles, Stephen is chosen by God to bear witness to salvation. As one who is "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5), his life demonstrates the spiritual *power* that Jesus promised (1:8).

9. After the exile of 586 BC, the need

for synagogues arose among the Jewish people. By the time of the first century AD, synagogues served as important meeting places for observing religious practices, studying Scripture, gathering on the Sabbath, and discussing Jewish law and tradition.

More than one *synagogue* may be in view here. Commentators suggest the writer could be considering anywhere from one to five synagogues, although most tend to lean toward one or two. Paul refers to multiple synagogues in Jerusalem (Acts 24:11–12). Therefore, the groups mentioned in this verse may attend different synagogues. Nonetheless, they all had a specific dispute with Stephen.

The Freedmen are Jews who have been liberated from slavery or who are descendants of those freed; these differ from freeborn citizens who never experienced enslavement. *Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria* are from what is modern-day North Africa, and *Cilicia* and *Asia* are regions located in what is modern-day Turkey. The mention of these groups heightens anticipation for the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem and its surrounding areas to all nations and peoples.

10. The fact that the synagogue members *could not stand up against* Stephen does not mean that they agreed with his message; rather, it indicates their inability to refute his teachings. Their powerlessness fulfills Jesus' promise to give his persecuted disciples "words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15). Such fulfillment suggests that Stephen's wisdom was given to him by Jesus himself, undoubtedly through his Spirit.

II. The Faithful Martyr

Acts 7:54–60

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and

gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

54. The conflict between Stephen and the synagogue members escalates. False accusations lead to Stephen's arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:11–15). Stephen, speaking in his defense, emphasizes Israel's history of rebellion against God.

The Sanhedrin is the highest Jewish council in Palestine. It was led by the high priest and was composed of priests, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law, as well as Sadducees and Pharisees.

This include everything that Stephen has spoken in his lengthy speech found in Acts 7:2–53, especially the last three of those verses. His words provoke a sharp reaction from the Sanhedrin. They were *furious*, full of intense anger or rage. The phrase *gnashed their teeth* signifies a corresponding behavior or facial expression. We see increasing hostility on their part as we trace their reactions from Acts 4:1–22 to 5:27–42 to 7:54–58. Their anger escalates as the story unfolds.

55. *Stephen*, like Moses, is granted the privilege of witnessing God's *glory* (compare Exodus 33:18–23). To be seated *at*

the right hand is considered to be in a place of honor. But we note that Stephen sees *Jesus standing*, not sitting, at that position. At least three interpretations have been proposed. One theory is that it indicates Jesus' transcendence, meaning that he is supernatural and surpasses creaturely boundaries. A second interpretation is that Jesus is rising from his throne to welcome Stephen into heaven. A third interpretation proposes that it signifies his readiness to judge, either in support of Stephen or against the Sanhedrin—or both. Indeed, this imagery may embrace all three ideas.

56. A vital turning point occurs. On rare occasions, Scripture mentions *heaven* being opened (compare Ezekiel 1:1; Matthew 3:16; Luke 3:21; John 1:51; Acts 10:11; Revelation 4:1). That is no less the case here when we compare the last line of Acts 7:55 with the last line in the verse now before us.

Stephen replaces the name "Jesus" with the designation *the Son of Man*. This title was Jesus' favorite self-designation during his earthly ministry. It appears more than 80 times in the Gospels and is associated with Jesus' authority, judgment, and role in salvation. This title can be traced to Daniel 7:13–14. Thus Stephen recognizes Jesus as the divine and promised Messiah, something the doubters don't do.

57–58a. What started as a trial based on false witnesses ends with deadly mob violence. The Jewish leaders sentenced Jesus to death after their perception of blasphemy. Death by stoning is indeed the proper Old Testament punishment for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10–16). But the members of the Sanhedrin refuse to consider evidence of Jesus' divinity as they cover *their ears*.

Their *loud* voices drown out Stephen's perceived blasphemies. All pretense of due process is out the window as the Jew-

ish leaders act on their belief that Stephen's conviction means he deserves death. We expect mob action from unruly crowds but not from the members of the Sanhedrin!

58b. *The witnesses* are likely the "false witnesses" whose accusations Stephen just addressed (Acts 6:13–14; 7:2–53). Furthermore, their laying down *their coats* is practical rather than symbolic; it allows them to throw stones more easily and avoid staining their clothes with blood.

The text introduces a new character, a young man named *Saul*. The note that Stephen's executioners place their clothes at Saul's *feet* suggests that he has a position of authority among the Jews (compare Acts 4:35, 37; 5:2). This detail supports the fact that he approves the execution (8:1; 9:1–2; 22:20).

59. In prayer, Stephen once again acknowledges Jesus' lordship and divinity. By asking the *Lord* to *receive my spirit*, Stephen affirms the Christian hope of living with Christ after death. Stephen's prayer also echoes the Lord's final words on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

60. This element of Stephen's prayer echoes Jesus' prayer on the cross in Luke 23:34 to forgive the executioners. By requesting this, Stephen follows Jesus' teaching to "love your enemies" and "do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27–28). In word and deed, Stephen's steadfast witness exemplifies what it means to follow the crucified and risen Messiah.

The sobering episode concludes as Stephen falls *asleep*—a metaphor for death (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Jesus' disciples were often confused by his use of figurative language (examples: Mark 7:17–18; 8:14–21; John 11:11–15; 16:25–30). But there's no mistaking what is happening here.

Involvement Learning

Stephen, the Unwavering Martyr

Into the Lesson

List the commitments, responsibilities, and preferences that “fill up” your time, energy, and attention.

Various commitments, responsibilities, and preferences fill our lives. When we encounter difficult circumstances, the priorities that “fill” us will “spill out” and become evident to those around us. In today’s study, pay attention to how a moment of testing reveals Stephen’s priorities.

Into the Word

Read Acts 6:7–10; 7:54–60. What words or phrases describe Stephen?

Key Text

Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.
—Acts 6:8

What words or phrases describe the actions of Stephen’s opposition?

Why do you think they “could not stand up against” his wisdom (Acts 7:10)?

What words or phrases describe God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?

How did those in power respond to the Spirit’s work in Stephen?

What was the impact of the Spirit’s wisdom through Stephen?

Into Life

List aspects of Stephen’s example and witness that might strengthen your discipleship to Jesus.

How can you apply Stephen’s example to your life and relationships?

Thought to Remember

Respond to opposition as Jesus and Stephen did.