

# DETERMINED TO DEFEND THE TRUTH

ACTS 6:8-7:60

## INTRODUCTION:

Before we get into the heart of the message this morning it is important to understand what Stephen is up against. Stephen is going to be on trial for his life. Also Stephen is under accusation for three serious charges.

1. Blaspheming God.
2. Blaspheming Law of God.
3. Blaspheming the Temple of God.

## ***Acts 6:8-15 Stephen's Source of Power!***

1. (8-10) Stephen's witness for God.
  - a. God did **great wonders and signs** through the apostles, but also through others like Stephen, one of the servants chosen to help the widows. Stephen was used of God because he was **full of faith and power**
  - b. **Disputing with Stephen**: Stephen debated with Jews from **the Synagogue of the Freedmen**, empowered by the Holy Spirit, he shows greater wisdom (**they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke**).
2. (11-14) The opposing Jews, defeated in debate, induce false accusations against Stephen.
  - a. **They stirred up the people**: The opponents of Stephen could do nothing until they got popular opinion on their side. Previously, persecution against the apostles had been limited because popular opinion was with them (Acts 2:47, 5:26).
    - i. **They secretly induced men to say**: The opponents of Stephen could not win a fair fight, so they used lies and secret strategies to shape popular opinion against Stephen.

iii. How did Luke know what the opponents of Stephen **secretly induced men to say**? Possibly, it was because a man named Saul of Tarsus was among the opponents, because some of them were from Paul's home region of Cilicia. Saul (who became known as Paul the apostle) may have told Luke about this incident.

b. The accusers brought their charges: **We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God . . . this man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law . . . Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change customs.** Significantly, many of the same false accusations were leveled against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61). You are in a good place when people are treating you like they treated Jesus!

c. Why would they make such accusations? Because Stephen was clearly teaching that Jesus was greater than Moses; that Jesus was God; that Jesus was greater than the temple; that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law; and that Jesus was greater than their religious customs and traditions.

i. Of course, Stephen would never teach **against Moses and God**, but his glorification of Jesus would be twisted. Stephen would never **speak blasphemous words against this holy place** (the temple), but he would not make it an idol as many Jews in that day did. Stephen had his words twisted, and a false accusation was brought against him.

d. Several commentators imply or directly state that the thrust of Stephen's message - that Jesus supersedes the temple and its localized worship - was a doctrine that the apostles themselves must have shied away from proclaiming. This is purely unwarranted speculation.

The demonstrated boldness of the apostles is undeniable proof that they withheld no truth from fear that it might be too controversial.

### 3. (15) Stephen's countenance when accused.

And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

a. **His face as the face of an angel:** Stephen's face did not have that mild, soft, angelic look that we see in so many paintings; nor was it a look of stern judgment and wrath. Instead, his face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one that knows and trusts his God. His face had the same reflected glory that Moses had as he beheld God intimately.

b. **The face of an angel** also means that Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or terror, because he knew his life was in God's hands and that Jesus never forsakes His people.

## ***Acts 7 - Stephen's Sermon Standing For The Truth***

A. A survey of Israel's history during the time of the patriarchs.

### 1. Background: Why did Stephen preach this sermon?

a. Remember the charges brought against Stephen in Acts 6:11 and 13-14: First, that he spoke *blasphemous words against Moses*, he spoke against the *law*, and spoke to change Jewish *customs*. Second, that he spoke *blasphemous words* against *God* and God's dwelling place, the temple.

b. In this sermon, Stephen gives a panorama of Old Testament history. We shouldn't think Stephen instructed the Sanhedrin on points of Jewish history they were ignorant of.

Instead, Stephen wants to emphasize some things revealed in Jewish history they may not have considered: That God has never confined Himself to one place (like the temple), and that the Jewish people have a habit of rejecting those God sends to them!

c. This really is not a *defense*. Stephen isn't interested in defending himself. He simply wants to proclaim the truth about Jesus in a way people can understand.

## 2. (1-8) God's promise to Abraham.

a. The **high priest** mentioned here was probably still Caiaphas, the same one who presided over the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:57).

b. Stephen recounts Abraham's journey from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran, then from Haran to Canaan, amounting to a somewhat roundabout obedience to God's command. God had commanded Abraham **Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you**, and Stephen makes it clear this command came to Abraham **when he was in Mesopotamia**.

i. When Abraham lived in **the land of the Chaldeans** and received this command and promise, he did not immediately obey. First, he did not immediately go **to a land that I will show you**. Second, he did not leave his **relatives**, taking with him his father (who died in Haran) and his nephew Lot.

c. As Abraham went from Mesopotamia to Haran to Canaan, God was with him all the time. Stephen began by saying the **God of glory appeared to our father Abraham**.

Stephen wants to make it clear that God appeared to Abraham, and guided Abraham, and blessed Abraham when there was no temple. Abraham didn't need the temple to be close to God.

3. (9-16) God's faithfulness through Joseph.

a. **God was with him:** Again, Stephen is emphasizing the *spiritual* presence of God with Joseph all the time. Joseph did not need to go to the temple to be close to God. There was no temple! Instead, **God was with him** all the time.

b. Stephen mentions the story of Joseph, because he is a picture of Jesus, in that the sons of Israel rejected Joseph, who later became a "savior" (and the *only possible* savior) for them.

c. **Seventy-five people:** How can Genesis 46:27 say there were seventy all together of the family of Israel, when Stephen in Acts 7:14 says it was 75? Stephen is quoting from the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which says 75. The number in the Septuagint is not wrong, just arrived at in a different way, specifically adding five more sons (or grandsons) of Joseph born in Egypt.

d. **The tomb that Abraham bought:** The only land that Abraham ever actually "possessed" in Canaan was this burial plot. The rest was received only by faith.

4. (17-29) Israel's rejection of Moses at his "first coming."

a. Moses is the next picture of Jesus, who was favored by God from birth and miraculously preserved in childhood and was **mighty in words and deeds**.

b. **He supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand:** When Moses offered deliverance to Israel, he was rejected, and rejected with spite, with Israel denying that he had any right to be a **ruler and a judge** over them.

5. (30-36) God's call of Moses, and Moses' role as **ruler and a deliverer** for Israel, who previously rejected him.

a. Even though Israel had rejected Moses and his leadership, God appointed Moses with unmistakable signs, including the burning bush in the wilderness.

b. God's appearance to Moses at the burning bush is important to Stephen, because it shows that God's presence is not limited to the temple. God is bigger than the temple, and Moses did not need the temple to be close to God.

6. (37-43) Israel's repeated rejection of Moses.

a. Moses promised that there would come after him another **Prophet** and warned that Israel should take special care to listen to this coming **Prophet**. But just like Israel rejected Moses, so they are rejecting Jesus, who is the **Prophet** Moses spoke of.

b. Moses, like Jesus, led the **congregation** of God's people, enjoyed special intimacy with God and brought forth the revelation of God.

c. **In their hearts they turned back to Egypt . . . and they made a calf in those days:** Israel continued to reject Moses, even after God had demonstrated that he was their deliverer.

i. The phrase **and rejoiced in the works of their own hands** is especially telling. One of the accusations against Stephen was that he had blasphemed the temple. It wasn't that Stephen spoke against the temple, but against the way Israel worshipped the temple of God instead of the God of the temple. Just as Israel worshipped the calf in the wilderness, so now they were worshipping **the works of their own hands**.

d. In their rejection of Moses and the God who sent him, Israel turned instead to corrupt idols, bringing upon themselves the judgment described in the passage quoted from Amos 5:25-27.

7. (44-50) Even as Israel rejected God, they still had the tabernacle, and later, the temple.

a. **Our fathers had the tabernacle . . . Solomon built Him a house**: Stephen's point is that the presence of the tabernacle or the temple did not keep them from rejecting God and His special messengers.

b. **However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands**: Stephen confronts their idolatry of the temple. In doing so, they tried to confine God within the temple. But God is too big to fit in any temple man could make.

8. (51-53) Stephen applies the sermon to his listeners.

a. **You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you**: One can imagine the angry whispering among the Sanhedrin as Stephen's history lesson begins to hit home. Stephen sees this and knows that they are rejecting the One God sent again, just like before.

b. Drawing on concepts from the Old Testament, Stephen rebukes those who rejected Jesus; they are **stiff-necked** (as Israel is described in passages like Exodus 32:9), and they are **uncircumcised in heart and ears** (as Israel is described in passages like Jeremiah 9:26). In using the two phrases together, he may have in mind a passage like Deuteronomy 10:16: *Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.*

c. His main point was unmistakable: “As Israel was in its history, so you are today, **you now have become the betrayers and murderers.**” Israel was proud that they had received the law of God and were guardians of the law, but Stephen reminded them, “you **have not kept it.**”

## B. Reaction to the sermon of Stephen.

1. (54) They **were cut to the heart**, and convicted by the Holy Spirit. Yet the Sanhedrin reacted with rage instead of submission to the Holy Spirit.

a. They show great anger, but who, really, are they angry with? Stephen is only the messenger. Their real anger is directed against the God they are rejecting.

b. The idea of **gnashing at him with their teeth** can't help but remind us of the imagery of Hell. Seven different times, Jesus described Hell as a place of *weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Matthew 8:12).

2. (55-56) Stephen's vision of Jesus.

a. We are reminded again that Stephen was **full of the Holy Spirit**; this was the source of his courage, wisdom and power in preaching.

b. **Saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God:** It is difficult to describe exactly what Stephen saw. We can't say if this was a personal vision or if some sort of "window to heaven" was opened, but going beyond the plain description of the text is pure speculation.

c. **Jesus standing at the right hand of God:** It is significant to note Jesus is **standing** here, as opposed to the more common description of Him *sitting* (Matthew 26:64, Colossians 3:1) at the right hand of the Father.

i. Why is **Jesus standing** here? Jesus stands in solidarity with Stephen at this moment of crisis. He does not impassionately react to the problems of His people.

### 3. (57-58) The execution of Stephen by stoning.

a. When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus *standing at the right hand of God*, it was too much. The Sanhedrin react quickly, violently, and together. When Jesus, before this same body of men, declared that He would sit at the right hand of God, they had the same reaction and sealed his death as a blasphemer (Matthew 26:64-66).

b. **They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord:** These were distinguished, older men acting this way! The reaction of the Sanhedrin seems extreme, but is typical of those rejecting God and lost in spiritual insanity. They wail in agony and cover their ears at the revelation of God, which they regard as blasphemy.

c. **Ran at him** uses the Greek word *hormao*. This is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea (Mark 5:13). This was an out-of-control mob rushing at Stephen.

d. **They cast him out of the city and stoned him:** The extent of their rage is shown by their execution of Stephen, which was done without regard for Roman law, and which was performed according to traditional Jewish custom (stoning).

e. **And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul:** Saul stood there as the “supervisor” of the operation. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he had also approved of Stephen’s execution.

i. **Young man** literally means, “a man in his prime.” It certainly does not mean that Saul wasn’t old enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin. In Acts 26:10, Paul says *I cast my vote against them*, and the plain implication was that he had a vote as a member of the Sanhedrin.

#### 4. (59-60) Stephen’s last words.

a. **They stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”** His life ended in the same way it had been lived: In complete trust in God, believing that Jesus would take care of him in the life to come.

b. **Lord, do not charge them with this sin:** God answered Stephen’s prayer, and used it to touch the heart of a man who energetically agreed with his stoning, though the man didn’t know the prayer was being answered.

When we get to heaven, make sure to look up Stephen and thank him for every blessing brought through the ministry of Saul of Tarsus.

c. **Cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not charge them with this sin:** Stephen displays the same forgiving attitude that Jesus had on the cross (Luke 23:34).

He asked God to forgive his accusers, and he made the promises loudly and publicly.

d. **He fell asleep**: Tenderly, the text notes that Stephen did not “die.” Instead, he merely **fell asleep**, and woke up in a much better world.