

The Book of Acts
Chapter 7

Acts 7:59-60

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.

I. Review of Chapter 6

1. In chapter 6, the young church had grown to nearly 8000 members and the church was having shared meals.
2. In that large effort, some of the widows were being neglected in an organizational oversight.
3. The apostles came up with a plan to organize the effort with 7 church helpers who were later given the title of deacon. Their role was to help with organizing church activities, like serving food, so the apostles could focus on prayer and the Word.
4. Once the seven were appointed and efforts organized, the church was blessed with miracles and continued to grow.
5. However, the chapter ended with a story about Stephen, one of the deacons, whose anointed service got him into a dispute with some other foreign-born Jews who brought false witnesses to say Stephen had blasphemed against the temple, saying Jesus was coming to destroy it and change their customs.
6. Stephen arrested and brought before the Council—the same Council had arrested Jesus in the gospels, they had arrested Peter and John in Acts 4 for preaching Jesus, they had arrested the apostles in Acts 5 for preaching Jesus, and now in Acts 6, they had arrested Stephen.
7. We will now look at the outcome of his trial in chapter 7.

II. Stephen's Defense Before the Council (Verses 1-53)

A. Promise to Abraham

1. Acts chapter 6 ended with Stephen being charged by false witnesses, and chapter 7 begins with the high priest giving Stephen the opportunity to answer those accusations:
Acts 7:1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so?
2. Verses 2-53 contain Stephens response to the high priest and his accusers. This represents the longest “sermon” recorded in Acts.
3. **[1] What was Stephen's main purpose for his speech of defense before the council?**
4. Stephens words were more an introduction to Jesus Christ rather than a defense of himself.
5. Stephen started with the call of Abraham, Israel's origin as a people:
Acts 7:2-3
2 And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran [Haran],
3 And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.
6. **[2] What was the subject of his discourse?**

7. Stephen's discourse was a long but condensed **summary of the history of Israel** from the time of Abraham, through Jacob, Joseph, their journey to Egypt, their slavery in Egypt, Moses, their escape from Egypt, the giving of the law, possessing the promised land, King David, King Solomon, and finally the temple, and a quick reference to Jesus as Messiah.
8. It is interesting that Stephen's history lesson ended with the temple. Up to that point, everyone in his audience would have been in agreement with him.
9. It is what he said next that turned the tide against him. Which we will come to in a moment.
10. But Stephen's brief presentation of Israel's history proved three things to all who heard him.
11. **[3] What three things did he prove in his resume of Israel's history?**
12. **He proved** (1) his own wide knowledge of the Law of Moses and of God's dealing with the nation of Israel, (2) his respect for the law, and (3) his faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Messianic prophecies, which we will talk about in a bit.
13. In his response, Stephen showed his understanding that the Jews owed their very existence to the divine providence of God who had led them to the land they now dwelled in:
Acts 7:4 Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran [Haran]: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.

B. Deliverance under Moses and David

1. Then Stephen moved from Abraham to Moses, saying that the descendants of Abraham would sojourn in a strange land—the land of Egypt—but again by God's providence, would return them to this land again:
Acts 7:6-7
6 And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years.
7 And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.
2. Egyptian slavery lasted for four hundred years, but God brought them out, and gave them a home in the very land He had promised to Abraham.
3. Stephen went on to say that God was compassionate of their afflictions and defeated Pharaoh by His own miracle-working power and delivered them from the bondage of Egypt.
Acts 7:36 He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years.
4. At this point, Stephen wisely pointed out a prophecy of Moses (Deut 18:15) about a Prophet that God would raise up in the future:
Acts 7:37 This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.
5. Stephen would later add that this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus (v. 52).
6. He mentioned Moses, Joshua, and David as deliverers sent from God.
Acts 7:44-45
*44 Our fathers had the **tabernacle** of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed,*

*speaking unto Moses, that he should **make it according to the fashion that he had seen.**
45 Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus [Joshua] into the
possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the
days of David;*

- C. The tabernacle and temple were temporary
1. Notice he also mentioned the tabernacle in the wilderness with its special form that God had showed to Moses. That tabernacle was full of prophetic symbols foretelling New Testament salvation.
 2. The golden altar of sacrifice speaks of repentance. The golden laver speaks of baptism. The holy place with the incense and bread speak of worship and the Word. And the Holy of Holies with the Ark of the Covenant speaks of the infilling of the Holy Ghost.
 3. Stephen also mentioned Solomon and the temple.
Acts 7:47 But Solomon built him an house.
 4. Of course the temple was built after the pattern of the tabernacle, which makes the temple yet another prophetic description of New Testament salvation that would ultimately replace the tabernacle and temple worship.
 5. These structures for housing God's presence, served only temporary purposes because you cannot contain God in a man-made structure:
Acts 7:48-50
48 Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet,
49 Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?
50 Hath not my hand made all these things?
 6. Stephen was quoting Isaiah 66:1-2.
 7. If you will remember from Acts 6, the false accusation that got him arrested was that he spoke against the temple.
Acts 6:13-14
13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:
14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.
 8. So, in a sense, their accusation was true because the tabernacle and the temple were but prophetic symbols of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and long after those buildings were gone, the gospel would continue to be preached.
- D. They had murdered the Just One
1. But bringing this up and turning the history lesson to Jesus caused the winds to turn against Stephen.
 2. **[4] What did Stephen prove by showing the Jews that their forefathers had rebelled against God and His servants in all their generations?**
 3. Stephen followed the example of Peter and the apostles with how they addressed this same court by preaching clearly and boldly the message of Jesus:
Acts 7:51-52
51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.
52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them

which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:

4. Stephen called these people stiff-necked and murderers of Jesus, saying they were just like their forefathers who had killed the prophets.
5. Stephen had **proved** that this current generation had followed the example of their forefathers in persecuting the prophets. They had killed the Prophet like unto Moses that God had sent to their current generation. They had betrayed and murdered the Just One, Jesus Christ, and were also persecuting His servants.

III. Stephen's Martyrdom (Verses 54-60)

A. The rage of Stephen's accusers

1. **[5] What was the effect of Stephen's words on his enemies?**

2. It was at this point that things started to look perilous for Stephen from the human perspective:

Acts 7:54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart [deeply infuriated], and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

3. That doesn't mean they bit him. That phrase refers to an expression of strong emotion or rage.

4. But from heaven's perspective, it was about to get glorious.

5. **[6] How did God sustain Stephen in his persecution?**

6. *Acts 7:55-56*

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.

7. At this point, his preaching was cut short. Stephen, this lowly table waiter, the man whose ministry started by distributing food to widows, was now speaking by the anointing of the Holy Ghost to the high priest and the members of the high court.

B. Blind to truth

1. But these high officials could not see the truth Stephen was speaking.

2. But that was no surprise. They did not see truth when Truth was standing before them. Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Lord of glory, had also stood accused before them, and they had condemned Him to die on the cross.

3. And neither they did see the truth when Peter and John preached it to them in Acts 4.

4. And neither they see the truth when Peter and the apostles preached it to them in Acts 5.

5. Each time they rejected the message of truth as if they were blinded to it. As Paul would later say:

2 Cor 4:3-4

3 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost:

4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

6. And Christ, the image of God was shining before them but they rejected Him, and in their blind wrath they lost all self-control and broke into mob violence.

- C. The right hand of God
1. Stephen, however, lost sight of his persecutors as he was caught up in the Spirit into the glory of God's presence, and saw Jesus standing in the place of glory and authority.
 2. **[7] What was the significance of his vision of Jesus standing on the right hand of God?**
 3. *Acts 7:55-56*
55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly 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.
 4. Some would interpret Stephen's vision of Jesus standing on the right hand of God as proof that Jesus was not really God, or maybe that although He was God, He was a separate entity from God. For there you have proof of God and then Jesus standing at God's right hand.
 5. But a good principle to follow in proper interpretation of scripture is to read it carefully in context, plus interpret scripture based on other scripture.
 6. First, God is a Spirit without form, invisible, and dwells everywhere. It is not possible to stand on the right hand of invisible everywhere.
 7. The right hand of God is a phrase that refers to the strength or power of God, not a physical geographical location.
 8. And the phrase the "arm of the LORD" is another phrase that has that same meaning. Isaiah 53:1-2 includes a prophecy about the coming Messiah who would be the "arm of the Lord," and was fulfilled in Jesus:
John 12:37-38
37 But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him:
38 That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?
 9. So, when Stephen described seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God, he wasn't describing a second God. He was revealing Jesus as the arm of the Lord, the power and express image of the invisible God. God with flesh:
1 Tim 3:16 And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.
 10. In fact, Stephen's words to describe how he saw Jesus, were very much like the words of Jesus Himself as He stood before the high priest:
Matt 26:64-66
64 Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.
65 Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy.
66 What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death.
 11. And with that, Jesus was crucified.
- D. Condemned to death

1. And it is no surprise that Stephen's very similar words resulted in his death:
Acts 7:57-58
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.
 2. They dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. But take note of the last part of verse 58.
 3. **[8] What part did Saul of Tarsus have in the stoning of Stephen?**
 4. Those who stoned him took off their cloaks and left them to be guarded by a young man named Saul. They needed swinging room.
 5. Chapter 8 starts off with the phrase: "*And Saul was consenting unto his death.*"
Acts 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.
 6. In other words, he completely agreed with or approved of the killing.
 7. **[9] How did Stephen manifest the Spirit of Christ in his last prayer?**
 8. *Acts 7:59-60*
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.
 9. As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed for his enemies that God would not lay this sin to their charge. He then asked the Lord to receive his spirit and was received into that glory world of which he had just had a vision.
- IV. Conclusion
1. **[10] What was the success and the extent of Stephen's short ministry?**
 2. We never know who we may impact by our testimony. It is not apparent that Stephen knew that in his audience was a young Rabbi, Saul of Tarsus.
 3. But more than 20 years later when the Apostle Paul was arrested at this very same temple, he gave a testimony of his conversion.
 4. And the events of this day of Stephen's stoning, were still very much on his mind 20 years later:
Acts 22:20 And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him.
 5. The young man, Saul of Tarsus, had heard Stephen's defense of the gospel of Jesus Christ, his prayer for his enemies, had seen the glory of God on his face, and was unable to forget that scene and the words which he heard.
 6. He tried to run away from this truth and for a short time, fought against the truth and the church.
 7. But it was only a short time after Stephen's death, perhaps a year or two at the most, that God pulled the blinders off the eyes of Saul of Tarsus, and turned this Christian killer into one of the greatest promoters of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 8. So, in a sense, Stephen's ministry was extended in the great ministry of Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul.