

English

Sports & Rec Plus
THE BOOK OF ACTS
Lesson 19: The Stoning of Stephen
Acts 7:51-60 (NIV®)
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This message today is part of a series from the book of Acts. You can listen to all of our messages by going to our website: **sportsrecplus.org** and clicking on the media tab. There you will find over two hundred messages from the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

While Rod and I are writing this sermon this week, the 2024 Olympic games are going on in Paris, France. We are here in Chattanooga, Tennessee listening and watching the Olympics. One of the races in the Olympics is the relay race. The relay race is an event where a team of four athletes run equal predetermined distances in a sprint race. Each will hand over a rod-like object called the "baton" to the next person to continue the race after he/she has run their appointed distance. The first team to have each of their runners complete their appointed distance and when the last runner called the "anchor" runs the baton across the finish line, that team is the winner of the race.

This life is a relay race. Each member of the relay team has a spot to run and a job to do. They must each fulfill their responsibility. If one fails, they all fail. When all of them are successful, they are all successful. Today we see this in the account of the life of Stephen. Many people lived before Stephen such as Peter and the prophets in the Old Testament. Stephen ran his part of the race, as they did theirs. Soon we will see another man named Paul (at first named Saul) take up the "baton" from Stephen and run his part. But now we will see Steven running and being faithful doing his part until he finishes his path.

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

The Stoning of Stephen

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."

⁵⁷At 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.

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

Rick’s Part **Acts 7:51-56**

In these three verses,—Acts 7:51-53—the climax of Stephen’s sermon, indicted the Jewish leaders for rejecting God in the same way that their ancestors had rejected God in the Old Testament.

7:51 “You stiff-necked people! They were stubborn like their forefathers (Exodus 32:9; Exodus 33:5).

Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. They are as unclean before God as are the uncircumcised gentiles. They were as unclean as their ancestors. They continue to be lost and without God in their sins—**still uncircumcised.**

You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! In our sermon today we see Stephen preaching his final sermon. In this sermon he reminds and accuses the Jewish leaders, that they are just like their ancestors and as unclean as their ancestors. They have rejected God in the same way that their forefathers had rejected him in the Old Testament.

They **always resist the Holy Spirit.** They were just like those who came before them. They thought they were all right because they had the right ancestry. But Stephen’s sermon shows that it is not your ancestry that makes you right before God; it is your relationship to Jesus that makes you right before God. Resisting the Holy Spirit meant that they would always be against God until they changed this in their lives.

7:52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— This **Righteous One** was and is Jesus.

Stephen tells them that they are as evil as their ancestors because their ancestors rejected the prophets who foretold of the Righteous One and now they are doing the same thing by rejecting Jesus who is the Righteous One. They even asked for a murderer, Barabbas, to be released to them instead of Jesus (Acts 3:14).

This is shown by there never being a prophet from God that they did not resist. They even killed those prophets who predicted the coming of the Messiah. And now they have even betrayed and killed the Messiah—God’s Anointed One—when He came. But God raised Him from the grave (Acts 3:15).

Let’s take a little time and look once again at Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the Roman governor at Jesus’ trial. He came from a national tradition that strongly supported justice (Acts 16:37, Acts 16:38; Acts 22:25-29; Acts 25:16). He knew that Jesus’ crucifixion would be unjust and therefore declared him innocent six times (Luke 23:4, Luke 23:14, Luke 23:15, Luke 23:22; John 18:38; John 19:4-6), and repeatedly sought to release Him (Luke 23:13-25). The irony here is that Pilate is going to render judgment on Jesus when one day Jesus would render a just judgment and condemnation of Pilate, “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son,” John 5:22.

7:53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it. There is no excuse for this, for you even received the law that was given through angels. You have even rejected it and not obeyed it.

The Stoning of Stephen

7:54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. This was done in anger and frustration.

7:55 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. We see a picture here of Steven as being almost unaware to what was happening around him and to him as he stood up and looked to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing next to God at God's right hand.

We too must be unaware of the world because if we are like Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, that keeps our gaze toward heaven, so we only see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. When you keep your eyes on the Lord, everything else that happens will have little attraction for you. Steven was oblivious to the world as far as being concerned about what the world was doing to him. However, he was aware of what he needed to do as being a preacher of the Gospel. He must preach the Word.

7:56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Here we see Peter doing what any faithful preacher of the Gospel must do. When God opens heaven up and shows the preacher Jesus, at the right hand of God, that preacher must point out what he sees to his people and then tell the people how to act accordingly.

Rod's Part Acts 7:57-60

7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, They did this because now they believed they had proof that he had uttered blasphemy, because he said, *He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* This was in reality a proof against them; for if Jesus was at the *right hand of God*, then they had murdered an *innocent* person. They were determined not to allow a man to live any longer who could say he saw the *heavens opened and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God.*

Covered their ears ... rushed upon him. This was a mob scene, not the execution of a deliberate sentence. **Then they cried out with a loud voice:** When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus *standing at the right hand of God*, it was too much. The Sanhedrin reacted quickly, violently, and together. When Jesus before this same body of men declared that He would sit at the right hand of God, they had the same reaction and sealed His death as a blasphemer (Matthew 26:64-66).

- “For Stephen to suggest that the crucified Jesus stood in a position of authority at the right hand of God must have ranked as blasphemy in the thinking of those who knew that a crucified man died under the divine curse.” (Bruce)
- **They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord:** These were distinguished, older men behaving this way. The reaction of the Sanhedrin seems extreme, but is typical of those who reject God and are lost in spiritual insanity. They wailed in agony and covered their ears at the revelation of God, which they regarded as blasphemy.
 - It is a dangerous thing to be religious apart from a real relationship with Jesus Christ. This fulfills what Jesus warned about in John 16:2-3: *Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.*

- **Ran at him:** This uses the ancient Greek word *hormao*. This is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea (Mark 5:13). This was an out-of-control mob rushing at Stephen.

7:58 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.

- **Cast him out of the city, and stoned him** However, they did not wait for any sentence to be pronounced upon him; it seems they were determined to stone him *first*, and then prove, after it had been done, that it was done *justly*. For the manner of *stoning* among the Jews, see Leviticus 24:23.
 - The second-century Jewish writing *Mishnah*, described the practice of stoning: “When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned...When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, ‘Confess, for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and everyone who confesses has a share in the age to come’...Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped...The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.”
- **The witnesses laid down their clothes** — To illustrate this whole transaction, see the observations at the end of this chapter, (Leviticus 24:23).
- **Stopped their ears ... rushed upon him ... etc.** This was a mob scene, not the execution of a deliberate sentence. It was illegal, because no Roman sanction had been given for execution of the death penalty. Those critics who question John’s gospel with its reference repeatedly to Jewish efforts to stone Jesus, declaring such to have been illegal and therefore impossible, are frustrated by this episode. As Richardson said, "Here is a case of mob stoning such as is said to have been impossible.”
- **The witnesses laid down their garments ...** This was probably the only formality observed during the mob stoning of Stephen. The ancient law required that the hands of the witnesses were to be first against the one stoned, and Adam Clarke tells us that "when they came to within four cubits of the place of execution, the victim was stripped naked." Adam Clarke, op. cit., p. 736. One cannot help wondering about those "witnesses" who had accepted money to swear lies against Stephen and thus found themselves to be his murderers also. Thus, once more, there is Scriptural testimony of the relationship between lying and murder. These two sins were named by Jesus as "works" of Satan (John 8:44), an Old Testament example of the same thing being that of Doeg (1 Samuel 22:9-18).
- **Young man named Saul ...** Here, in this bloody episode, there was evidence of the timeless principle that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." That young man was never to forget what his eyes that day beheld, what his heart felt, and what his conscience said; and there was born in his soul that instant an impression that would in time recruit him to the faith of Christ and energize the greatest evangelist of all ages. Young man literally means, “a man in his prime.” It certainly does not mean that Saul wasn’t old enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin. In Acts 26:10, Paul says *I cast my vote against them*, and the plain implication was that he had a vote as a member of the Sanhedrin.

7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

- Stephen’s life ended in the same way it had been lived: In complete trust in God, believing that Jesus would take care of him in the life to come.
- It is worthy of the remark that Stephen, in his death, **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”** offered the same act of homage to Christ that Christ himself did to the Father when he died, Luke 23:46. From all these considerations, it follows that the Lord Jesus is a proper object of worship; that in most solemn circumstances it is right to call upon him, to worship him, and to commit our dearest interests to his hands. If this may be done, he is truly divine and the second member of the Trinity. This is a testimony to the fact that one’s spirit lives apart from the body; for Stephen asked the Lord to receive his spirit in the very act of his body’s death.

7:60 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.

- **Lord, do not charge them with this sin:** God answered Stephen’s prayer, and used it to touch the heart of a man who energetically agreed with his stoning – even though the man didn’t know the prayer was being answered.
 - When we get to heaven, we should thank Stephen for every blessing brought through the ministry of Saul of Tarsus. God heard Stephen’s prayer, and Paul is the evidence of it. We have no idea how greatly God can use us in our times of suffering.
 - Augustine said, “If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul.”
 - **Stephen** displayed the same forgiving attitude that Jesus had on the cross (Luke 23:34). He asked God to forgive his accusers, and he made the promises loudly and publicly.
- **He fell asleep:** The text describes the passing of Stephen as tenderly as possible. Instead of saying simply that he died, it says that he merely **fell asleep** – with the idea that he woke up in a much better world.
 - Stephen wasn’t a superman, but he was a man filled through all his being with the Holy Spirit. Many have little idea of how greatly they can be used of God as they walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - He fell asleep ... Taking their cue from what Jesus had said regarding the sleep of Lazarus and that of the daughter of Jairus, the Christians quickly adopted this euphemism for death. It is not so much the superficial resemblances between ordinary sleep and the sleep of death, but the pledge of the resurrection which illuminates this beloved metaphor. Upon the gravestones of two millennia, the believing community of the saints in Christ have engraved upon the tombs of their beloved dead the sacred words, "Asleep in Jesus!"

Conclusion

Christ gave what some have supposed to be an impossible command: "Love your enemies; pray for them that spitefully use and persecute you." But Stephen shows here in his own person how practicable the grace of his Master had made this sublime precept.

Morgan wrote, “The fires... in the olden days never made martyrs; they revealed them. No hurricane of persecution ever creates martyrs; it reveals them. Stephen was a martyr before they stoned him. He was the first martyr to seal his testimony with his blood.” So, my challenge to each of us today is:

- Do you love your enemies as Stephen demonstrated?
- Are you living your life as an example to the world of the wonderful grace of God being poured out on you continually?
- What is your witness to a lost and dying world?

Rick began this message describing a relay race with the baton being passed from one runner to the next until the last person crosses the finish line. Think about your own life as a Christian. The baton was passed to you, and you are now running the race that is set before you. Stephen never stumbled nor did he drop the baton. He ran his portion of the race in a manner pleasing to the Lord. How about you? Are you running with every ounce of your being seeking to please God, trusting Him each step of the way, and holding on securely to the

baton so as not to drop it as you look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith? My prayer for you is, “I hope so.”

Let's close in prayer.

Our prayer here at Sports & Rec Plus for you is that every message we send out is an inspiration and blessing in your personal walk with the Lord. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions about this or any of our messages. And take a few minutes to visit our website and see how we can come alongside you, as you take the gospel to your community and the world. Here is our contact information:

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