

Acts 6:7-15

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Stephen debates with certain enemies of the gospel of Jesus. These enemies, the Freedmen, cannot stand against Stephen's wisdom, so they hire men to lie about Stephen. He is arrested for the charge of committing blasphemy, for supposedly saying that Jesus will destroy the Temple and change Moses's Law. Stephen is brought before the Council of religious leaders. They see his face is glowing like an angel's.

Luke, the author of Acts, reports the continuation of the gospel's advance in Jerusalem. There was no stopping it: *The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem.* The word about Jesus was spreading and the number of believers was growing. Then the gospel began to spread to the leadership, *and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*

The Jewish people are responding to the gospel strongly. Since Chapter 2, Luke has reported the steady growth of believers in Jesus. But here he notes that now *a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.* This is incredible, because in large part the priest-class has resisted and publicly opposed the apostles. The chief priests and Pharisees put Peter and John on trial in Acts 4, as they did also the entire group of the twelve apostles in Acts 5. But the *word of God* was finally getting through to *many of the priests.* This apparently did not spread to the ruling council.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. Stephen is a man of great faith and full of the Spirit (Acts 6:5). He will become the first martyr, the first believer to die for his faith in Jesus, just after giving an incredible gospel presentation that traces God's *grace* and man's rebellion all the way through the Old Testament until the time of his address. The *grace* which Stephen was *full of* was God's favor (Greek, "charis"), and a part of that favor was the *power* given to him through the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18).

While *performing great wonders and signs among the people*, Stephen draws the attention of some enemies:

men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia.

It is not known exactly what the *Synagogue of the Freedmen* was, but evidently they opposed the gospel of Jesus the Nazarene, that He was the Messiah, and that He had died and resurrected for the sins of the world. Luke does tell us what the countries of origin were for these *Freedmen*. They were *Cyrenians* from the city of Cyrene in Libya, almost due west of Jerusalem if sailing along the Mediterranean Sea. Notably, the man who carried Jesus's cross was Simon of Cyrene (Luke 23:26)

Also among the *Freedmen* were *Alexandrians*, men from Alexandria, Egypt, another city west of Jerusalem on the coast of the Mediterranean, founded by Alexander the Great and the place of origin for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Other members of the *Freedmen* were from *Cilicia* and *Asia*, both Roman provinces in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). It is possible that these *Freedmen* were former slaves who had been set free, who then formed a Jewish synagogue, but this is speculation.

These men *rose up and argued with Stephen*. Stephen, full of the *Spirit*, is able to handily rebut and dismantle their arguments. So much so that it pushes these men to a breaking point: *But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking*. They apparently did not consider the possibility that the reason they were unable to counter Stephen was because they were wrong.

So since they were unable to humiliate or silence Stephen through debate, they turn to slandering him through lies. They begin a smear campaign against him: *Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."* This is just how the enemies of Jesus slandered Him during His ministry (Mark 2:7, Mark 14:56-59).

The *Freedmen* then *stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to Stephen and dragged him away and brought him before the Council*. Somehow their smear campaign was effective enough to turn the crowds against *Stephen*, allowing them to arrest him in rough fashion. The temple soldiers had been afraid to arrest the apostles violently, fearing that the crowds would intervene and help the apostles (Acts 5:26). Now, however, it seems that these enemies of Stephen had muddied the waters enough to provide an opportunity to have him *dragged* away to be *brought before the Council*, without causing a public outcry. The ruling *Council*, also called the Sanhedrin, was made up of 70 Sadducees (priests) and Pharisees (rabbis), governed by the High Priest Annas.

The enemies of Stephen continue the smear campaign; they *put forward false witnesses who said, "This man, Stephen, incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law."*

What was he *incessantly* saying about the temple and the *Law of Moses*?

The hired slanderers trot out the same accusations against Stephen that were waged against Jesus during His trial: *we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us* (see Mark 14:57-58, Matthew 27:40 for similar claims against Jesus).

They twisted what Jesus actually said. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). Jesus was speaking about the temple of His body, and His death and resurrection, which none understood at the time. Even so, if taken literally, Jesus never said He would destroy the temple. He said if anyone destroyed the temple, He would raise it up again.

After hearing the accusations against Stephen, the council turns to look at Stephen, and to hear his defense, *fixing their gaze on him*. Incredibly, *all who were sitting in the Council saw that Stephen's face looked like the face of an angel*. They had already hardened their hearts against

the miracles that had been wrought by the apostles and by Stephen, and they will ignore this sign as well.

Luke doesn't describe what he means by the *face of an angel*. In the New Testament, angels often appear simply as men in white robes, but at the announcement of Jesus's birth to the shepherds, an angel of the Lord radiates God's glory:

“And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.”
(Luke 2:9)

The most vivid, detailed description of an angel's appearance in the Bible was recorded by Daniel the prophet:

“His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult.”
(Daniel 10:6)

The general sense of angelic appearance is bright shining light. Thus, though they were accusing Stephen of being an enemy of God's temple, God's law, and God's prophet Moses, Stephen apparently sat before them all with a supernatural glow to his face, a sign that God's favor was upon Stephen.

The priests and Pharisees were clearly not impressed by this, given the outcome of Stephen's trial in Acts 7. This is consistent with how routinely the religious leaders buried their heads in the sand every time God worked miraculously among them. Though the apostles had urged the Jewish leaders to repent, and had spent months healing and working signs, and though Stephen sat in the seat of judgement with God's light shining from his face, the Sadducees and Pharisees blinded themselves. As Isaiah the Prophet wrote,

“Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.”
(Isaiah 55:6-7)

But the Jewish leadership will not seek God. They will instead seek to maintain their own political power.

Biblical Text

7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.