



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Defense of Stephen, Part IV

The Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 7:51-60

June 10, 2007

- I. **Stephen Rebukes the Sanhedrin**
- II. **The Sanhedrin Reacts Violently to Stephen's Words**
- III. **Stephen is Martyred**

- ❖ This account of Stephen and his martyrdom reveals the continued pattern of the Gospel confronting the world...light confronting darkness...and the darkness not simply disliking the light, but hating it.

I. **Stephen Rebukes the Sanhedrin**

- ❑ Immediately following Stephen's quotation of [Isaiah 66:1-2](#), he says, '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. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murders you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.' **Verses 51-53**
- ❑ Up until now, Stephen had referred to the Jewish fathers of the past as 'our' fathers [vv. 19, 38, 39, 44]; however, in Verse 51, Stephen refers to them as 'your' fathers. The contrast is significant. Stephen, is now clearly distancing himself from the Sanhedrin.
- ❑ In these three short verses, Stephen refers to the members of the Sanhedrin as (1) stiff-necked; (2) uncircumcised in heart and ears; (3) resisters, enemies of God [the Holy Spirit]; (4) Betrayers and Murderers of the Righteous One, the Messiah; and (5) neglected, indeed blasphemers of the law.

○ Stiff-necked

- ❑ In his attack of the Sanhedrin, Stephen used a phrase directly from the Old Testament [Exodus 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deuteronomy 9:6, 13; 10:16; 31:27; 2 Chronicles 30:8; Jeremiah 17:23]. Deuteronomy 9:13 states, “The LORD spoke further to me, saying, ‘I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a stubborn people.’”
- ❑ The term ‘stiff-necked’ describes someone who refuses to bow his head in worship and submission to the LORD.
- ❑ It is a powerful contrast between the Sanhedrin, who would not bow before the one true God, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abid-nego, who refused to bow down before the golden image [Daniel 3:8-18]

○ Uncircumcised in heart and ears

- ❑ Again, Stephen uses an Old Testament phrase [Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; 9:26; Ezekiel 44:7, 9]. Ezekiel 44:9 states, “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the sons of Israel, shall enter My sanctuary.’”
- ❑ In other words, Stephen is essentially calling the Sanhedrin a group of Gentiles. It is as though they are unclean and acting as though they had never received the Law. There could have been no greater insult to these religious leaders.
- ❑ Certainly Stephen knew that the members of the Sanhedrin were circumcised physically; however, once again, they had focused on the physical, completely missing the eternal, spiritual reality to which physical circumcision pointed: circumcision of the heart performed by God Himself.
 - ‘Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.’
Deuteronomy 30:6
 - Romans 2:29: ‘But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.’
 - Also, God pronounced His judgment upon those who were ‘circumcised, yet uncircumcised.’
 - ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised’
Jeremiah 9:25

○ Resisters of the Holy Spirit

- ❑ Just as God worked through His prophets in the Old Testament, since Pentecost God the Holy Spirit indwelt and worked through His appointed Apostles and other believers, like

Stephen. It was the Holy Spirit working through His Apostles and people that the Jewish leaders were resisting.

- ❑ John Gill writes, ‘The resistance made by these persons was not to the Spirit of God in them, of which they were destitute, but to the Spirit of God in His ministers, in his apostles, and particularly in Stephen; nor to any internal operation of his grace, but to the external ministry of the word...this passage is no proof of the resistance of the Holy Spirit, and the operations of his grace in conversion, when he is in men, and acts with a purpose and of the will to convert them; since it does not appear that he was in these persons, and was acting in them, with a design to convert them.’
- ❑ The ‘resisting’ here of the Holy Spirit is **not the resisting of the effectual call of God unto conversion**. When God ‘draws’ someone to conversion, such a ‘drawing’ is effectual – it cannot [nor would we ever want it to be!] be resisted. Yet, here, the Sanhedrin, and their fathers, resisted the work of the Holy Spirit in His prophets and ministers.
- ❑ In fact, the unregenerate, unconverted soul will always resist the working of the Holy Spirit in and through the ministers of Christ. The irresistible grace we so often speak of, however, refers to the particular, effectual drawing of God by which the Holy Spirit sovereignly regenerates the lost through the proclamation of Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

○ Murderers of the Messiah

- ❑ The next charge Stephen leveled against the Sanhedrin was that of murder.
- ❑ In the Gospel accounts, Jesus Himself said, ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her!’ Luke 13:34a
- ❑ Stephen says, ‘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...’
 - Throughout Jewish tradition, there is certainly sufficient evidence to support Stephen’s assertion.
 - According to rabbinical tradition, Isaiah was sawn in two during the reign of King Manasseh [see the potential reference in Hebrews 11:37].
 - Also, according to the Early Church Father, Tertullian, Jeremiah, like Stephen, was stoned by the people who forced him with them to go to Egypt.
 - Jesus, Himself, said in Luke 11:51: ‘...from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yet, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.’
- ❑ Just as their fathers [as Stephen has already outlined in his speech] had persecuted and murdered the prophets, so they [the Sanhedrin] were guilty of murdering Christ.

- ❑ Stephen is essentially saying, ‘Your fathers killed the prophets; you killed the One to whom the prophets pointed.’
 - Therefore, it is as though the sin of the Sanhedrin was **even greater** than the sin of their fathers who had gone before them.
- ❑ In Matthew 23:30, Jesus, in His condemnation of the scribes and the Pharisees, says that they will say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ However, although the claim this, Jesus says, ‘You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?’
- ❑ Yet, not only had they murdered the Messiah, but now they were about to commit another murder.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Blasphemers of the Law

- ❑ One of the primary charges against Stephen was that he was speaking ‘against this holy place and the Law.’ Acts 6:13
- ❑ However, here, Stephen says, ‘you [to the Sanhedrin] who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.’ Acts 7:53
 - In other words, Stephen is saying that his accusers, the Sanhedrin, not himself, are the true blasphemers of the Law.
 - **Yet, as the leaders of the Jews, they are without excuse.**
- ❑ Tragically, the Sanhedrin used the law as a tool to appear as righteous, even though they were not. They idolized the literal letter of the law, yet, they did not keep it. It was knowledge for them that simply ‘puffed up.’
- ❑ This is a danger we, too, must guard against. We have the Scriptures, and may even know them well; however, it is not enough to *have* the Scriptures – we must *keep* them. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures ‘backwards and forwards...inside and out’; however, they did not keep them. They were far too concerned with how their knowledge of the Scriptures made them appear.
- ❑ So it is today. As 1 Corinthians 8:1 states, ‘We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.’

- ❑ Ultimately, Stephen’s rebuke of the Sanhedrin was not intended to condemn them [as though he could even do that]; but, rather, to lead them to repentance. Yet, the Sanhedrin appears too blinded to be able to understand or embrace the foolishness of the Gospel message.

II. The Sanhedrin Reacts Violently to Stephen's Words

- ❑ Luke writes, 'Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.' **Verse 54**
- ❑ Luke states that after Stephen's rebuke of the Sanhedrin, they were 'cut to the heart' – the words *diaprio* literally means 'to saw in half.'
 - The truth of the Gospel message is, indeed, penetrating. It 'cuts to the heart.' It destroys the false idols that we can build in our own heart. It can, in fact, even be painful at times.
 - As Hebrews 4:12 states, 'For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.'
- ❑ Further, they were 'gnashing their teeth'.
 - Psalm 35:16 states, 'Like godless jesters at a feast, / They gnashed at me with their teeth.'
 - Throughout the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, Jesus uses this phrase to describe the place of eternal torment, reserved for the wicked:

'The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'
 - It is as though the 'torment' and hatred that the Sanhedrin experiences in this scene is but a foretaste of what will come for them.

- ❑ Then, in the midst of Sanhedrin 'gnashing [their] teeth', Luke writes **Verse 55-56**:

'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; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

- ❑ The **first point** that Luke mentions is that Stephen was 'full of the Holy Spirit...'
 - As a result, Stephen stood in direct contrast to the members of the Sanhedrin, who were full of hatred and malice.

Finally, John 15:26-27 states: 'When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.'

- Therefore, Stephen’s speech is less a ‘defense’ and more a ‘witness’ to the resurrected and exalted Christ.

❖ **In other words, it was the Holy Spirit within Stephen who was testifying to the truth of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ [to the Glory of God the Father].**

- The **second point** Luke makes is that Stephen was given a vision of heaven and the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God...?
 - This is similar to Isaiah’s vision in Isaiah 6; however, Stephen’s vision was not that of the pre-Incarnate Christ, but rather the risen and exalted Christ.
 - Further, Stephen has explained to the Sanhedrin the purpose of the earthly tabernacle and temple, and now he is afforded a glimpse of the **true temple!**
 - Also, it could be an indication that the *shekinah* glory has left the physical temple, and this is what Stephen beholds. The reason, most certainly, for this is because Christ fulfilled the temple.
 - Lastly, as John Calvin commented, ‘...Stephen alone did see the glory of God. For that spectacle was not only hid from the wicked, who stood in the same place, but they were also so blinded within themselves, that they did not see the manifest truth.’
 - Calvin continues, ‘...if we be desirous to see him present by the working of his grace, we must seek him in heaven; as he revealed himself unto Stephen there.’
- **Thirdly**, Stephen says, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’

- This statement sealed Stephen’s fate.
- There are several reasons for this.
- First of all, he makes reference to a vision of the **Son of Man**.
 - Stephen’s words [‘...I see...the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’] reference the great Son of Man passage in Daniel 7:13-14:

‘I kept looking in the night visions,
 And behold, with the clouds of heaven
 One like a Son of Man was coming,
 And He came up to the Ancient of Days
 And was presented before Him.
 ‘And to Him was given dominion,
 Glory and a kingdom,
 That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
 Might serve Him

His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.’

- Therefore, the concept of the Son of Man is one that describes the absolute dominion, rule and sovereignty of the Messiah over all the nations.
- Thus, **Stephen beheld the ruling, reigning, SOVEREIGN King of Kings and LORD of Lords!**
- Secondly, Stephen saw the Son of Man **standing** at God’s right hand.
 - Certainly the right hand was at the position of authority; however, the Son of Man, the risen and exalted Christ, was **standing**.
 - Throughout the New Testament, the resurrected and exalted Christ is described as **seated** at the right hand of God the Father (Matthew 22:44; 24:64; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:11-12; 12:2).
 - Jesus Christ is pictured as seated, first, in terms of **completed** redemptive work. It demonstrates ‘satisfaction’ or ‘completion’ (Hebrews 10:12).
 - The concept of ‘seated’ also indicates sovereign rule and One who is in absolute control, as a monarch, or kings, would rule from his throne.
 - Yet, why is Christ standing?
 - There are several reasons, each of which, I believe, are consistent with the passage:

1.) While Stephen confesses Christ before men [the Sanhedrin], so Christ is standing, confessing Stephen before the Father.

Matthew 10:32: ‘Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.’

- F.F. Bruce wrote, ‘Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God.’

2.) As Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the heavenly courts are vindicating Him!

‘...what Stephen caught a glimpse of was that second and much greater trial in which he was involved. Up to this moment he had only been able to see the earthly trial. He was condemned by the earthly court. But at the moment of his death he caught a glimpse of that greater, heavenly trial, in which he was acquitted. In this trial the Lord Jesus Christ took his side, pleaded his case, and prevailed.’
James Montgomery Boice

- ❑ ‘...in the heavenly court...this member of the Son of Man community is already being vindicated by the head of that community – *the* Son of Man *par excellence*.’ C.F.D. Moule

3.) Consistent with the ‘legal’ theme, Christ is standing as Stephen’s advocate before the Father.

- ❑ Augustine said ‘that Christ sits as a judge, and that He stood then as an advocate.’

4.) While Stephen is being judged by the Sanhedrin, so Christ, the Sovereign Son of Man, stands in judgment of the Sanhedrin.

- ❑ ‘The standing position may...depict he exalted Christ in his role of judge. If so, Stephen’s vision not only confirmed his testimony, but it showed Christ rising to render judgment on his accusers.’
John Polhill

5.) Finally, we see a picture of Christ standing to welcome Stephen into his eternal home!

- ❑ John Stott wrote, ‘[Jesus] stood up either as his [Stephen’s] heavenly advocate or to welcome his first martyr.’
- ❑ It is almost impossible to imagine that one day our Lord will welcome us into our eternal home as well!

- ❑ After this, in **Verse 56**, Luke writes, ‘But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.’
- ❑ One can imagine the anger that Stephen’s words, in Verse 56 would have caused. If Stephen was correct, then the Sanhedrin, not Stephen, stood in judgment and condemnation. Therefore, the Sanhedrin concludes, Stephen must be committing blasphemy, claiming to see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Such a vision would only be possible if he were a true prophet of God.
- ❑ The Sanhedrin had a choice to make. Either Jesus really was the Son of Man, and they were tragically wrong in sentencing Christ to death; or, Stephen was lying and blaspheming.
- ❑ The claim by Stephen would have possibly called into mind the recent trial of Jesus Christ, where the high priest asked Christ, ‘I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’
Matthew 26:63-64

Immediately after these words of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 26:64, Mathew writes, ‘Then the high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has blasphemed!’
Matthew 26:65

- ❑ Imagine the incredible anger and torment the Sanhedrin must have felt. Jesus claimed to be the Son of Man. Then, they had Him crucified. And now, Stephen is claiming to see the fulfillment of the words of Jesus during His own trial!
- ❑ Another reason that Stephen's words were blasphemous was because he claimed to see the exalted Christ at the Father's right hand. However, Christ, according to the Sanhedrin was not only dead but accursed! For, as Deuteronomy 21:23 states, 'his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God).'
- ❑ Finally, as F.F. Bruce writes, 'Many who heard Stephen describe his vision must have felt that this was unabashed contempt of the Shekinah [glory].'
- ❑ In **Verse 57**, Luke states that the Sanhedrin 'cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears...'
 - In their rigid legalism, it appears that the Sanhedrin feared that God would destroy them for hearing such words of 'blasphemy', so they sought to drown out Stephen's words by shouting, and covered their ears.
 - Furthermore, the word translated 'rushed' [Greek: *hormao*] was the same word used in Mark 5:13 and Matthew 8:32, describing the herd of demon-possessed pigs that ran madly into the Sea of Galilee. So, it was with the Sanhedrin. Their actions indicated that they were filled with anger and hatred, exhibiting no self-control [a fruit of the Spirit].
- ❑ Notice the contrast between Stephen and the Sanhedrin. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit; the Sanhedrin was filled with wickedness. Stephen was at peace; the members of the Sanhedrin were shouting and gnashing their teeth.
- ❑ Amazingly, despite the tragic circumstances, Stephen was at perfect peace. So it is with us today. As the world rages around us, we can remain at peace as well. For, biblical peace is not the absence of conflict, but, rather, rightness with God in the midst of 'worldly' peace or conflict.

III. Stephen is Martyred

- ❑ Then, Luke states **Verse 58** that they drove 'him out of the city' and 'began stoning him.'
 - According to John 18:31, the Jews were 'not permitted to put anyone to death.' However, because of their extreme hatred towards Stephen, the Sanhedrin and the witnesses turned into an out-of-control mob.
 - They chose to stone Stephen, no doubt in accordance with the Levitical Law; yet, it was still an illegal trial.
 - The Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 6:1-4 (late second century A.D.) states:

‘When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned...When ten cubits [fifteen feet] 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 every one who confesses has a share in the age to come.’...Four cubits [6 feet] from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped....The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man [typically, ten to twelve feet]. 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.’

- Therefore, the execution of Stephen was illegal, but the Sanhedrin did all they could to give the appearance of justice...the appearance of legality. They did the same thing during the trial of Christ. Yet, this was the mark of their lives. They were ‘white-washed tombs.’ To the human eye, they looked righteous, but in their hearts, they were wicked.

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- Luke concludes his account of Stephen’s death by recording his final two requests.

- First, he says, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’

- These words echoed the words of Christ during his crucifixion. They also echo the Psalmist.
- Psalm 31:5 was an ancient Jewish prayer that children often prayed prior to going to bed at night.

Into Your hand I commit my spirit;
You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth.

- Yet, there are differences between Stephen’s words and Christ’s.
- *First of all*, Christ says, ‘Into your hands **I** commit My spirit.’ Stephen said, ‘receive my spirit.’
- In other words, Stephen did not have the authority or the ability to ‘give’ or ‘commit’ his spirit to Christ. Christ had to receive it. The authority to give life or take life is only God’s.
- Secondly, Christ’s request is made to the Father. Stephen’s is to Christ. Therefore, Stephen’s request reflects the truth of the full deity of Christ – He is fully God!

- Second, Stephen said, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’

- These words also reflect the words of Christ on the cross [Luke 23:34].

- Again, Stephen says 'Lord' instead of 'Father' further underscoring the Deity of Christ.
 - Yet, interestingly, in Jewish tradition, prior to stoning, the condemned was to confess his sins, so that he could participate in the resurrection in the 'last day.' Yet, here, powerfully, Stephen asks for forgiveness not for his sins [for they have all been fully forgiven by the work of Christ], but for his accusers!
- Then, according to Luke **Verse 60**, 'Having said this, he fell asleep.'
 - According to F.F. Bruce, Stephen's death was 'an unexpectedly beautiful and peaceful description of so brutal a death.'
 - The great hope we see in this passage is that Stephen died with the complete assurance that he would be immediately with Christ. This is what gives us such great hope even today (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23).