



12 | ACTS 6:8-7:60

STEPHEN'S SERMON & MARTYRDOM

Be willing to stand for Christ alone, no matter what it costs. Everything else is just an idol and cannot satisfy.

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Introduction

We continue our series in the book of Acts called "Life on Life Discipleship." Our title this morning is: "Stephen's Martyrdom".

There's coming a time, dear saint, when you are going to have to be one against the crowd, and you're going to be all by yourself against great odds. The night I came to the Lord, the evangelist said, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for everything." When we come to know Christ, we have to be willing to stand alone.

It might be in school for you students. It may even be here at church. Some of you are in your career and may have to stand alone. Your co-workers may talk about fornication; or there may be obscenity; there will be dishonesty; and there will be materialism. And you as a Christian, in the name of Jesus, will have to stand alone. Some of you in your social life will have to stand alone. Everyone is out dating, but there is not a suitable person who loves Jesus, and God calls you to singleness rather than date someone who doesn't know the Lord.

I heard of two couples who were out double-dating, and one of them suggested that they stop and go into a kind of seedy dance club. They're about to go in there, but the young lady in the back seat with her date says, "No, I don't want to go in there. I have someone with me who would not enjoy that place." And the boy who was with her said, "Oh, I don't mind going in there at all." She said, "I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about the Holy Spirit of God that lives in my heart."

There are times when we are going to have to stand alone, because we are twice-born people in a world of once-born people, and we're going to find ourselves going against the tide. And as we get closer to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, we're going to find that the opposition is sharpening, and the hostility is emerging more fierce and furious than ever, and we will have to stand alone.

Key thought: Be willing to stand for Christ alone, no matter what it costs. Everything else is just an idol and cannot satisfy.

1. BE WILLING TO STAND FOR CHRIST (6:8-15)

Stephen was one of the first deacons, and he was a man who was willing to stand alone for Christ. He was also a Hellenist, that is, he was a Greek speaking Jew who had taken on a more Western culture. He was a passionate believer in Jesus Christ who belonged to a Jewish synagogue, as all the Jews did, but in a foreign land. He, along with all the rest of the deacons, were chosen to care for the widows. God chose Stephen and the other deacons to be take the first step beyond the Jews in the direction of the Gentiles.

STAND WITH POWER

The mantle of Stephen falls strangely on Saul, one of Stephen's most bitter enemies. Saul, also called Paul, is a member of the Sanhedrin. **It may be that the apostle Paul owes much of his exposure to the gospel to the sermon that Stephen is about to preach.** Stephen was a noble personality. He was essential to God's plan for world evangelization. It was his martyrdom that launches the church into the world. We see something quite

important. He wasn't intimidated by the earthly power of the Sadducees and Pharisees who made up the Sanhedrin. He is described as "full of grace and power" working miracles.

Acts 6:8 | And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Stephen is filled with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, performing miracles and signs among the people. Nothing more is said here about the nature of these miracles, but we need to understand that miracles are more common in places where the Word of God is either not present or outlawed. We read about some of the miracles later in Acts, especially healings. But there are dreams and visions. There are miraculous escapes from prisons, like with Peter in Jerusalem and Paul in Philippi. There are earthquakes that result from prayer meetings. There was an incredible demonstration of power from the apostles and their co-workers. The new covenant had begun, and the powers of the new creation were on display.

STAND AMIDST PERSECUTION

Stephen is about to find out that there is a plot, a scheme to take his life. A certain synagogue with a very prominent member leads the way.

Stephen's Conspirators

Acts 6:9 | Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

Who were this group of men from various synagogues? Synagogue worship seems to have had its roots in the Babylonian Exile. Jews congregated in synagogues to hear the Scriptures read and expounded. They became common gathering centers of the Jews, especially in the lands of their dispersion. Any sizable town with a Jewish population had its synagogue, sometimes several.

The "synagogue of the Freedmen" in Jerusalem seems to have been attended by Jews from various parts of the Dispersion. The mention of Jews from Cilicia suggests that this was the synagogue attended by Saul of Tarsus when he was in Jerusalem. Tarsus is located in Cilicia, the birthplace of Saul, the persecutor of the church, and later an apostle. Since Paul's hometown of Tarsus was located in Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3), he likely attended their synagogue in Jerusalem. That he was present for the events surrounding Stephen's trial and execution is evident from 7:58 and 8:1. It is possible that, as a student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, he even participated in the debate with Stephen.¹ Jews from this synagogue of the Freedmen engaged Stephen in hot debate over the question of whether Jesus is really the Messiah, and if he is, is the Temple necessary anymore?

Stephen's Controversy

Acts 6:10-11 | But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 193.

Stephen's able handling of the Scriptures was such that not even the most knowledgeable Jewish apologists could defeat him. They could not withstand the wisdom of the Spirit of God within him. He was right, and they knew it. But they kept lying to themselves. They privately convinced people to say that Stephen hated the Temple and the Bible. But truly Stephen loved them more than all of them. He knew the real meaning of the Temple. It was to point to Jesus. He knew the meaning of the Bible: it was to celebrate Jesus. But sometimes people can love the reflection of a thing more than the thing itself.

Then they persuaded people to lie, who said they had heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. Hired informers were now engaged to distort Stephen's words in the most damaging way possible. He was accused of blasphemy against Moses, because he was telling them the beautiful story of how Jesus fulfilled all the law and the prophets.

It's kind of like they were all looking at a black and white photo of Jesus. They were in love with the photo, but Stephen was telling them that the actual person had come! They didn't want to hear about it. The Temple and customs that pointed to Jesus were more important to the people than Jesus himself.

Stephen's Court

Acts 6:12-14 | And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

They arrest Stephen and drag him before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin is made up of the elders (the Sadducees who were the politicians and theological liberals) and the scribes (the Pharisees who were the teachers of the law and theologically conservative). Again, this is the Jewish senate who had crucified Jesus and had already told the apostles never to preach in the name of Jesus. They had jailed the apostles and beaten them. They charged Stephen with the same charges they trumped up for our Lord. But Stephen stood, even if he stood alone. He did not waver. Stephen's ministry, though brief, was essential to God's plan for world evangelism. He showed that the efforts of one courageous person, though of short duration, can have far-reaching effects.²

He was charged with blasphemy and destroying the law and the customs of the Temple. Stephen was being treated in the same way as his Lord. Jesus does not destroy the law or the Temple, but he does fulfill them. The religious leaders loved these gifts of God for all the wrong reasons. They loved the law because it gave power to them over the people. They loved the Temple because it gave the leaders prestige. Power and prestige had replaced the humble faith they should have had for the Lord, so they missed the Messiah when God sent him. Not only did they miss him—they crucified him.

² MacArthur, *Acts volume 1*, 188.

Stephen's Countenance

They wanted to debate Stephen, but Stephen had an anointing on him. The leaders of the Sanhedrin could clearly see the manifestation of the Spirit of God on him.

Acts 6:15 | And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen's address opens with "the God of glory" and closes with the glory of God (Acts 7:55); and all the time he spoke, his face radiated that same glory! Why? Because Israel was the only nation privileged to have the glory of God as a part of its inheritance (Rom 9:4). Alas, the glory of God had departed, first from the tabernacle (1 Sam 4:19–22) and then from the temple (Eze 10:4, 18). God's glory had come in his Son (Jn 1:14), but the nation had rejected him.³

This scene presents a striking contrast. Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin accused of being an evil blasphemer of God, the temple, and the law. Yet when the members of that council fixed their gaze on him, they saw his face like the face of an angel. Far from being evil, Stephen radiated the holiness and glory of God. God himself answered their false charges by putting his glory on Stephen's face—something Moses experienced (Exo 34:27–35). He thus showed his approval of Stephen's teaching in exactly the same way he did that of Moses.⁴ Stephen had the filling of the Spirit and you could see it on his face. In fact, we who know Christ have a great glory than Moses! Moses had to veil his face because of God's glory radiating from his face. Paul tells us:

We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. —2 Corinthians 4:18

Stephen demonstrates that you can stand for Christ without being angry or rude. Like God who loved the world and wants to see his heaven full, so Stephen's motive was to see many in the Sanhedrin come to Christ. That's why he was willing to stand alone for Christ.

But remember it's not our faces that will bring people to Christ. We must open our mouths with the message of the gospel. And Stephen gives a demonstration of how we can all preach the gospel even to a hostile crowd.

2. BE WILLING TO SPEAK FOR CHRIST (7:1-53)

Stephen is then asked a question about the accusations about him.

Acts 7:1 | And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Stephen was ready to give an answer, and speak up, and so should we.

In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. —1 Peter 3:14

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 430–431.

⁴ MacArthur, *ibid.*, 195–196.

Stephen is asked, "Is it true that you Stephen are setting aside the land, the law and the temple?" That would be blasphemous in the minds of the Sanhedrin! Stephen had a choice to make then and there. Will he speak for Christ? Will he try to defend himself, or will he simply give the Gospel? Stephen's choice is very helpful for all of us. He chooses not to answer the charges or defend himself. Like his Lord, Stephen was like a sheep before her shearers is silent, and he did not open his mouth to defend himself. Instead, he lifted up Jesus from the Old Testament.

What Stephen did do was kick out the false pillars they were staking their lives and eternity on: the land, the law, and the temple. These were good things, but they were means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. You see the religious leaders had loved the photograph of Jesus: the land, the law, and the Temple—more than they loved the real thing. Jesus comes as the fulfillment of these things, and they crucify him. It's like they're crying out, "We don't want the real thing! We want the picture." You see they gained some things through those pictures that they would lose if they followed Jesus. They gained worldly power and prestige. Intoxicated with power, and unwilling to let it go, they crucified their Messiah.

You see whatever controls you is your Lord. Whatever makes you angry and anxious is your little "g" god. That might as well be the title of Stephen's sermon. The gist of his message is stop worshipping the photograph—the real Messiah is here. Don't worship the wrapping paper when God wants you to worship the gift.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE LAND!

One thing the leaders of Israel were in love with was the land. They felt they were uniquely blessed by God because they lived in the Promised Land. They had come back from exile. The inheritance of the land proved that the Jews have the blessing of God.

Abraham and the Land

Stephen says, God's is not the inheritance of the land, but the inheritance of knowing Jesus. Stephen starts where we should all start: the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham is justified by grace through faith. It wasn't the land that was special. It was his faith in the Lord! His inheritance in Christ was what made the difference, not the land.

Acts 7:2-8 | And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,³ and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.⁷ 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship 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.

The popular opinion of the time was that God gave special spiritual privileges to those living on the real estate of Palestine. The resulting veneration of the land and the status that went with it left little room for the ultimate inheritance we have in Jesus the Messiah. Stephen argued that God's blessing on Abraham had nothing to do with the land, but came because of his faith in the coming Messiah. Abraham spent considerable time in the land but did not own any part of it. Stephen is emphatic. ⁵

Acts 7:5 | God gave Abraham no inheritance in the land, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.

Abraham who was promised the land and a people to inhabit it never owned even a "foot's length" in the Promised Land. You see, Stephen's point is, the land is the wrapping paper. It's certainly not the ultimate inheritance. Christ is the gift inside the wrapping paper. He is our eternal inheritance. That's Stephen's point. The Sanhedrin, including Saul of Tarsus, are so enthralled with the wrapping paper that they not only hate the gift of Jesus, they crucify him.

Joseph and the Land

Again, if the land is so important, why is it, Stephen says, that the none of the twelve patriarchs owned land was a burial plot.

Acts 7:9-16 | "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

God blessed them through Joseph in Egypt even though the only part of the Holy Land they possessed was the family tomb.⁶

Moses and the Land

Again, if the land is so important, why is it, Stephen says, that the none of the twelve patriarchs owned land was Abraham's burial plot?

Acts 7:17-36 | "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ until

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 104.

⁶ Hughes, *ibid.*, 105.

there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. ¹⁹ He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. ²⁰ At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, ²¹ and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son.

²² And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. ²³ "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴ And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. ²⁶ And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?'

²⁷ But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. ³⁰ "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord:

³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.' ³⁵ "This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

Listen to Stephen's clinching example was Moses, described in the verses above. God met and took care of Moses and his people *outside* the Holy Land. Moses was raised in Egypt (vv. 17–22). He matured in Midian (v. 29). He was commissioned near Mt. Sinai, and God called the area "holy ground" (vv. 30–34). "Holy ground" is wherever God meets his people, and not just inside the borders of Palestine. The greatest miracles of Israel happened in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert—not in the Promised Land.⁷

⁷ Ibid.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE LAW!

Stephen's basic argument (7:37) is built on Moses' words from Deuteronomy 18:15, when Moses predicted that God would raise up for the Jews "a prophet like me from your own people."

Moses and the Law

Acts 7:37-41 | This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'³⁸ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

The Jews' hope of redemption should never have been the law of Moses. The law of Moses didn't die for them, but Jesus did. There is a Prophet that is infinitely greater than Moses, because he is God and because he as the God-man substituted his life's blood for their sin.

Of course, the Jews in Moses' day rejected both Moses and the law anyway.⁸ The people of Jesus' day lost the whole purpose of the law when they rejected Jesus, who kept the law perfectly for them. If they would only believe, his righteousness could be applied to them (2 Cor 5:21).

Stephen's opponents had accused him of speaking against the sacred law of Moses, but the history of Israel revealed that the nation had repeatedly *broken* that Law. God gave the law to his church in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, his living word through the mediation of angels (*cf* Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19). No sooner had the people received the law than they disobeyed it by asking Aaron to make them an idol (Exo 32), and thereby broke the first two of the Ten Commandments (Exo 20:1-6).⁹

When Stephen quoted Amos 5:25-27, he revealed what the Jews had really been doing all those years: in outward form, they were worshiping Yahweh; but in their hearts, they were worshiping foreign gods!

Acts 7:42-43 | But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets [*Amos 5:25-27*]: "Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ⁴³You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'

The form of the question in Acts 7:42 demands a negative reply: "No, you were not offering those sacrifices to the Lord!" In our day of "pluralism" of religions and an emphasis on "toleration," we must understand why God hated the pagan religions and instructed Israel

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 432.

to destroy them. To begin with, these religions were unspeakably obscene in their worship of sex and their use of religious prostitutes. Their practices were also brutal, even to the point of offering children as sacrifices to their gods. It was basically demon worship, and it opened the way for all kinds of godless living on the part of the Jews. Had the nation turned from the true God and succumbed to idolatry, it could have meant the end of the godly remnant and the fulfillment of the promise of the Redeemer.¹⁰

This brings up an important point: idols will eventually make you miserable. Idols are like a delicious cake laced with poison. It tastes so good, but the poison of self-worship and self-focus will afflict your soul with worry: what do people think of me? Your anger or frustration or despair will rise anytime your reputation is tarnished because you care too much of the opinion of others. The poison of self-comfort will have you will eat you up with worry about your health and a million other things as you try to protect your life, which is already in God's hands. Worry and despair will take hold of you as you try to guard your wealth and comfort from money. The problem with idols is they are never, never enough. You look to relationships as an idol, and you become a needy person. Or perhaps you become jaded and give up on people all together. Whichever end of the spectrum, it's poisonous idolatry. Trust in God. Forgive people. Don't look to idols because they will always be tormentors adding to your misery. Replace idols with the worship of the forever satisfying God who made you. Find your identity in Christ, not in other people's expectations or even your own expectations.

God's law was given to the Jews to protect them from the pagan influence around them, and to enable them to enjoy the blessings of the land. It was God's law that made them a holy people, different from the other nations.¹¹ The law was never meant to take the place of Christ. The law was meant as a grace to guide them to a Person. The law was the means and never the goal. The Jews made the law the goal. Keeping the law was their "chief end." They failed at terribly. When Stephen points out as Paul did to the Galatians that "The law is our schoolmaster that leads us to Christ" (Gal 3:24), they want to kill him.

The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. —*Galatians 3:24, KJV*

The Sanhedrin of Stephen's day had already crucified the one who kept the law perfectly. And they are about to stone Stephen who was a blameless, godly brother. Why? Because the Sanhedrin idolizes the law. Idolatry will make you a terrorist and a tyrant. Mess with the idol and you get punished!

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE TEMPLE!

Now Stephen turns his attention to the Temple. The Jews thought they were untouchable. They had the Temple. Stephen delineates the folly of building a house for the Creator-God who has all heaven and earth for his dwelling place (vv. 49–50).¹²

Moses, Joshua and the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle is not to be admired. It's the wrapping paper. Look at the very presence of God himself. He is the gift to Israel.

¹⁰ Wiersbe, *ibid.*

¹¹ Wiersbe, 432.

¹² John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 203.

Acts 7:44-45a | “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers.

The Tabernacle and Temple are pictures of our relationship with God. From the Menorah to the Table of Showbread, we see Jesus.

The Menorah or lamp stand was a symbol of Jesus who is the light of the world. As we see in Revelation, the lampstand is a beautiful picture of the Spirit of God burning in the churches where Jesus is the head.

Remember the table of showbread with twelve loaves. Of course, Jesus called himself the bread of life (Jn 6:48).

The altar of incense that was constantly burning day and night represents our prayers. Just as the sweet smells of incense filled the room, so our prayers are sweet to God! Oh how he loves us to spend time with him in prayer.

At the front of the courtyard was the Bronze Altar. This is where animal sacrifices were offered. The altar reminds us that Jesus is, as John the Baptist said, “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).

David, Solomon and the Temple

Stephen makes his point. When it comes to the Temple and the Tabernacle, these were nothing more than wrapping paper.

Acts 7:45b-50 | So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?”

This magnificent provision for true worship nevertheless is not to be revered, Stephen implies, for “the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” (7:48). God is far too great for that.¹³ Stephen was clinging to the God who was made flesh. Jesus reveals the Father for us (Jn 1:18). If you don’t come to God through Jesus who the law, the temple and the Temple point to, then you cannot come to God. As God the Son, Jesus is the exclusive way to the Father (Jn 14:6).

What does all this have to do with us today? *The land*. It is possible to imagine that since we live in a privileged nation where so much good has been done and so many godly people reared, we will surely inherit God’s blessing. *The law*. Sometimes we, like the Jews of old, make a fetish out of God’s Word. We carry it with us, mark it appropriately, thumb it piously, but fail to let it take root in our hearts. *The temple*. It is easy to suppose that since we go to the place where God has chosen to meet his people, we will receive special blessings. Three

¹³ William H. Baker, “Acts,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 894.

times, not necessarily so! It is possible to have all these things and yet be pitifully and utterly damned or saved but defeated and disobedient.¹⁴

It's About Jesus (Whom They Murdered)

The Sanhedrin didn't get it. They were mainly made up of Sadducees who rejected the supernatural. For sure there were many Pharisees as well who did believe in the supernatural, one of whom was Saul of Tarsus. Though they accepted the supernatural, they rejected Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah. Yet look at Stephen, he does not wilt in the face of unbelief. He speaks the truth in love. Remember when they looked at him, he had the "face of an angel." He proclaims the Gospel to the most important religious body in Israel. What he says is not rudeness but truth. He's loving their souls. He wants them to come out of their unbelief.

Acts 7:51-53 | "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

He holds nothing back, even though it would cost him his life. Stephen says, "The land, the law and the Temple point to Jesus, and you murdered him. In your idolatry you killed what all this pointed to." How sad. They were given the law through angels, but they refused to keep the law they so revere.

3. BE WILLING TO SUFFER FOR CHRIST (7:54-60)

The Sanhedrin had turned these wonderful pictures of Christ into idols. And we are about to see that idolatry turns a person into a tyrant. The Jews who crucified Jesus are now wanting more blood: Stephen's blood to be exact.

Everyone who loves Jesus will suffer for him in this world. Stephen put aside their love for the land, the law, and the Temple because they loved these gifts of God that pointed to Christ more than they loved God. They loved God's gifts so much that when the true gift came, they crucified him.

SUFFER WITH VICTORY

Incredibly, Steven was not at all worried about the angry mob of the Sanhedrin preparing to execute him. He was too busy gazing at the victorious Christ.

Acts 7:54-56 | Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 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. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

¹⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 105–106.

"There he is," Stephen must have thought, "My prophet, priest and king! The Son of Man." He's not sitting though; he is standing at the right hand of God. How easy it is for us to let fear take hold of us, and when that happens, we cannot see Jesus. But Stephen, filled with faith, got to see Jesus, and he wasn't sitting on his throne, but standing, cheering Stephen on from heaven.

In that moment, I think Stephen's face was still glowing like an angel, because even though the men began shouting and stopping their ears at Stephen's words, he kept gazing into heaven, amazed at the sight of Jesus welcoming him.

SUFFER WITH TRUST

In that moment, I think Stephen's face was still glowing like an angel, because even though the men began shouting and stopping their ears at Stephen's words, he kept gazing into heaven, amazed at the sight of Jesus welcoming him.

Acts 7:57-58 | But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 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.

These respected, dignified aristocrats descended on young, innocent Stephen and executed him! Their action was illegal, brutal, immoral, but they did not care. They probably took him outside the city where the witnesses repeated their charges, threw him down an embankment (it was the witnesses' privilege to do so), and cast great stones on him, followed by more stones from the crowd.¹⁵ Frederick Buechner describes it this way:

Stoning somebody to death, even somebody as young and healthy as Stephen, is not easy. You do not get the job done with the first few rocks and broken bottles, and even after you get the man down, it is a long, hot business. To prepare themselves for the work-out, they stripped to the waist and got somebody to keep an eye on their things till they were through. The man they got was a fire-breathing young arch-conservative Jew named Saul, who was there because he thoroughly approved of what they were doing. —*Frederick Buechner*¹⁶

There is Saul of Tarsus who would write thirteen books in our New Testament. Even though Stephen's life was being taken away from him, God was filling Stephen's Greek-speaking, Hellenistic shoes with the greatest persecutor of Christians among the Jews. No one could have known that the chief instigator of hate toward the Christians would become their greatest friend and proponent. He would soon become the famed Apostle to the Gentiles.

SUFFER WITH COMPASSION

Finally, we have another way to suffer. We need to suffer with compassion. We cannot hold bitterness against those who persecute us. Look at Stephen's amazing example.

Acts 7:59-60 | And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 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.

¹⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 106–107.

¹⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 162.

Like Jesus, he prayed for his executioners. This was an overflow of grace—God's unmerited, unconditional favor.¹⁷ Jesus who crushed the serpent's head at the cross, is now going to crush the serpent's plans in a different way. He's going to use the prayer of Stephen, which is answered in the next chapter.

Do you think God is stopped by the most devious plans of men? Think again! He can take your greatest failures and turn them into great gains for the Kingdom of God. All we have to do is look beyond the suffering and persecution.

Conclusion

Saul of Tarsus was so offended by Stephen's message that he gathered a crowd to stone him, and as a member of the Sanhedrin, gave his approval for executing him.

Was Stephen's death worth it? The Apostle Paul would say so because it was the memory of Stephen that tormented him and refused to let go.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. —*1 Corinthians 13:9*

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. —*Galatians 1:13*

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. —*1 Timothy 1:15*

Conclusion

Stephen's death kept goading the persecutor Saul, nudging him toward the throne of grace.¹⁸ Paul would be won by that angel-faced deacon. Paul would carry on the work that Stephen started. Stephen and Paul had something in common: they were both Hellenized Jews. They were Greek speaking Jews who had adapted to the Greek culture. And now Saul (his Jewish name) would find his Hellenized name, Paul, to be very helpful. It would be Paul's desire to see all men everywhere repent and find hope in Jesus.

That's my hope for you today. Perhaps you are zealous about religion and doctrine, like Saul of Tarsus, but you don't know the Lord. You are zealous about the wrapping paper, but you haven't yet received the gift. Come home and receive the welcome of Jesus. He loves you. Come you weak who are burdened down by the law and find the one who kept the law for you. He alone satisfies. Come home today!

¹⁷ Hughes, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Hughes, 108.