

Acts 7:54-60 | Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

## Acts 7:54-60 | The Stoning of Stephen

Stephen’s speech is cut off by the Sanhedrin. In fact they become so enraged by Stephen’s accusations they lose grip on themselves and devolve into a murderous mob. All decorum is lost, the veneer of formality is stripped, and with no counter argument to present they illegally stone Stephen to death. The Scene is mounting chaos.

Stephen had been brought to trial because his opponents in public were unable to overcome his arguments for the risen Christ. The trial was a position of force by which they might overcome him by false testimony against him. But their false testimony was unable to overcome the Spirit of God speaking through him. Stephen overcame them by the word of his testimony. But as we’ve discussed before, the danger is not in losing the argument, it is in winning the argument. The danger was not in Stephen’s case proving false, but proving true.

In the story of Stephen’s final moments the heavens are opened up to his sight. It is a moment of seeing things as they are. But just as the heavens are opened up there is a sense in which hell is opened up as well. The polite constraint of the Sanhedrin is removed to reveal the reality of who they worship. The heavens are revealed, and the domain of satan is revealed. Finally the grace of God triumphs over both. I have three points that are all mixed up. Point one is that Satan breeds madness. Point two is when you’re surrounded, look up. Point three die like Jesus.

### 1. Satan Breeds Madness

Acts 7:54 | Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

We have nothing recorded of what the Sanhedrin say in response to Stephen. It is not a response that can be articulated, it is sub-words, senseless. Instead what we have relayed are their emotions and actions. Stephen’s speech which we’ve followed closely for weeks is most simply a relaying of the narrative of scripture. But the narrative of scripture culminates in Jesus. Jesus came to save sinners. If the message is for you, your sin will be revealed. Why so provoked by the man they think is a blasphemer? Why do they care what he thinks?

You may remember the beginning of his speech, all who looked at Stephen saw that his face was like the face of an angel. He was a messenger of God. His message is God's message. It is not Stephen they are angered by, it is God. The whole room understands that the truth of what they have heard regarding their own sin against God is in fact the truth. They have been uncovered, a shining light has exposed them. Because they hate who they are before God and hate who God is over them, their response is madness and rage.

The conversation has reached a point beyond reason. Has Stephen made a misstep in his sharing the word of God to evoke such a response? No. The word has done its work.

Hebrews 4:12-13 | For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup> And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Stephen by the word of God has revealed their nakedness he has revealed the thoughts and intentions of their heart. By the revelation of God the enemies of God are revealed. They must give an account but they can't, they have been revealed. What we're seeing in the Sanhedrin is the true state of their hearts. Satan breeds madness. Consider what Stephen has to look it.

The organization of the Sanhedrin is two levels of seating that look down upon the man on the floor who is being questioned. Now where can Stephen look. It is like David writes in Psalm 22.

Psalm 22:7 | All who see me mock me;  
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;

It is a nightmarish scene when he looks around him. Have you every had a nightmare where you've been humiliated? Where everyone has turned on you, and everywhere you look you are shamed and attacked. Some of you have had experiences like this. There is nowhere in the world you can turn for relief. You are backed into a corner. At those moments you must look up.

Acts 7:55 | But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen looks up into heaven. He does not turn his eyes to the attackers. You were made to look into a face and receive love. To be surrounded by faces receiving hatred is not something you are capable of doing. You must look to another face. You're surrounded, you've looked at the numbers and you can't conceive a way to make it out. Your own home is meant to be a place of respite but you can't return there. Where can you look? You must look up. And here is the hope we see modeled by Stephen, the Lord meets his gaze. Stephen gazed into heaven and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

## 2. Satan breads Madness

Acts 7:56-57 | And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”<sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.

The text relays that Stephen sees Jesus at the right hand of God. But you may wonder, how does Luke the author of Acts know what Stephen saw? Well the Holy Spirit inspired Stephen to say what he was looking at. So that he declares, the heavens were opened to him, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Why does he say this? It is unthinkable provocative. And something that the rest of the room would not be able to see because it is a spiritual vision being granted to Stephen.

It is a statement of triumph. They may gnash their teeth all they want, they may threaten him with anything. The one they thought they had previously extinguished now reigns in the heavens. Augustine says Jesus sits at the right of God as a judge but here he stands as an advocate for Stephen. Stephen is proclaiming that there is a higher court above the Sanhedrin who will overrule whatever ruling they make, even a ruling of death. Because Jesus is the advocate who stands for his people, who bore the price for their sin, who rules the heavens now, and will see to their rescue.

The proclamation of Jesus becomes their final cry. They cry out and stopped they’re ears. They are literally trying to stop hearing the sound of what Stephen is proclaiming. It is visible suppression of the truth in their own hearts. Normally you can’t see it, but this one is actually covering they’re ears.

## 3. Die Like Jesus

Acts 7:58 | Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

There is no formal ruling. Instead the mob violence conquers the room and they take Stephen out of the City and they stone him. But a detail peaks through. The garments of the witnesses were laid at the feet of a young man named Saul. This of course is the Apostle Paul before his conversion. He hunted Christians and brought them to Jerusalem to be killed. He watched in approval at the stoning of Stephen. Before Stephen dies Luke relays to us two final prayers Stephen makes.

Acts 7:59 | And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

The first prayer is to the Lord. And it is the very prayer that the Lord prays before he dies on the cross. It is a prayer of faith, and a prayer of love. Stephen commends his Spirit to the Lord. Who else can rescue him in death? Who else can he turn to who can overcome the mob against which he is powerless? He turns to his Lord who has gone before him into death so that when he faces death the face of our Lord will be there to greet him. This first prayer is the greatest commandment, to love the Lord your God. Then

Acts 7:60 | And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Then he turns to pray the second commandment which is like the first, he prays a prayer of love for his neighbors. It too is the prayer of our Lord at the cross who prayed for the forgiveness of those killing him, and he prays for the forgiveness of those who are stoning him. The gospel he proclaimed which begins with their sin against God ends with this final proclamation that there is forgiveness from the one who was slain.

And then Stephen fell asleep. His earthly ministry had ended. The new testament says fell asleep in lieu of death because we know that in Christ he will rise again.

I've spoken a lot regarding the similarities between the book of Joshua and the book of Acts. The book of Joshua is the book of conquest of the promised land in the Old Testament. It is about the people of God driving out the enemies of God by victorious battles. The laying the twelve memorial stones maps onto the selecting of the twelfth apostle. The sermon at pentecost with its baptism maps onto the conquering of Jericho. The betrayal of ananias and Saphira follows the pattern of Achan's theft of the goods of Jericho.

But then Joshua moves onto conquer Ai. It is not a clean conquering at first because of the sin of Achan. But afterward they move in and establish a pincer movement which allows for all the people of Ai to be killed and they inhabit the land. The final scene is outside the city, the king of Ai is buried under a pile of stones. When the enemy king is buried under a pile of stones that is certainly victory. But what of Stephen. Stephen is buried under a pile of stones. Did he lose?

This is the wonder of the New Testament and the Kingdom of God under Christ. You see this is the next battle in the new testament and from one perspective they lose. But of course, Stephen wins.

The Lord answered Stephen's prayer at least for one of the men. Augustine says it is because of Stephen's prayer is the means by which God gave the church the apostle Paul. Not long after this he will see what Stephen saw. Jesus reigning in heaven. It will reveal his blindness, and draw him to repentance. And no one will be more effective for the proclamation of the gospel.