

ACTS | Stephen's Speech | Story 9

Rob Rogers October 24, 2021

Introduction

We're looking at the phenomenon of the early church — it's beginning, and the exponential spread of Christianity throughout the first century world.

What's so incredible about what's recorded in Acts is the fact that never in human history has any other religion or ideology spread so rapidly and so comprehensively without its leaders being of high social standing or power.

A ragtag group of nobodies, chosen by God, willing to be used by God, flipped the world upside down.

1. They received supernatural power and were continually filled with the Holy Spirit.
2. To be Christ's "witnesses" there was an incredible commitment to the truth no matter what it cost them personally.
3. They endured hardship and persecution — and continually met a hostile culture with sacrificial love and kindness.
4. Pastor Dave did an excellent job drawing out how these early followers walked in the Fear of God, when they had every opportunity and reason to fear men instead.

Today, we're examining the events that led to the first recorded martyr of the Christian faith — Stephen.

Word ministry without deed ministry is weak ministry.

In chapter 6, the disciples were wearing too many hats. They chose 7 men who were full of the Spirit, wisdom, and of good repute to serve widows that were being overlooked and unintentionally neglected in the church. They cared for the poor, did good deeds, distributed resources to the disadvantaged. While the disciples devoted themselves to the teaching of the Word of God and to prayer.

If you can recite the scriptures, and have all the knowledge, but your knowledge of the Word hasn't worked its way out in your "doing of the Word," it's an empty witness. James says it pretty plainly — *Faith without works is dead*.

The first among those the early church used not only to serve widows but to perform miracles, signs and wonders — was Stephen.

Stephen caused such a commotion among the Jewish religious leaders that they conspired against him, lied to the Sanhedrin about him, arrested him, and brought Stephen in to be questioned before the High Priest

- who might have been Caiaphas, the same one who presided over Jesus' arrest and interrogation

The high priest asks Stephen to respond to his accusers. In his speech he gives a review of the entire Old Testament to the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders that should have known and understood the scriptures better than anyone.

Stephen's response is the longest message in the book of Acts. I encourage you to read all of chapter 7. Here is an overview of Stephen's response to the Sanhedrin —broken up into five sections.

The Promises to Abraham

1. *The Promises to Abraham (7:2–8).*

Stephen began with God's covenant with Abraham. Stephen drives home the point that Abraham never owned so much as a "foot of ground" in the holy land. The promises to Abraham all came outside of Israel. Stephen was beginning a critique of the Jewish nationalism, the idea that God was confined to the land of Israel and particularly to the temple. As if the temple was literally God's house, Stephen says later in the passage

Acts 7:47-50

But it was Solomon who built a house for him-⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ "Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. What kind of house will you build for Me, says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest? ⁵⁰ Did not My hand make all these things?"

The Sojourn of Joseph

1. *The Sojourn of Joseph (7:9–16).*

Stephen continued by pointing out how God had delivered Israel through Joseph, again *outside* of the Holy Land. He also began a second theme.

Acts 7:9

"And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him..."

These are the patriarchs, the leaders of the 12 tribes — and Stephen is laying out the reality that throughout Israel's history they repeatedly rejected those that God had chosen and sent to them.

The Deliverance through Moses

1. *The Deliverance through Moses (7:17–34).*

Stephen spends the most time on Moses. It falls into three sections, each covering forty years of Moses' life.

- a. Verses 17–22: Moses' early years, his birth, and education in Pharaoh's house.
- b. Verses 23–29: the forty years between Moses's flight from Egypt and his calling at the burning bush.
- c. Verses 30–34: the final section of Moses's life — the Exodus and wilderness wandering.

The same two themes are prominent: God was with Israel in a special way *outside* the Promised Land, and as Israel continued to reject its leaders whom God had sent.

The Apostasy of Israel

1. *The Apostasy of Israel (7:35–50).*

In verses 44–47 Stephen essentially says that Israel did a better job of worshipping God in the wilderness, when they had a tent of worship that could be moved from place to place — than the nation of Israel ever did with Solomon’s temple. It was as if the Temple somehow tied God down to a single holy place.

The Sanhedrin’s accusations against Stephen weren’t necessarily wrong. He *did* criticize and speak against the way Israel approached their religious practices in the temple. It was supposed to be a house of prayer, but it had become a place where Israel’s view of God was so narrow and so small, that they literally believed God was only accessible to Israel and His people, and only through the methods and means of the Temple.

This is why Stephen asks them, “How in the world could the temple be God’s only dwelling place when God says through the prophet Isaiah, *‘Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool?’*”

Application: The reminder for us is that God is infinitely bigger, infinitely grander, infinitely more majestic, more powerful, more present, infinitely more than we can possibly fathom with our finite minds.

Yet often we are just like the religious leaders of Israel, approaching God as a means to an end — not the end in and of Himself. We approach God so rigidly, where God only operates in the ways that we feel comfortable, and Who doesn’t confront our lives in any way, or never challenges us or offends our sensibilities.

**If you believe or follow a God that never offends you —
you don’t have God — you have an idol made in your own image.**

**If you have a God that never confronts your ideas or ideologies —
a God that never challenges your thinking or never offends you —
you don’t have God — you have an idol made in your own image.**

The Rejection of the Messiah

This is what Stephen is telling the Sanhedrin! He knows He is signing his own life away. Stephen is choosing a death sentence. And He doesn’t stop there.

2. *The Rejection of the Messiah (7:51–53).*

Stephen launched into a frontal assault. Listen to how the speech ends!

Acts 7:51

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

- Your fathers before you betrayed those chosen and sent by God, just as you have just done with the Messiah
 - He’s essentially saying — it was your sole responsibility to look for and identify the Messiah, when He arrived. You had ONE job! And not only have you failed miserably — you’ve also murdered the Messiah.

Application: Oh, that God would give us this boldness and courage when the moment demands it. That, even at great personal cost, we would not shy away from the truth of the gospel.

Application: To the Sanhedrin, their sacred things were the Temple, their customs and traditions, their power and control, their status and position. The Sanhedrin wouldn’t see it. It’s not just that they wouldn’t listen — they were set on cutting off and destroying anyone who told them what they didn’t want to hear!

What are your sacred things?

What are the things that you say God can’t change in your life?

What are you clinging to that you would be absolutely destroyed if He told you to let go?

What are your idols?

The thing you are currently most defensive about may be the very thing you worship.

The Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 7:54-8:1

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution.

1. We’re introduced to Saul — who we later know as the Apostle Paul. Here He is approving of the killing of Stephen. In later chapters we see that Saul is seething with rage toward these early Christians, the air around him was literally death and rage. Saul was absolutely committed to silencing Christians by any and all means necessary.
2. The religious leaders didn’t realize what they were doing when they killed Stephen. The result of Stephen’s martyrdom, as the first Christian martyr, was the dispersion of the early Christians to the regions outside of Jerusalem. Chapter 8 is where we see the church moving into Judea and Samaria.

This is mission of the early church....

Acts 1:8

“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The martyrdom of Stephen was the impetus for the expanding influence and spreading of the gospel beyond Jerusalem.

3. One of the most beautiful things about this passage... is the fact that in Stephen laying down his life for sake of the gospel, *He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

*This is the only place in scripture where Jesus is not described as sitting at the right hand of the Father, but **He is standing**.*

Stephen, the first Christian martyr sees Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is standing for Stephen. **Where Saul is described as standing in approval of Stephen's death, Jesus is standing in approval of Stephen's life.**

Church, my prayer for each one of us is that we would live lives that cause Jesus to stand! That we would live the lives that He has given us for His pleasure and His pleasure alone.

*Stephen prays for the forgiveness of the men killing him — Stephen actually looks like Jesus here — not just in his message, but in his methodology. In his actions. Not just in word — **but in deed**.*

We see that Stephen was willing to die, to lay down His life for the sake of the gospel.

As Pastor of Grace Chapel

Let me address things that I'm willing to die for as the pastor of Grace Chapel.

As the pastor of Grace Chapel, I want you to know the things that I am absolutely willing to die for. Convictions that God has placed in me that will never change. There are hills that I will die on, no matter what is happening in culture, no matter what version of opposition we face, whether it's attacks from outside, or attacks from within.

1. Without apology, regardless of consequence, I will not preach the ideas and ideologies of man, but privately and publicly proclaim the full counsel of the Word of God.
 - a. Where the Bible speaks, I will speak. Where the Bible is silent, I will remain silent. The only authority on which I have built the life that God has given me is on the revelation of the Word and will of Christ for humanity through the Scriptures. Outside of what is written in Scripture, I have no authority.
2. Without apology, I will be faithful to doing the work of pastor. **It is my deep conviction, that as pastors, we are called by God to be servants.** We are not to promote ourselves for the furthering of our own agenda, but to quietly and faithfully lay down our lives for the sake of the gospel, and out of love for the sheep God has asked us to shepherd.
3. It is my deep personal conviction that in the midst of a world full of churches giving in to the demands of pagan culture, adopting all kinds of beliefs that are antithetical to the teachings of Scripture, Grace Chapel will hold firm to biblical orthodox Christianity and to the doctrine that has been held to and taught by the Church, long before Grace Chapel ever existed.
 - a. Just to be clear, I'm not a "woke pastor" with a liberal theology, Grace Chapel is not becoming a "woke church" preaching a watered-down gospel. Anybody that claims as much has never sat down with me to actually have a conversation about what I believe and the message I'm committed to proclaiming.
 - b. The conservative theology that men like Bill Spencer, Steve Berger, Dave Buehring, and other faithful men of God have instilled in me from the beginning of my faith — my convictions will not waiver, pander to, or bow down to the demands of culture.

4. I will continue to fulfill the calling of God on my life to make disciples that make disciples, and plant churches that plant new churches — to raise up and develop the next generation of pastors, leaders, missionaries, church planters and theologians, kingdom-centered businessmen and women — not because it's a good strategy crafted by human minds, but because it is the command of scripture and commission of Christ that I do so.
5. Stephen laid down his life for the sake of the gospel, and I will do the same with whatever life I have left on this earth. And I will lay down my life to see the Grace Chapel family healed, and whole, and on mission together in unity, representing the grace, truth, and love of Jesus Christ to a broken world.

This is what God has called us to at Grace Chapel. This is what we'll do.

Discussion Questions

1. As you have been following the Lord, in what ways has your life looked more like Jesus?
2. The early Jewish leaders taught the idea that God was confined to the land of Israel and particularly to the temple, as if the temple was literally God's house. Do you ever confine your God to a particular time or place in your life?
3. Throughout Israel's history they repeatedly rejected those that God had chosen and sent to them. Who or what things in your past has God sent to you that you have rejected?
4. Discuss: "If you believe or follow a God that never offends you — you don't have God — you have an idol made in your own image."
5. What are the sacred things that you are clinging to in your life — that you say God can't change?

NOTES