

“Stephen – Part 4”
Acts 6:8 – 7:60
(Stephen’s Defense – focus on Acts 7:38-60)
(Preached at Trinity, May 18, 2005)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We’ve been looking at this rather lengthy section dealing with Stephen’s defense of the faith and ultimate martyrdom.
 - A. In **Chapter 6:9-15** we read of the false witnesses falsely accusing Stephen of the high crimes of blaspheming God, Moses, the Law, and the Temple.
 - B. After the false witnesses made their accusations the high priest looked at Stephen and asked, “Are these things so?”
In other words, “How do you plead, Guilty or Not Guilty?”
2. Beginning with **Verse 2** Stephen begins his defense. In his defense he recites Israel’s history as he brings them face to face with their sin and rebellion. He was telling them something they all knew very well. He was speaking before the Sanhedrin. They knew their history. They knew the Scriptures. Yet, they were not able to properly apply the Word of God to their own life. In rejecting the Messiah they were imitating their apostate fathers who from the beginning rejected God’s purpose and plan. Stephen was not the blasphemer – they were.
3. So far we seen Stephen aptly defending himself against the charge of blasphemy as well as aptly preaching to the Sanhedrin
 - A. To the charge that he had blasphemed God Stephen affirms the God of glory who is working out His covenant purposes perfectly.
 - B. To the charge that he had spoken against Moses Stephen instead praises him describing him as being “exceeding fair.”
 - C. As we’ve gone through the passage we also continually seen the nature of preaching. Preaching must be heard, examined, received, and followed.
4. Tonight I want to continue to the end of this chapter. Stephen defends himself against the final two charges – that he had blasphemed the Law and the Temple. He also concludes his message pronouncing their condemnation. Their response is immediate – they take Stephen outside and stone him to death. Stephen becomes the first martyr of the Christian Church.
 - I. Stephen’s defense in support of the Law and the Temple
 - A. Stephen exalts the Law of God
 1. **Verse 38** – He calls the Law "Living Oracles"
 2. The Law, like the rest of Scripture is living, enduring, everlasting – sharper than any two-edged sword – divine revelation
 3. The fathers had rejected God's Word – **Verse 39**, the Sanhedrin had rejected God's Word – Stephen was innocent
 - B. Stephen also was not guilty of despising the Temple

1. He affirms the tabernacle God had appointed
 - a. First unto Moses – **Verse 44**
 - b. Joshua brought the Ark into Canaan – **Verse 45**
 - c. David desired to build a house unto God and Solomon built the house – **Verses 46-47**
 - d. Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians and was replaced by Zerubbabel. The current Temple had been built by Herod. That Temple would be destroyed in 70 ad.
2. Stephen makes the point –

Acts 7:48-49 - 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?

 - a. Stephen had not blasphemed the Temple
 - b. The Sanhedrin had blasphemed the Temple by confining God to it. The Temple was never meant to be a permanent institution
In doing so they blasphemed God as well

II. Stephen now brings his sermon to a dramatic conclusion

- A. Stephen had used Israel's history to paint a history of sin and rebellion against God
 1. Their fathers had sold Joseph into captivity – they were stirred by envy the same motivation that stirred them to crucify Christ
 2. They rejected Moses as their deliverer causing Moses to flee to Midian
They later rejected him again in the wilderness
Acts 7:39 – "To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust *him* from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,"
 3. They rejected the Law of God
 4. They were continually given over to idolatry
 5. Over and over Stephen has subtly applied this rebellious spirit to the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin but their stubborn religious hearts would not allow them to hear.
- B. Stephen now openly condemns them
 1. Often a preacher's subtle warnings go unheeded. He is well received until he speaks directly
 2. Stephen now speaks directly – **Verses 51-53**
 3. They were cut to the heart
Acts 7:54 – "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with *their* teeth."

III. We now find the beauty of grace contrasted against the tragedy of depravity

- A. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit
 1. The Sanhedrin was filled with carnal anger
 - a. Anger stems from self-seeking vengeful spirit
Anger is purely a desire to satisfy the carnal desires of our flesh.
 - b. The Sanhedrin was stirred not from righteousness but from envy
 - c. They had heard the truth -- They should have been broken in guilt
They should have wept in repentance – they killed Jesus!
Instead they were filled with anger

- d. In **Verse 57** the word for “ran upon” means “run violently”
Matthew 8:32 – “. . . the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea”
 2. In contrast, Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit
 3. He spoke the Word with boldness – his boldness came from within
 - a. This is the power that had been promised to believers
Acts 1:8 – “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”
 - b. This is the power that Jesus had promised that would equip us through every trial
Luke 12:11-12 – “And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and *unto* magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: ¹² For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.”
 - c. God provides us special strength in our hour of need
2 Corinthians 12:10 – “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”
 4. Being filled with the Spirit Stephen demonstrated the beauty of Christianity – **contrasted with the ugliness of sin**
- B. Stephen was granted spiritual sight – **Verses 55-56****
1. The Sanhedrin had demonstrated continual spiritual blindness.
 - a. They were unable to discern their own sin until Stephen confronted them openly.
 - b. Instead of repenting of their sin they attempted to silence the truth by killing Stephen
 2. Stephen had the spiritual discernment to properly apply the Scriptures
 3. Stephen was one of the few granted the special privilege of being able to look into heaven
(Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, and John shared this distinction)
 - a. First, Stephen saw the presence of God in all of His glory –
 - b. The glory of God was made manifest in the person of Christ.
Colossians 2:9 – “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”
 - c. Stephen saw Christ standing at the right hand of God
 - d. Elsewhere Christ is described as seated at the right hand of Majesty – He is seated because His redemptive work is finished.
 - e. Could it be that Jesus was standing to receive Stephen
Psalms 116:15 – “Precious in the sight of the LORD *is* the death of his saints.”

4. This must have been particularly insulting to the Sanhedrin. They had crucified Christ for making the same a very similar statement.
Mark 14:61-62 – “But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? ⁶² And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.”
- C. Stephen died the death of a believer
1. The Sanhedrin went through the motions of legality, just as they did with Jesus. They took him outside the city according to Levitical law. The punishment for blaspheme was stoning, also according to Levitical law.
 - a. They had a pretense of uprightness, yet their wickedness could not be hid, especially before God
 - b. These wicked religious rulers would continue to live, and then they died. They died as those who have no hope.
 - c. We are granted but one life. How we live it is of eternal importance
 2. Stephen died a glorious death
 - a. He died with absolute confidence in Christ – **Verse 59**
Acts 7:59 – “And they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”
 - b. When Jesus died He commended His spirit to the Father
 Stephen commends his spirit to Lord Jesus
 - c. Stephen fully expected to enter Christ’s presence upon his death
2 Corinthians 5:8 – “We are confident, *I say*, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”
Philippians 1:23 – “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.”
 - d. Stephen knew he was about to unite with Jesus
- D. Stephen manifested the grace of love
1. The Sanhedrin had only hatred in their heart – no mercy, no love, no compassion
 2. Stephen was filled with love, even for his enemies
 Love is the distinguishing mark of our redeemed character
 Love is the sum of all saving grace
 3. Love is one of the attributes of God -
1 John 4:8 – “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.”
1 John 4:16 – “And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.”
 - a. Those who are united to Christ become partakers of His divine nature.

2 Peter 1:2-4 – "Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, ³ According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: ⁴ Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."

1 John 4:7-8 - "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. ⁸ He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love."

b. Although Stephen was hated and cruelly treated he responded with love.

E. Stephen responded to their hatred with forgiveness

Acts 7:60 – "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

1. This too was Christ-like behavior

Luke 23:34 – "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

2. We manifest our divine character when we manifest forgiveness.

Matthew 5:44-45 – "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; ⁴⁵ That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."

Conclusion:

1. Stephen demonstrated what it truly means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He demonstrated the true expression of Christian grace.
2. Pray that this might be your character. May God grant each of us to manifest more and more the divine nature of Christ.