

# STEPHEN - HIS MINISTRY, HIS MESSAGE, & HIS MARTYRDOM

## **Acts 6:7 - 7:60**

Up to this point, our focus in the book of Acts has been upon the Twelve and upon Peter and John. But now there is a change. With the appointment of the first seven deacons in Acts 6:1-6, there are new leading figures within the church. Luke will introduce us to two of them.

<b>Acts 6:7 - 7:60</b>	<b>Acts 8:4-40</b>
Stephen	Philip
Confronts the Jews in Jerusalem	Preaches to the Samaritans
Faces false accusations	Faces a false magician
Addresses the Jewish Sanhedrin	Shares the gospel with an Ethiopian eunuch
Stoned to death	Is snatched away by the Holy Spirit

Stephen was the president of the Jerusalem board of deacons. He was a leader in the church. He seems to have been an eloquent and fiery preacher. But he was also a man just like you and me. He had the same sorts of problems that you face and the same sorts of struggles. The fact that he was used by God is a matter of grace.

We have a tendency to look for Christian heroes. We find them and we put them up on pedestals. But there are no super-Christians. The closer you get to your Christian heroes, the more you will see that they are just like you. They have the same faults and the same struggles. And that means you can identify with Stephen. As you identify with him, you will be able to learn from him.

## **STEPHEN THE MAN.**

We were first introduced to Stephen in the first verses of Acts 6. He was one of the men

chosen by the church to oversee the equitable distribution of food to the needy widows. His name is a Greek name meaning “crown.”

1. The Setting.

*The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7).*

The church had seen a great deal of growth. It had begun with an explosion and it continued to see growing numbers. This is stated in three ways:

a. The word of God kept spreading.

The reason that the deacons had been appointed was so that the Twelve could focus upon their ministry of prayer and the Word of God.

b. The number of the disciples continued to increase.

However, this increase had not yet extended outside the city of Jerusalem. This was the home of the early church and its children had not yet left home.

c. A great many of the priests were coming to the faith.

The entire priesthood was divided into 24 separate courses. Each course was given the responsibility of serving in the Temple twice a year. On an additional 4 weeks out of the year at the special feast days all of the priests would come together to serve.

As these priests rotated through Jerusalem, they had the opportunity to hear the gospel, the good news that Jesus had died and had risen from the dead. Many believed and became a part of the growing church. It was this factor that would lead to an intensifying of the persecution.

2. The Signs.

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

The qualifications for the position of deacon had been that they be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. This is now seen is Stephen who was full of grace and power.

6:3	<i>Seven men... full of the Spirit and of wisdom</i>
6:5	<i>Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit</i>
6:8	<i>Stephen, full of grace and power</i>

From where do you get grace and power? You get it from the same place you get the Spirit and wisdom and faith. You get it from God. This isn't something that Stephen worked up on his own. It was given to him by God. The Christian faith involves living in such a way that Jesus lives through us. If you desire these qualities, then go to the Lord and ask Him for them.

Up to this point, only the apostles had been able to perform "signs and wonders." But now Stephen manifests such an ability.

3. The Slander.

9           *But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.*  
10           *But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*  
11           *Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." (Acts 6:9-11).*

Stephen's ministry to the Hellenistic widows put him into contact with many of the Greek-speaking Jews. While there were many who believed the gospel, there were many others who did not and who viewed this new sect of Christians with suspicion. The debates between the two parties grew heated and the Jews began to cast accusations at the church and specifically at Stephen.

These antagonists came from the Synagogue of the Freedmen, literally, the Synagogue of the Libertarians (Λιβερτίνων). This was evidently a synagogue which had been started for Greek-speaking Jews who had once been Roman slaves but who had now been released and allowed to return to Palestine to live. There were men from a number of countries.

Stephen's arguments were irrefutable. This was not because Stephen was so brilliant. It is because Christianity is so true.

- Cyrenians - located in north Africa.
- Alexandrians - from Alexandria on the Nile Delta.
- Cilicia - In southwestern Turkey, the province from which the apostle Paul came.
- Asia - located in central Turkey.

These men spoke the same common language as Stephen. And yet, there was a great and bitter disagreement. Stephen was accused of blasphemy and this soon led to civil proceedings.

#### 4. The Charges.

<sup>12</sup> *And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.*

<sup>13</sup> *They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."*

<sup>15</sup> *And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:12-15).*

There are two crimes for which Stephen is charged. They are charges of blasphemy. To blaspheme is to speak against God. Stephen is accused of speaking against God as He relates to two areas.

<i>This man incessantly speaks against...</i>	
<i>this holy place</i>	<i>and the Law</i>
<i>For we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus...</i>	
<i>will destroy this place</i>	<i>and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us</i>

The charges are remarkably like those which were leveled against Jesus when He was arrested, tried and turned over to the Romans for crucifixion. Indeed, there is a correlation between these two events.

Both were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. Both are accused by false witnesses. Both were accused of speaking against the Temple and the Law. Both

were put to death.

Stephen is on trial for having taught what Jesus taught. And as he stands before the Sanhedrin, his countenance appears almost heavenly. Why? Because he is filled with the Spirit of Christ.

## **STEPHEN: HIS MESSAGE**

Before studying the sermon of Stephen in greater detail, it is best to step back and examine it as a whole and get the bigger picture.

(1) What this Sermon is Not.

a. It is not a Defense.

Given the context, we would have expected Stephen to give a defense for his faith. After all, he is on trial for his life. Instead we see not a defense, but a indictment of the Jews themselves.

The charges leveled against Stephen had to do with his alleged attack against the Temple and the Law of Moses. These are the two main themes in his sermon. But instead of trying to defend himself, he shows how that the Temple and the Law both serve to show the sin of those who claim to worship in the temple and who claim to keep the Law.

b. It is not an evangelistic appeal.

In this, the content of Peter's sermon is completely different from any other sermon given in the book of Acts. There is almost no mention of either Jesus or of His resurrection. Neither is there any call for repentance, but only a strong accusation of guilt.

(2) What this Sermon Is.

a. This sermon is the longest recorded sermon in the Book of Acts - twice as long as Peter's sermon at Pentecost.

b. It is Scriptural.

It is basically a retelling of the entire story of the Old Testament. Much of it consists of direct quotations from the Scriptures. His conclusion is merely applying the message of those Scriptures to his hearers.

- c. It has a geographical orientation.

Stephen focuses on the land, the Temple and the Law. The charge against him was that he spoke against “this holy place.” He speaks of the places where God dealt with Israel.

- He begins in Mesopotamia where he was first called.
- He then takes us to Haran by the Euphrates River.
- He takes us to the Promised land and then to Egypt in the days of Joseph.
- He returns us to Shechem for Jacob’s burial and back to Egypt.
- He retells how the Lord appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai.
- He recaps the Exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea.
- He tells of the 40 years in the Wilderness.
- He mentions the Tabernacle and the Temple, but issues a disclaimer that the Lord does not dwell in a house made with hands.

God's presence was with His people long before there was a Temple (it was in Mesopotamia with Abraham, with Joseph in Egypt, and with Moses in the Wilderness).

- d. It has a “rejection motif.”

- God chooses to use Joseph, even though he had been rejected by his brothers.
- God chooses to use Moses, even though he had been disowned by his fellow Israelites.
- God chooses His prophets, but they are persecuted and killed by the Israelites.
- God chose “the Righteous One” who was betrayed and murdered by the very Sanhedrin who now sits in judgment over Stephen.

God’s presence is designed to bring about obedience on the part of His people (they claimed the presence of God, but their works refuted their claim).

- e. It is Spirit-filled.

Stephen was described in Acts 6:3 as a man who was “full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” in Acts 6:5 as a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” and in Acts 6:8 as “full of grace and power.” At the time of his death he was said to be “full of the Holy Spirit” (7:55).

Yet though this was a Spirit-filled sermon, no one came to Christ as a result of hearing it. Instead, it brought about Stephen’s death.

It is not a good sermon that brings people to Christ. Even a sermon from God does not accomplish this without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

- f. In spite of the theme of judgment evident in this sermon, it was not motivated by anger or resentment, but by love and grace. Verse 8 says that Stephen was “full of grace.” His last words will be a prayer of intercession on behalf of those who are putting him to death.

Now we are ready to go through this sermon and to examine all of its particulars.

1. The Question of the High Priest.

*The high priest said, “Are these things so?” (Acts 7:1).*

This is the question which brought forth this sermon. What are the “these things” about which the high priest asks? They are the things which had been said of Stephen by the false witnesses in Acts 6:13. Stephen had been charged with speaking against the holy place and against the Law. His sermon will now deal with those two issues.

Stephen demonstrates two fundamental concepts:

- (1) The history of Israel bears out the fact that much of the life of the Jews was spent outside of the land; and,
- (2) For all their smug self-righteousness, Israel had always shown themselves to be rebels against Moses and against the Law which was given through him.

2. God’s Covenant with Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> *And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’*

4           *“Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.*

5           *“But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him.*

6           *“But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.*

7           *“‘And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I myself will judge,’ said God, ‘and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.’*

8           *“And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. (Acts 7:2-8).*

The Jews were impressed with the Land of Canaan. They referred to it as the “Holy Land.” They thought of it as the land where God lived. But God had first spoken to Abraham long before he ever came to Canaan. God spoke to him when he was still living in Mesopotamia - the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. Furthermore, even when Abraham did leave Mesopotamia, he did not immediately come to Canaan, but instead lived for a time in Haran. It was only after the death of his father that he came and lived in the land.

Stephen addresses himself to <i>brethren and fathers</i> . This is a Jew speaking to fellow-Jews. For a Gentile to say the things that Stephen says would come across as anti-Semitic.
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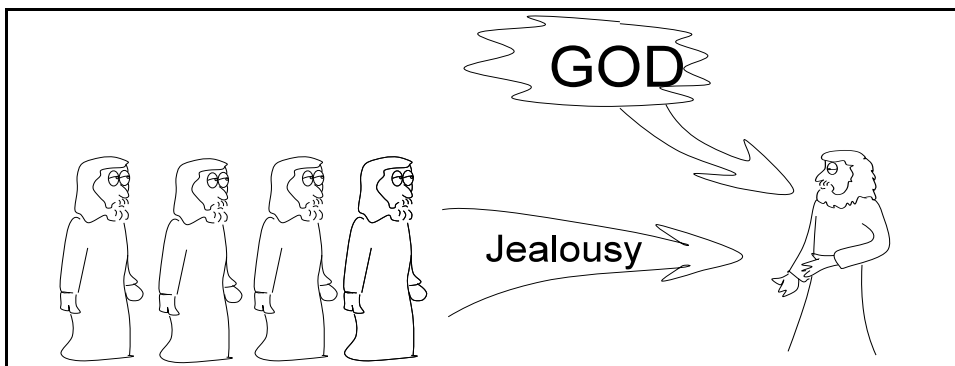
But Abraham was not given any of the land. It was promised to him, but it was not given to him. The promise was that his descendants would live here. But before they would live here, they would first live in a foreign land.

Here is the point. God is not limited to a PLACE. He is able to speak and work apart from a land and apart from a Temple. Stephen has been accused of blasphemy because he said the Temple will be destroyed, but that is not blasphemy because it is possible for God to work perfectly well without a Temple.

3. Joseph - Rejected by his brothers but Accepted by God.

- 9           *“The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.*
- 11           *“Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.*
- 12           *“But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time.*
- 13           *“On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh.*
- 14           *“Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.*
- 15           *“And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died.*
- 16           *“From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. (Acts 7:9-16).*

Notice the sin of the patriarchs. There are many which could have been mentioned, but the one which Stephen points out is that of JEALOUSY. The patriarchs were jealous of Joseph. And it is evident in the Scriptures that God was on Joseph’s side.



There is a reason that Stephen mentions the jealousy of Joseph’s brothers. The sin which they committed is now being repeated by the members of the Sanhedrin. They were motivated by a spirit of jealousy (Acts 5:17). And they are doing to Stephen the very thing that Joseph’s brothers wished to do to him. His brothers had originally planned to murder him. It was only happenstance that caused them to sell him into slavery in Egypt. The Sanhedrin has the same murderous attitude toward Stephen. They are going through the motions of a trial, but there is already

murder in their heart.

Sanhedrin	Stephen
Filled with Jealousy.	Filled with the Spirit.
Following in the footsteps of the brothers of Joseph who planned to murder their own brother.	Following in the footsteps of Joseph. Instead of rising to the throne of Egypt, he will have a vision of the throne of God.

God was with Joseph, not only when he was in Canaan, but even when he was sold into slavery in Egypt. Indeed, the salvation of everyone in the family of Israel was found in Egypt. When a severe famine struck the land of Canaan, it was in Egypt that they were able to find food. The entire family of Jacob eventually moved into Egypt and lived there.

4. Moses - Rejected by Israel but Accepted by God.

<sup>17</sup> *“But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, <sup>18</sup> until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.*

<sup>19</sup> *“It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.*

<sup>20</sup> *“It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.*

<sup>21</sup> *“And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.*

<sup>22</sup> *“Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. (Acts 6:17-22).*

Moses was deemed “lovely in the sight of God” from his very birth. When the Pharaoh of Egypt called for the death penalty of all male Hebrew children, little Moses was set adrift in a basket on the Nile - a rejection by his own family.

It was not his own family who raised him, but the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh who adopted him and raised as her own son.

- 22           *“Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.*
- 23           *“But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.*
- 24           *“And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.*
- 25           *“And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.*
- 26           *“On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?’*
- 27           *“But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us? 28 You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?’*
- 29           *“At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the Land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. (Acts 6:22-29).*

When Moses defended an Israelite who was being beaten and killed the Egyptian taskmaster, his own fellow Israelites failed to understand that he had been called by God to liberate them and they rebuffed him, threatening to turn him over to the Egyptian authorities. Because of this, Moses was forced to flee the land of Egypt.

Stephen is continuing to tell of the rejection of the Israelites in the past. The contrast is still obvious. The Sanhedrin is guilty of doing the same thing that Israel did in the days of Moses. They had rejected the Second Moses in the person of Jesus. They had essentially asked the same question: *Who made you a ruler and judge over us?*

- 30           *“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning horn bush.*
- 31           *“When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:*
- 32           *“‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.*
- 33           *“But the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*
- 34           *“‘I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.’” (Acts 7:30-34).*

It was not in Israel or in a temple where the Lord appeared to Moses, but on a mountain in the Sinai wilderness. This place was designated by God as “holy ground.” And it was from here that Moses was sent with the message of freedom.

35                   *“This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.*

36                   *“This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.*

37                   *“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.’*

38                   *“This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.” (Acts 7:35-38).*

Moses, the very one whom the Israelites had rejected as being a “ruler and a judge” was chosen by God to be both ruler and judge and law-giver.

There is a reason that Stephen is relating this. He gives it for the purpose of contrast and comparison. His hearers are supposed to see themselves in the story. They are the leaders of the nation of Israel. And they are to identify themselves with the actions of their forefathers.

<b>Israel in Moses’ Day</b>	<b>Israel in Stephen’s Day</b>
Disowned Moses	Disowned the Prophet who was like Moses - Christ (Verse 37).
God sent Moses to be both a ruler and a deliverer.	God sent Christ to be both a ruler and a deliverer.
Moses performed wonders and signs.	Christ and His followers have performed wonders and signs.

Stephen continues, showing that the Israelite rejection of Moses did not end with the deliverance from Egypt.

39                   *“Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but*

*repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, <sup>40</sup> saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt -- we do not know what happened to him.'*

<sup>41</sup> *"At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.*

<sup>42</sup> *"But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'It was not to me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? <sup>43</sup> You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.'*

<sup>44</sup> *"Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.*

<sup>45</sup> *"And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. (Acts 7:39-45).*

This time the Israelites rejected Moses and the God whom he represented when Moses went up into Mount Sinai to receive the Law. While he was away, the people approached Aaron and had him make for them a golden calf which they proceeded to worship.

Stephen had been accused of speaking against the Temple and against the Law. But he now shows that it is the nation of Israel as represented by the Sanhedrin to whom he speaks who has been guilty of profaning the Temple and breaking the Law.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his face shown from the glory of God. As Stephen addresses the Sanhedrin, his face appears to be the face of an angel (Acts 6:15).
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It was that same spirit of idolatry that would eventually lead to the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian Captivity (verse 43). In the same way, it will be this same spirit of idolatry and the refusal to recognize God's Righteous One which will result in the destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of the Roman Empire.

## 5. The Temple.

<sup>46</sup> *"David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.*

47                   *“But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.*  
48                   *“However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by*  
*human hands; as the prophet says:*  
49                   *“‘Heaven is my throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet;*  
*what kind of house will you build for me?’ says the lord, ‘or what*  
*place is there for my repose? 50 Was it not my hand which made all*  
*these things?’” (Acts 7:46-50).*

God never demanded that a Temple be built. He ordained the Tabernacle, but the Temple was David’s idea. He did permit the Temple to be built in His honor. He gave permission for Solomon to build the Temple. And when it was completed, God sanctioned it by moving the Shekinah Cloud into the Temple. But even Solomon recognized that God cannot be confined to a house. The Temple was not for God’s benefit but for man’s. God does not need men to build Him a house since it was God who built everything.

Why does Stephen mention this? Because back in Acts 6:13 he was accused by the Sanhedrin of “speaking against this holy place.” He shows that, even if the accusation had been true, it did not constitute blasphemy because the Temple was not synonymous with God because God doesn’t live in a house built with hands.

## 6. Indictment upon the Leaders of Israel.

51                   *“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?*  
*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).*

Stephen draws his sermon to a conclusion, stating his indictment against the leaders of Israel in no uncertain terms. He charges them with acting in the same way their forefathers acted. They take great pride in their circumcision, but there is a hardness around their heart that has never been cut away. They have taken great pride in having the Law, but he charges them with not keeping the Law.

The Sanhedrin has sinned in the same way as their ancestors - not merely putting to death the prophets, but murdering the Messiah.

## STEPHEN: HIS MARTYRDOM

### 1. The Reaction of the Court.

- <sup>54</sup>            *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.*
- <sup>55</sup>            *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; <sup>56</sup> and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*
- <sup>57</sup>            *But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. (Acts 7:54-57).*

The Sanhedrin lost all semblance of a court of law. They begin to take on the appearance of one who is demon-possessed. Stephen, on the other hand, is seen to be full of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, at this very moment he has a heavenly vision. He sees two things:

#### a. The glory of God.

Do you remember how Stephen began his sermon? He began by referring to the "God of glory." Now he sees the glory of God.

The prayer of Moses had been that he might see the glory of God. Moses had only been permitted to see God's "after-glow." Stephen got to see the rest of it.

#### b. Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Hebrews tells us that Christ "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). This is also taught in Mark 16:19, Hebrews 8:1; 10:12 and 12:2. But this time we see Jesus standing. It is as though the King is giving His loyal witness a standing ovation.

Can you imagine it? Stephen is standing before the Sanhedrin as they are preparing to pass judgment upon him, but he isn't even looking at them. Instead, his eyes are focused elsewhere. There is a look of blessed awe over his features. He sees Jesus.

This would have driven the crowd wild. They had heard Jesus stand in this same place and tell them that “*from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God*” (Luke 22:69). Now Stephen bears testimony that the promise has been fulfilled.

2. The Stoning of the Witness.

*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 7:58).*

Just as Jesus had been crucified outside the city (Hebrews 13:12), so also Stephen was driven outside the city to be stoned. It was the mandate of the law that the witnesses for the prosecution cast the first stones.

*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).*

It was the custom that the chief witness for the prosecution would be given the duty of pushing the offender to the ground where the stoning was to take. The second witness would then cast the first stone and the rest of the crowd would join in until the offender was dead.

3. The Plea for Forgiveness.

<sup>59</sup> *They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”*

<sup>60</sup> *Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60).*

Stephen cries out twice more before he dies. Both of these cries are echoes from the death of Christ. They are both prayers which Jesus prayed while He was on the cross.

a. “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!*”

Jesus had prayed for His spirit to be given into the hands of His heavenly Father. Stephen directs his prayer to Jesus. He has seen the glory of God and he is ready to be received into the presence of that glory.

- b. *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”*

This is also a prayer which Jesus prayed. He died in order that our sins might not be held against us. Stephen prays the same prayer. And that prayer will be ultimately answered in the life of one who was there - Saul of Tarsus.