



“Stephen’s Witness”

Acts 7:1-60

Study Guide #11 for the week
of March 20, 2022

Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin - [Acts 7:1-53](#)

Some questions to answer and discuss:

1. What is one time of your life you wish you could do over? Why?
2. Why did Stephen make this speech? ([7:1-2](#))
3. As he wove the history of the Jews, how did Stephen show a pattern of opposition to God and His plan for them? ([7:2-4](#), [9](#), [23-29](#))
4. How did Stephen compare the attitude of those in the Sanhedrin with that of God’s people down through the centuries? ([7:51-53](#))
5. Which "spiritual ancestors" from the Bible do you admire most?
6. How can we learn from those who have gone before us?
7. From what older, more mature believer can you learn? How?

Life Application Bible Notes

[7:1](#) This high priest was probably Caiaphas, the same man who had earlier questioned and condemned Jesus ([John 18:24](#)).

[7:2ff](#) Stephen launched into a long speech about Israel's relationship with God. From Old Testament history he showed that the Jews had constantly rejected God's message and his prophets and that this council had rejected the Messiah, God's Son. He made three main points: (1) Israel's history is the history of God's acts in the world; (2) people worshiped God long before there was a Temple, because God does not live in a Temple; and (3) Jesus' death was just one more example of Israel's rebellion against and rejection of God.

[7:2ff](#) Stephen didn't really defend himself. Instead, he took the offensive, seizing the opportunity to summarize his teaching about Jesus. Stephen was accusing these religious leaders of failing to obey God's laws—the laws they prided themselves in following so meticulously. This was the same accusation that Jesus had leveled against them. When we witness for Christ, we don't need to be on the defensive. Instead, we can simply share our faith.

[7:8](#) Circumcision was a sign of the promise or covenant God made with Abraham and the entire nation of Israel ([Genesis 17:9-13](#)). Because Stephen summarized Israel's history, he told how this covenant fared during that time. Stephen pointed out that God always had kept his side of the promise, but Israel had failed again and again to uphold its end. Although the Jews in

Stephen's day still circumcised their baby boys, they failed to obey God. The people's hearts were far from God. Their lack of faith and lack of obedience showed that they had failed to keep their part of the covenant.

7:8 The Jewish rite of circumcision, like Israel's regular sacrifices and annual feasts, was intended to be a very meaningful event. As with all religious rituals, circumcision was designed to serve as an outer symbol of an inner reality. Those who participated thoughtfully would be reminded of profound spiritual truths. But we know from our own experiences of repeating the church creeds, saying the Lord's Prayer, or celebrating ordinances like baptism and the Lord's Supper, that it is difficult to avoid merely going through the motions. We are often guilty of participating passively and mindlessly in religious exercises. Make it your goal to give God your full attention (body, soul, and spirit) the next time you pray, take Communion, or take part in a church ceremony.

7:17 Stephen's review of Jewish history gives a clear testimony of God's faithfulness and sovereignty. Despite the continued failures of his chosen people and the swirling world events, God was working out his plan. When faced by a confusing array of circumstances, remember that (1) God is in control—nothing surprises him; (2) this world is not all there is—it will pass away, but God is eternal; (3) God is just, and he will make things right—punishing the wicked and rewarding the faithful; (4) God wants to use you (like Joseph, Moses, and Stephen) to make a difference in the world.

7:37 The Jews originally thought this "Prophet" was Joshua. But Moses was prophesying about the coming Messiah ([Deuteronomy 18:15](#)). Peter also quoted this verse in referring to the Messiah ([3:22](#)).

7:38 Stephen used the word *ekklesia* (translated "assembly") to describe the congregation or people of God in the wilderness. This word means "called-out ones" and was used by the first-century Christians to describe their own community or "assembly." Stephen's point was that the giving of the law through Moses to the Jews was the sign of the covenant. By *obedience*, then, they would continue to be God's covenant people. But because they disobeyed ([7:39](#)), they broke the covenant and forfeited their right to be the chosen people.

7:38 From [Galatians 3:19](#) and [Hebrews 2:2](#), it appears that God had given the law to Moses through angels. [Exodus 31:18](#) says God wrote the Ten Commandments himself ("written by the finger of God"). Apparently God used angelic messengers as mediators to deliver his law to Moses.

7:43 Here Stephen gave more details of the idolatry referred to in [7:40](#). These were idols worshiped by Israel during their wilderness wanderings ([Exodus 32:4](#)). Molech was the god associated with child sacrifice, and Rephan was an Egyptian god. Amos also names Assyrian deities worshiped by Israel ([Amos 5:25-27](#)).

7:44-50 Stephen had been accused of speaking against the Temple ([6:13](#)). Although he recognized the importance of the Temple, he knew that it was not more important than God. God is not limited; he lives not only in a house of worship but also in those who are open to receive him ([Isaiah 66:1, 2](#)). Solomon knew this when he prayed at the dedication of the Temple ([2 Chronicles 6:18](#)). God wants to live in us. Is he living in you?

7:52 Indeed, many prophets were persecuted and killed: Uriah ([Jeremiah 26:20-23](#)); Jeremiah ([Jeremiah 38:1-6](#)); Isaiah (tradition says he was killed by King Manasseh; see [2 Kings 21:16](#)); Amos ([Amos 7:10-13](#)); Zechariah (not the author of the Bible book but the son of Jehoiada the

priest; see [2 Chronicles 24:20-22](#)); Elijah ([1 Kings 19:1, 2](#)). Jesus also told a parable about how the Jews had constantly rejected God's messages and persecuted his messengers ([Luke 20:9-19](#)).

The Stoning of Stephen - [Acts 7:54-8:1](#)

1. How do you respond to reports of violence in the news?
2. Why did the Jewish leaders respond to Stephen as they did? ([7:54](#))
3. Why was Stephen put to death? ([7:56-60](#))
4. What change in the church did Stephen's death bring about? ([8:1](#))
5. Faced with the violent mob, Stephen seemed fearless; how was he able to face this danger?
6. What would make it possible for you to be calm and sure in the middle of extreme danger?
7. How can Stephen's example help you be prepared to handle rejection?

Life Application Bible Notes

[7:55](#) Stephen saw the glory of God and Jesus, the Messiah, standing at God's right hand. Stephen's words are similar to Jesus' words spoken before the high council ([Matthew 26:64](#); [Mark 14:62](#); [Luke 22:69](#)). Stephen's vision supported Jesus' claim and angered the Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. They would not tolerate Stephen's words, so they dragged him out and killed him. People may not kill us for witnessing about Christ, but they may let us know they don't want to hear the truth and try to silence us. Keep honoring God in your conduct and words; though many may turn against you and your message, some will follow Christ. Remember, Stephen's death had a profound impact on Paul, who later became the world's greatest missionary. Even those who oppose you now may later turn to Christ.

Stephen's death was not in vain. Below are some of the events that were byproducts (either directly or indirectly) of the persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom.

- Philip's evangelistic tour ([Acts 8:4-40](#))
- Paul's (Saul's) conversion ([Acts 9:1-30](#))
- Peter's missionary tour ([Acts 9:32-11:18](#))
- The church in Antioch of Syria founded ([Acts 11:19ff](#))

[7:58](#) Saul is also called Paul (see [13:9](#)), the great missionary who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. Saul was his Hebrew name; Paul, his Greek name, was used as he began his ministry to the Gentiles. When Luke introduces him, Paul was going everywhere persecuting Jesus' followers. This is in great contrast to the Paul about whom Luke wrote for most of the book of Acts, describing him as a devoted follower of Christ and a gifted preacher. Paul was uniquely qualified to talk to the Jews about Jesus because he had once persecuted those who

believed in him and understood how the opposition felt. Paul is a powerful example of a person who was thought impossible for God to reach and change.

[7:59](#) The penalty for blasphemy, speaking irreverently about God, was death by stoning ([Leviticus 24:14](#)). The religious leaders, who were furious, had Stephen stoned without a trial. They did not understand that Stephen's words were true because they were not seeking the truth. They only wanted support for their own views.

[7:60](#) As Stephen died, he spoke words very similar to Jesus' words on the cross ([Luke 23:34](#)). For telling others the good news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection the members of the early church were persecuted. Sometimes, as in the case of Stephen, they were even put to death. Christ had promised his followers that living for him would lead to trouble (see [Luke 21:12-19](#)). This is still true. If we boldly live out our faith, the light of our lives will expose the sinfulness of others. Our words of truth will pierce their souls. Some will be convicted and yield to the leading of the Spirit. Others will become angry and hardened in their hatred of the truth. As Jesus said, "They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the One who sent me" ([John 15:21](#)). We shouldn't be surprised or abandon our faith when we are persecuted.

Chapter 8

[8:1-4](#) Persecution pushed the Christians beyond Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria, thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command (see [1:8](#)). The persecution helped spread the Good News. God would bring great results from the believers' suffering.

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