

Acts 7:51-60

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Stephen concludes his sermon by turning his focus on the Sanhedrin. They are just like the sinful Israelites who kept rejecting their deliverers, rejecting the will of God, and worshipping idols instead. Stephen compares them to the Israelites from the past who killed the prophets for prophesying about the Messiah. And when Jesus the Messiah came, they killed him too. The Sanhedrin proves Stephen's point and stones him to death. He has a vision of Heaven, and asks God to forgive the men stoning him. A young pharisee named Saul is present for this episode and approves of the execution. This is Luke's first introduction of the man who will become the Apostle Paul.

Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of 70 Pharisees and Sadducees, and the High Priest. The charge against Stephen is that he is an enemy of the Temple and the Law of Moses. But Stephen is taking this opportunity, led by the Spirit, to confront these religious leaders. He gives a sermon that summarizes relevant sections of the Old Testament, answering the accusations against him concerning the Temple and Moses.

In answer to the accusation that he speaks against Moses and his customs, Stephen showed the Jewish elders that he knows the entire history of Israel as a nation, and all about Moses. He details God's commands to Abraham, how Israel (Jacob) fathered the 12 tribes of Israel, how Israel's son Joseph was appointed as firstborn and rejected by his brothers, but was used by God to save Israel and his family. He showed further how this would be the theme of the Israelite people. Stephen explained how Moses was presented as Israel's deliverer, but was also rejected by the Israelites, yet God used him to save them anyway.

Moses was then the mediator between the Israelites and God, and he prophesied that one day God would raise up a second Moses to speak directly from God. That second Moses was Jesus, whom these council members rejected. Stephen highlights the idolatry of Israel; they not only reject God's sent saviors, they reject God Himself. They worship false Gods throughout their whole history, from the golden calf in the wilderness to the Canaanite gods Moloch and Rompha, to whom they sacrificed children.

In answer to the accusation that he speaks against "the holy place" (the Temple) and that Jesus "will destroy this place" (the Temple), Stephen again showed the council that he knows all about the history of the Tabernacle, how it was made according to a heavenly pattern given by God, how it was brought into Israel and eventually evolved into the Temple built by Solomon. Yet, Stephen argues, quoting Isaiah, God is not contained by the temple, nor does He need a temple. He made everything. His throne is beyond our earth. The Temple is merely a building and a symbol meant to direct hearts to God, because God is after our hearts. He desires us to know Him, to love Him, to obey Him. But the Sanhedrin was concerned only with material things, customs and temples, and with maintaining control over these things.

[For more on the Temple, read our Tough Topics Article.](#)

Now, having defeated the accusations that he is an enemy of Moses and the Temple, Stephen rebukes the religious leaders of Israel:

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 one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?

The pattern of Israel is that they reject their saviors (Joseph, Moses, Jesus). The pattern of humanity is to reject what is good for us. Stephen's response is essentially, "It is not me who is dishonoring the Temple. It is not me who doesn't believe Moses. You know who it is? You."

You rejected Joseph. You exiled him. You rejected Moses. You exiled him. You rejected God come in human flesh, who came and tabernacled with us, and you chose Moloch. You rejected Jesus, the second Joseph, the second Moses. God become man, to dwell among us and speak directly to us as a man (as promised by God in Deuteronomy 18:17-18). Jesus is now, in a manner of speaking, exiled in heaven. But He will return to save His people (Romans 11:26).

Stephen uses the same description of Israel that God uses, calling the council "*stiff-necked*," "obstinate" or "stubborn" (Exodus 32:9, 33:3,5, 34:9; Deuteronomy 9:6, 13, 10:16).

Peter has been preaching about Israel's obstinance too, telling the Jewish people that if they will repent, Jesus will come back and give Israel the times of refreshing, restoration, and peace. He is ready to deliver Israel right now, if they will receive Him:

"Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time."
(Acts 3:19-20)

In that same sermon, Peter quotes, just as Stephen does, from Moses's prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:18, that God will raise up a prophet like Moses to speak directly to the people. That prophet is Jesus, who is God speaking directly to Israel as a human. Peter continues to say how "likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days" (Acts 3:24). All the prophets have been pointing to the Messiah's arrival.

Stephen picks up on this same theme, asking the Sanhedrin, *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.*

The Old Testament prophets were indeed persecuted and hated by the leaders of their day (2 Chronicles 16:9, 2 Chronicles 24:21, 1 Kings 22:27, 1 Kings 19:1-4, Jeremiah 26:20-23, Jeremiah 20:2, Amos 2:12). Stephen puts the Sanhedrin in the same category as those who *killed* the prophets *who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One*, the Messiah, the Christ. The religious teachers and priests were *betrayers* of God and *murderers* of Jesus Christ.

Their reaction is predictable: *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.* The Sanhedrin, full of pride and worldly prestige, were filled with rage that this man Stephen, a nobody heretic (in their eyes) would call them spiritually *uncircumcised* (equating them with Gentiles, common and unclean), rebels against God's *Spirit*, and murderers. Furthermore, Stephen's defense was compelling and convicting, and their response was not to repent, but to double-down on their hatred for him.

To be *cut to the quick* means to be wounded to the very core. The word *quick* here relates to one's life, of being alive. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "cwic." The original Greek for this phrase is "dieprionto tais kardiais," which literally means that they were "cut to the hearts." The Sanhedrin were emotionally cut in half, killed, probably because of how true and painful Stephen's rebuke was. They *began gnashing their teeth at him*, because they did not want to face the truth, but wanted to eliminate it. The context here indicates that *gnashing their teeth* was a means of showing great anger.

Stephen seems to know he will soon die. He experiences a vision from God, who peels back the veil of this world to begin welcoming this faithful witness home. While the Sanhedrin are *gnashing their teeth* at Stephen, he, *being full of the Holy Spirit*, looks above. 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."*

It is a notable and rare moment in Scripture. Seemingly, God begins the process of taking Stephen's soul to Heaven before he is even dead. Perhaps this gives Stephen courage and spares him of some suffering as he is about to be murdered in a brutal, horrible way. He was *full of the Holy Spirit*, meaning he was walking completely in step with God's will, totally led by the *Spirit*, given peace and clarity and a heart fully dedicated to God's love. Nothing of that world concerned him. Not the danger he was in, nothing. His confrontation of the ruling council is being fully endorsed by God, who will stand to receive him home.

He saw the *glory of God*. *Glory* (Greek "doxa") means the character or essence of someone or something being observed (1 Corinthians 15:40-41). Here, the idea of *God's glory* has to do with God's essence, with seeing God and His beauty, power, otherness, all at once. Stephen *gazed intently into heaven*, his eyes were fixed only on what he saw; *heaven* is filled with *God's glory*. He apparently saw *God* on His throne, because as he exclaims, Stephen sees *Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God*.

Jesus, after He ascended to Heaven in His resurrected body (Acts 1:9), *sat down at the right hand of God*. The term "sat down" indicates ruling authority. No one stood in the presence of ancient kings. This was His exaltation and reward for His obedience to God, for dying for the sins of the world (Hebrews 1:3). The New Testament is full of references to Jesus sitting at *the right hand of God*, a place of prominence that shows He has inherited authority over all of creation, bestowed on Him by God the Father.

But here in Stephen's vision is the only moment in the New Testament where *Jesus* is seen *standing at the right hand of God*. *Jesus* has stood up from His glorious throne, which likely means that *Jesus* was showing His approval to Stephen, that He was welcoming him up into

Heaven. No one stood in the presence of ancient kings. But here Jesus is standing to honor Stephen.

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus encourages perseverance to believers as they suffer persecution, and He promises them a reward if they “overcome” their present trials. This episode of Stephen being a faithful and fearless witness, and Jesus standing to receive him might illustrate what it means to “overcome” as well as what it means to share Jesus’s throne:

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”
(Revelation 3:21)

It seems apparent that Stephen meets the requirement of being an overcomer. He is the first “martyr” of the Christian faith. The word “martyr” comes from the Greek “*martys*,” which means “witness.” Stephen has spoken as a faithful witness to the truth of the Gospel. This is perhaps what Jesus wants most from believers in Him, to be a faithful witness no matter what. No matter whether we are rejected, no matter whether we are contested, no matter whether we lose things, including our physical life. And here, Stephen sees Jesus preparing to welcome him to Heaven to sit down with Him on His throne, to receive a reward for his faithfulness through suffering (Romans 8:17).

Stephen tells the Sanhedrin of this heavenly vision, but they do not care. Instead of seeing that this man is doing the will of God, *they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears* so that they could not hear anything else Stephen might say.

Everything Stephen had said in this trial appears to have rattled them to their core. The anger the Jewish leaders were feeling was born from fear, guilt, conviction, because Stephen spoke the truth, and the truth was that they did not love God or obey Him, that they had rejected and murdered His prophet and Messiah just as the ancient Israelites had done to the prophets and messiahs of their day. They shouted, *they cried out with a loud voice*, to drown Stephen’s words. *They rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him.* This is highly illegal.

There is not even a pretense here that this execution was decided through legal means. Even Jesus was given a lengthy trial, where he was passed around from the Sanhedrin to King Herod to Governor Pontius Pilate, beaten, questioned, slandered, before at last, Pilate, after much fretting and attempts to delay the outcome, sanctioned the crucifixion of Jesus. But Stephen’s fate is decided impulsively and immediately. The priests and rabbis become a murderous mob, demonstrating conclusively that everything Stephen said was exactly true: *betrayers and murderers you have now become.*

They had *driven Stephen out of the city* presumably because what they were doing was completely against Roman law. Israel was under Roman rule and was not allowed to enact capital punishment except through Roman approval. This is why the Sanhedrin had to rouse the crowds to pressure Pontius Pilate to sign off on the execution of Jesus. But now the Sanhedrin is pushed to their limit.

They, the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees, spent three years conspiring how to remove the “nuisance” of Jesus the Nazarene. At last they succeeded. And it did not matter. The ministry of Jesus did not die with Him, as they hoped. Ever since, His followers have been preaching that He resurrected from the dead and is the Son of God in Heaven. They perform miracles and are bringing thousands of Jews to faith in Jesus. The Sanhedrin has twice arrested and attempted to silence the apostles (Acts 4-5), to no effect. Now, after hearing Stephen’s brutally truthful sermon, they snap. They carry Stephen outside of the city away from the eye of Roman soldiers or officials, beyond the city gates, perhaps to somewhere remote, and *began stoning him*.

Here Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, introduces his readers to one of the most important figures in the early church going forward. Luke writes, *the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul*. *Saul* is one of the Pharisees. He has presumably heard of the signs, wonders, and healings that the apostles and Stephen have performed in Jerusalem (Acts 6:8). It seems likely that he was at Stephen’s trial and saw Stephen’s face shining like an angel (Acts 6:15). He heard Stephen’s sermon. And he agreed with everything that was happening.

Luke tells us immediately after this event that “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death” (Acts 8:1). He does not participate in the stoning, instead watching over the *robes* of the others. But he is in “hearty agreement” that Stephen should die, and that all other believers should be punished.

Saul becomes a zealous persecutor of believers in Jesus. Jesus will put a stop to this, and lead *Saul* to repentance and belief, commissioning him as an apostle to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, to kings, and to the Israelites (Acts 9:4-6, Acts 9:15). *Saul* (or Paul, his name in Greek) will go on to plant churches across the Roman Empire and write thirteen of the twenty-one church letters in the New Testament. He becomes the central figure in the second half of this book of Acts.

Luke was probably writing this book in part to legitimize Paul’s apostleship, so that his letters would circulate among the churches to be studied and used for teaching. Luke has introduced the audience to Peter, as the leading apostle, and shown how the gospel went to the Gentiles first through him. He is now introducing us to Paul, who will be the apostle to the Gentiles. Luke is carefully crafting a case that demonstrates that to reject Paul is to be like the ruling council, who rejected Jesus. Paul was one of those who rejected, but then saw the light—literally. We will see the testimony of Saul’s conversion in Chapter 9.

As for Stephen, he is a faithful witness till the bitter end. He is such a devoted follower of Jesus’s that he even quotes Christ as he dies, imitating Jesus even in death (1 Peter 2:21).

The Pharisees and Sadducees *went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”*

Jesus spoke similarly as He died,

“And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.’ Having said this, He breathed His last.”
(Luke 23:46)

However, Stephen *called on the Lord*, asking, “*Lord Jesus*” to *receive his spirit*, acknowledging Jesus as God and as the exalted King of Heaven and earth.

Then falling on his knees, Stephen cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” He *cried out with a loud voice* so that his killers would hear that his dying words were of forgiveness to them, that he pleaded on their behalf for God to spare them of judgement. The total obedience with which Stephen lived and died, imitating Christ’s truth-telling and ministry of mercy, is remarkable. Again, his dying words are much like Jesus’s own:

“But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’”
(Luke 23:34)

Having said this, Stephen fell asleep. The phrase “*he fell asleep*” is simply a gentle euphemism meaning that he died, leaving this earthly realm for eternity with *Jesus in Heaven*, surrounded by the *glory of God*. Stephen’s name in the original Greek is “Stephanos,” which means “crown.” This man whose name meant “crown” wins the crown of life:

“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”
(Revelation 2:10)

“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the **crown** (“stephanos”) of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him.”
(James 1:12)

Just as it was intentional that Jesus’s name means “savior,” it is probably not an accident that Stephen’s name is derived from the Greek word “stephanos” which means “crown.” His life shows believers how to win at life—be a faithful witness, not fearing loss, rejection, or death. While being a faithful witness, speaking the truth fearlessly, doing so in love, wishing the best for others, and walking in forgiveness for those who harm you. Stephen was a deacon, and the first recorded Christian martyr. His witness is a great testimony and inspiration.

Biblical Text

51 “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. 52 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; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.” 54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. 55 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; 56 and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 But they cried out with a loud

voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.