

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 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

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 the disciples*. When the gospel falls on willing hearts, spiritual fruit results, often in abundant measures.

Second, the fact that the church's number *multiplied . . . greatly* implies rapid 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 and Sadducees.

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" (Acts 6:1–4). We presume that Stephen's ministry in that regard did not involve miracles. Therefore, the *great wonders and miracles* 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 Ghost" (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 Jew-

ish 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. Additionally, synagogues were places for financial contribution, elementary education, and hospitality.

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 14:11–12). Therefore, the groups mentioned in this verse may attend different synagogues. Nonetheless, they all had a specific dispute with Stephen.

Libertines are Jews who have been liberated from slavery or who are descendants of those freed; these differ from freeborn citizens who never experienced enslavement. The *Cyrenians* and *Alexandrians* 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.

Acts 6:11–14 indicates that the dispute with Stephen is likely over his interpretation of the Law of Moses and the relevance of the temple.

10. The fact that the synagogue members could not *resist* 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 "a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gain-say nor resist" (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 they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And 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. Stephen, speaking in his defense, emphasizes Israel's history of rebellion against God.

The word *they* refers to the members of the Sanhedrin, 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.

These things 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. The expression *cut to the heart* conveys their intense anger or rage. The phrase *gnashed*

... *with 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 *the heavens* 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. Tied to this revelation is the fact that Stephen sees Jesus sharing in God's presence and glory. His acknowledgment of the divinity of Jesus cannot be missed.

57–58a. What started as a trial based on false witnesses ends with deadly mob violence. Death by stoning is indeed the proper Old Testament punishment for blasphemy. 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 Jewish leaders act on their belief that Stephen's conviction means he deserves immediate 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 clothes* 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. This detail supports the fact that he approves the execution.

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 thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

60. 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 "pray for them which despitefully use you" (Luke 6:27–28). In word and deed, Stephen's steadfast witness exemplifies what it means to follow the crucified and risen Messiah.

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, full of faith and power,
did great wonders and miracles
among the people.
—Acts 6:8

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

Why do you think they were “not able to resist” his wisdom (Acts 6:10)?

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.