
Signs of Life: Sacrifice Part 2

Acts 7

August 1, 2026

CUSTOM

Pray for love packages team before 2nd and after 1st.

Introduction:

We now come to Stephen's response to the accusations that were brought against him. Remember, he has been accused of speaking against Moses, speaking against the Law, and speaking against the temple. In other words, they are accusing him of attacking the very things that they believe make them the people of God.

But instead of using this opportunity to mount a defense for himself, Stephen does something much more powerful: he defends the truth of the gospel and exposes the fact that the real problem is not that he has rejected Moses, the Law, or the temple. The real problem is that these men have misunderstood all three because they have missed the One to whom all of them ultimately pointed.

Context

At first read, Acts 7 can feel a little difficult to follow. Stephen moves through Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the wilderness, the tabernacle, the temple, and the prophets, and if you are not paying attention to the context, it can almost feel like he is simply giving them a long Jewish history lesson. But when you understand the accusations that were brought against him, what Stephen does here is nothing short of brilliant. He takes their own history, the very history they are so proud of, and uses it to demonstrate that they are repeating the same pattern of rebellion in rejecting Jesus that has marked Israel over and over again. This is not so much a history of Israel as much as it is a history of faith and those who reject it.

- The religious leaders accuse Stephen of dishonoring Moses, but their own fathers rejected Moses when God first sent him to deliver them.
- They accuse Stephen of speaking against the temple, but Stephen reminds them that God had been revealing Himself and working powerfully among His people long before Solomon ever built a temple.
- They pride themselves on being the descendants of the prophets, but their fathers persecuted the prophets. And now, when the One whom Moses and the prophets had pointed toward finally came, they rejected and murdered Him.

So Stephen begins this chapter as the accused, but by the time he is finished preaching, the whole scene has been turned around. The religious leaders are the ones standing on trial and exposed before the truth of God.

And before we work through Stephen's argument, there are a few things about this sermon that immediately stand out to me.

A. First, it is deeply biblical.

Stephen does not stand before these men and offer them his opinions. He does not try to impress them with some clever philosophical argument. He does not try to manipulate their emotions. He simply opens up the story of Scripture and walks them through what God has already said and done.

That is important because there is a tendency in our culture, and sometimes even in the church, to think that the Bible needs to be made more impressive in order to compete with the ideas of the world. We can almost become embarrassed by its simplicity, as though we need to dress it up, soften its edges, or add some kind of intellectual sophistication to make it more believable.

But Stephen understood something we need to remember: ***the Word of God does not need our help to become powerful. It is already powerful.***

SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 4:12 (NKJV) [12] For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Theodore Roosevelt once said,

QUOTE

"A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education."

Now, thankfully, our salvation does not depend on how much Bible trivia we know. You can genuinely know Jesus and still have a lot to learn about Scripture. You can also have great knowledge of the Scriptures, and be far from the God who wrote them and is revealed in them.

But I do believe that the Christian who learns to love the Word of God, understand the Word of God, and hide the Word of God in his heart will become a stronger Christian and a more effective witness, and be prepared with divine wisdom for all they face in life.

APPLICATION

That means Sunday morning cannot be the only time we are exposed to Scripture. Sundays are important because we gather, we worship, we learn, we are challenged, and hopefully we leave with a greater understanding of the truth. But Sunday was never meant to replace your own pursuit of God through His Word. It ought to become a springboard into the rest of your week, where you are reading Scripture, studying it, talking about it with your family, teaching it to your children, and learning how to apply it to your life.

If we are going to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us, then we have to know what we believe and why we believe it.

B. Second, Stephen's sermon is fearless.

I'm reminded of what Paul (the one who oversaw Stephen's stoning) would later say in Romans 1:16:

SCRIPTURE

Romans 1:16 (NKJV) [16] For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Stephen certainly lived that way and modeled fearlessness in the face of sacrifice.

He is standing before the most powerful religious leaders in Israel, men who had already demonstrated that they were willing to use their authority against anyone they believed threatened their religious system. Stephen knows that there is a cost attached to what he is saying, but he does not allow fear of their reaction to silence the truth.

And I think the church needs to recover some of that courage.

We should never be obnoxious for the sake of being obnoxious, and we should never confuse boldness with arrogance. But neither should we feel some sense of shame when the truth of the gospel clashes with the values of the culture around us.

Paul told us exactly what to expect:

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NKJV) - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

If you faithfully present the gospel, there will be people who think it is foolish. There will be people who mock it, dismiss it, stereotype you because of it, or make you feel as though belief in Scripture is

somehow intellectually beneath them.

That should not surprise us.

We are not called to defend the gospel as though it is some fragile idea that will collapse unless we can come up with the perfect argument. We are called to KNOW the gospel, which leaves no room for ignorance, and we are called to PREACH the gospel, which leaves no room for fearfulness.

Our responsibility is to speak the truth in love, present Christ faithfully, and trust the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do in the human heart.

C. And finally, Stephen's sermon is direct and honest.

This is not a message designed to make his audience comfortable. Stephen is not trying to figure out how to say just enough truth to avoid upsetting the crowd. He knows that their greatest problem is not that they have been offended. Their greatest problem is that they are spiritually blind and desperately need to see the truth about themselves.

So Stephen takes their own history and holds it up like a mirror.

- You honor Abraham, but you do not have Abraham's faith.
- You honor Moses, but you have rejected the One Moses told you to hear.
- You honor the prophets, but you are repeating the sins of those who persecuted them.
- You treasure the temple, but you have forgotten that the Most High cannot be confined to a building made with human hands.

And this is where Acts 7 becomes incredibly relevant to us, because it is possible to be surrounded by the things of God and still resist God Himself.

APPLICATION

You can own a Bible, attend church, know Christian language, grow up in a Christian family, worship with other believers, hear sermons week after week, and still develop a heart that becomes resistant when God begins to challenge something you do not want to surrender.

That is one of the great warnings of this chapter. Religious familiarity is not the same thing as spiritual surrender.

The question is not simply, "How much of God have I been exposed to?"

The real question is, "When God speaks, am I willing to obey?"

Now the message... and you say, "Josh, are you really going to cover the longest sermon in the book of Acts (52 verses) in the rest of our time together?" The answer is yes! We can divide this into three themes that move throughout the sermon and in Stephen's example.

MAIN POINT 1

God cannot be confined to man-made religious borders

The first major theme that runs through Stephen's defense is that God has never been confined to the religious borders that these men had constructed around Him. That is important because one of the primary accusations against Stephen was that he had spoken against "this holy place," referring to the temple.

- To these religious leaders, the temple had become more than a God-ordained place of worship; it had become so central to their understanding of God that any challenge to their assumptions about the temple felt like an attack against God Himself.
- Stephen is going to show them from their own history that while God certainly established sacred places and gave Israel specific forms of worship, He was never dependent upon any of them in order to reveal Himself, fulfill His promises, or accomplish His purposes.

CUSTOM

Now, I want to be careful here, because we hear people say today, "You can't put God in a box," and sometimes that statement is used to justify almost anything. People will have an experience, develop an idea about God, or embrace some new spiritual practice and then suggest that anyone who appeals to Scripture is somehow trying to restrict what God is able to do. That is not the argument Stephen is making.

- God cannot be confined to our man-made traditions, preferences, denominational systems, or expectations, but He will always be perfectly consistent with the truth He has revealed. The God who inspired the Scriptures will never lead someone contrary to the Scriptures. He may confront our traditions, expose our assumptions, and work in ways we did not expect, but He will never contradict His character or His Word.
- The problem in Acts 7 is not that these men took Scripture too seriously; it is that they had allowed their traditions and religious structures to become the lens through which they interpreted Scripture.

Stephen begins his argument all the way back with Abraham:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:2-3 (NKJV) [2] And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, [3] and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.'"

That opening is more significant than it might initially seem. Where did the God of glory appear to Abraham? **He was in Mesopotamia.** There was no Jerusalem. There was no temple. There was no tabernacle, priesthood, Mosaic Law, or even a nation called Israel.

- Yet God revealed Himself to Abraham, called him, made promises to him, and began unfolding the covenant purposes that would eventually produce the nation these men were so proud to belong to.
- In fact, Stephen points out in verse 5 that Abraham did not even possess the land when God made the promise. The promise rested not upon Abraham's possession of sacred geography, but upon the faithfulness of the God who had spoken.

That is important to Stephen's argument because the very history these men treasured began with God working outside the borders they had come to consider indispensable. **Israel did not create the presence of God; the presence and promise of God created Israel.** Long before there was a holy city or a holy temple, there was a holy God calling a man to walk by faith and trust His Word.

Stephen then moves to Joseph, and again the geography matters.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:9-10 (NKJV) [9] "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him [10] and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

Those four words are easy to pass over: **"God was with him."**

Where was Joseph? **Egypt.** He had been removed from the land of promise by the sinful actions of his own brothers and sold into a pagan nation. Yet the purposes of God were not interrupted because Joseph was outside Canaan, or apart from his family. God was with him in Potiphar's house, God was with him in prison, and God was with him when he was eventually elevated before Pharaoh. In fact, God used what appeared to be Joseph's removal from the promised land as the very means through which He would preserve the family of Jacob during famine.

Again, Stephen is not diminishing the importance of the land. He is showing that the God who gave them the land was never trapped inside it. Their own history testified that God was sovereignly at work in Egypt just as surely as He was in Canaan.

The same God who was with Joseph in Egypt was with Stephen.

Moses

Then Stephen spends the largest portion of his sermon talking about Moses, which makes perfect sense because Stephen had also been accused of speaking against Moses and the Law. But where does Moses first encounter the manifest presence of God? Not in Jerusalem. Not in the tabernacle. Moses is in Midian, in the wilderness, standing before a burning bush. Prior to that, he was raised in

Egypt, apart from the people of God.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:30-33 (NKJV) [30] “And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. [31] When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, [32] saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and dared not look. [33] ‘Then the LORD said to him, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

Why was that ground holy?

It was not holy because a temple had been constructed there. It was not holy because a priest had consecrated it. It was holy because the holy God had manifested His presence there.

That does not mean the place was irrelevant under the Old Covenant. God would later designate the tabernacle and eventually the temple as unique places connected to His covenant worship. But the holiness always came from God; God did not derive His holiness from the location. Stephen is carefully correcting the order of things. The temple was sacred because God had chosen to associate His name and worship with it, but the God of heaven could never be reduced to the temple.

Stephen then walks them through the tabernacle and the temple.

Verse 44 reminds them that their fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness. David later desired to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob, and Solomon ultimately built the temple. Stephen is not denying any of that history. He is affirming it. The tabernacle was given according to God's pattern, and the temple was an important part of Israel's worship. But then Stephen immediately adds the necessary qualification:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:48-50 (NKJV) [48] “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: [49] ‘Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, Or what is the place of My rest? [50] Has My hand not made all these things?’

Stephen quotes Isaiah 66, which means he is not introducing some radical new theology about the temple. Their own prophet had already told them this. Solomon himself had expressed the same truth when the temple was dedicated: “Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!” The temple was never meant to communicate that God lived inside a building as though the Creator of heaven and earth could be geographically contained.

- The tragedy is that over time they had taken something God gave as a gift and allowed it to become something closer to an idol. They were defending the temple while resisting the God of the temple. They were protecting the religious structure while rejecting the Messiah who had come into their midst.

And I think there is an important warning here for the church.

APPLICATION

We can do the same thing with good things.

God can use a certain ministry, a particular church tradition, a style of worship, a method of teaching, a movement, or even a season of revival in a powerful way. None of those things are necessarily wrong. In fact, they may have been wonderfully used by God. But there is always a danger that we begin to confuse one way God worked with the only way God can work. Before long, we can become more committed to preserving a method than we are to obeying the God who gave us the method in the first place.

At the same time, the answer is not to throw away biblical boundaries in the name of being “open to what God might do.” Scripture remains the boundary by which every doctrine, experience, impression, and practice must be tested. We are not free to reinvent God simply because we have rejected human tradition. Biblical Christianity is not choosing between dead traditionalism on one side and untethered spiritual experience on the other. **The healthy position is to remain completely submitted to what God has revealed while refusing to elevate our own traditions to the level of what God has revealed.**

That is where these men went wrong. They had taken what God gave them and built borders around Him that He never gave them permission to build. ***Jesus, the true word of God, threatened what they had built as an idol.***

God is not confined to our traditions, but He is always faithful to His truth. He may work outside of our preferences, but He will never work contrary to His Word. And when our loyalty to a religious structure becomes greater than our willingness to obey the God who gave it, the structure has stopped serving its purpose.

Now, we see another theme in his message:

MAIN POINT 2

Man has a history of resisting God's voice

The second major theme running through Stephen's defense is the repeated pattern of people resisting the very work of God they claimed to be waiting for. This becomes the heart of Stephen's accusation against the council. They believed they were the guardians of Israel's faithfulness, standing in the tradition of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. But Stephen walks them through their own

history and demonstrates that they were not actually standing with the faithful servants God had sent. They were repeating the pattern of those who had rejected them.

- This is one of the reasons Stephen spends so much time recounting Israel's history. He is not giving them information they did not know. These were highly educated religious leaders who knew these stories well. ***Stephen is forcing them to see themselves inside the stories... and they weren't the good guys in the stories!***
 - It is one thing to admire Joseph after you know how the story ends. It is another thing to recognize that you may be standing with the brothers who rejected him.
 - It is one thing to honor Moses centuries after his death. It is another thing to recognize the same spirit of rebellion in yourself that once said to him, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?"

Stephen begins developing that pattern through Joseph.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:9-10 (NKJV) [9] "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him [10] and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house."

Joseph was chosen by God for a unique purpose, but his brothers did not recognize what God was doing through him. Instead, they became envious and rejected him. Their rejection did not mean Joseph was outside the will of God. In fact, while they were working against him, God was still working through him. They sold him into slavery, but God was with him. They intended to remove him from the family, but God eventually used Joseph to preserve the family.

The irony is that the brother they rejected became the deliverer they needed.

That pattern points forward in a powerful way to Jesus.

- Christ came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. He was rejected by His brethren, betrayed, handed over to the Gentiles, and condemned to death. Yet the rejection of Jesus did not defeat the purposes of God. Just as God used the suffering of Joseph to bring preservation, God used the suffering of Christ to accomplish salvation.
- Of course, Joseph is not Jesus in every detail, and Stephen does not stop to explain every possible comparison. But the pattern is difficult to miss. God raises up a deliverer. His own people reject him. God remains with him. And the one who was rejected becomes the means of their rescue.

Stephen then turns to Moses and spends a much larger portion of the sermon on him.

This was especially important because the accusation against Stephen was that he had spoken against Moses. Stephen's response is essentially, "You accuse me of rejecting Moses, but have you

forgotten what your fathers did when Moses first came to them?”

Moses understood that God had called him to identify with his people and become an instrument of deliverance. When he saw an Israelite being mistreated, he intervened. But Stephen tells us that Moses assumed his brethren would understand that God was going to deliver them through his hand.

Acts 7:25 — “For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand.”

That last phrase explains much of the tragedy of Israel’s history: ***“They did not understand.”***

God was working in front of them, but they did not recognize it. God was raising up a deliverer, but they could not see it. Their lack of understanding was not merely intellectual. It was rooted in a heart that did not want to submit to the instrument God had chosen.

When Moses attempted to reconcile two Israelites the next day, one of them pushed him away and said:

Acts 7:27 — “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?”

That question becomes incredibly significant in Stephen’s sermon. The answer, of course, was God. God had made Moses a ruler and a deliverer, but the people rejected his authority before they ever recognized his calling.

Stephen emphasizes the irony in verse 35:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:35 (NKJV) [35] This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush.

The man they rejected was the man God sent.

And Stephen’s audience should have immediately felt the weight of that statement, because they had done the same thing with Jesus.

- They had looked at Christ and essentially asked the same question: “Who gave You this authority?” They questioned His right to forgive sins, challenged His interpretation of the Sabbath, resisted His claims, and ultimately rejected Him as their ruler and Messiah.

The parallels become even stronger when Stephen reminds them that Moses performed signs and wonders, led the people out of bondage, and received living oracles from God. Yet even after witnessing God’s power, the people still refused to obey him.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:39 (NKJV) [39] whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt,

That statement exposes the real problem. Israel had physically left Egypt, but Egypt had not left their hearts. They had experienced deliverance, but they still desired the security and familiarity of their former bondage. When following God became difficult, they began romanticizing the very place from which God had rescued them.

APPLICATION

There is an important spiritual warning there. It is possible to be delivered outwardly and still remain attached inwardly to the thing God brought you out of.

A person may leave a sinful environment, abandon an old habit, or outwardly embrace a new life, while still carrying an appetite for the former bondage in the heart. Israel wanted God's deliverance without consistently wanting God's direction. They wanted freedom from Pharaoh, but they resisted the authority of the Lord when His commands disrupted their desires.

Their resistance eventually produced idolatry. While Moses was on the mountain receiving the Word of God, the people made a calf and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. They replaced the invisible God who had delivered them with a visible god they could control. That is always the temptation of idolatry. Fallen man prefers a god he can manage over the true God he must obey.

Stephen then reminds the council that Moses himself had pointed forward to another Prophet.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:37 (NKJV) [37] "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.'"

Stephen is not speaking against Moses. He is taking Moses seriously. Moses told Israel that God would raise up another Prophet and commanded them to hear Him. That promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

- Like Moses, Jesus was sent by God as a ruler and deliverer.
- Like Moses, He performed signs and wonders.
- Like Moses, He came to rescue people from bondage. And like Moses, He was rejected by the very people to whom He came.

The tragedy is that these men claimed to honor Moses while refusing to obey what Moses had said. Their respect for Moses had become selective. They admired the parts of his ministry that supported

their religious identity, but they rejected the One to whom Moses pointed.

Stephen broadens the indictment by bringing in the prophets. Israel's resistance was not confined to one generation or one deliverer. Over and over again, God sent messengers to call His people back to covenant faithfulness, and over and over again, those messengers were ignored, opposed, and persecuted.

That is why Stephen finally says:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:51-53 (NKJV) [51] “You stiff-necked and 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 foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, [53] who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”

That is the conclusion toward which the entire sermon has been moving.

“You are doing exactly what your fathers did.”

- *They rejected Joseph.*
- *They rejected Moses.*
- *They persecuted the prophets.*
- *And now these leaders had betrayed and murdered the Just One, Jesus Christ.*

Different generation, same rebellion.

Stephen calls them **“stiff-necked,”** which describes someone who refuses to bow. He calls them **“uncircumcised in heart and ears,”** meaning that although they possessed the outward sign of covenant identity, inwardly they were no different from those who did not know God. Their ears heard the Word, but their hearts resisted its authority.

Then Stephen says, **“You always resist the Holy Spirit.”**

- That does not mean human beings can ultimately overthrow the sovereign purposes of God. Joseph's brothers could not stop God's plan. Israel's rejection could not cancel Moses' calling. The persecution of the prophets could not silence God's Word. The crucifixion of Jesus did not defeat the plan of redemption. In every case, human rebellion was real and accountable, yet God remained sovereign and accomplished His purposes.
- But it does mean that people can stubbornly resist the Spirit's testimony, reject His conviction, and refuse the truth He places before them. God was speaking through Joseph's circumstances, through Moses, through the Law, through the prophets, through Jesus, and now through Stephen. Yet every new revelation was met by the same hardened response.

APPLICATION

This is where we need to be careful not to keep the application safely in the first century.

It is easy to read this chapter and condemn the Jewish accusers. It is much harder to ask whether we are resisting the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

We may never stand before Jesus and openly deny that He is the Messiah. But resistance does not always begin with a dramatic rejection of Christ. Sometimes it begins when God's Word confronts an area of our lives and we continually refuse to obey. The Spirit convicts us about bitterness, pride, sexual sin, dishonesty, unforgiveness, selfishness, or some compromise we have protected, and rather than surrendering, we begin explaining why the command does not quite apply to us.

We can become very skilled at using religious language to defend disobedience.

So the question is not simply whether we know the history, understand the doctrine, or possess the language of faith. The question is whether we are willing to hear God when His Word confronts us.

When Scripture exposes something in us, do we humble ourselves, or immediately begin building a defense?

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

“The greatest evidence that we honor God's Word is not that we can explain it to someone else. It is that we submit to it ourselves.”

Israel's history reminds us that a person can stand very close to the work of God and still resist the voice of God. They can admire yesterday's prophets while rejecting the truth God is speaking today.

The warning Stephen gives is direct: do not become so attached to your religious identity that you can no longer recognize when God's Word is confronting your heart.

MAIN POINT 3

A faithful witness keeps his eyes on Jesus

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:54 (NKJV) [54] When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.

That phrase, “cut to the heart,” is interesting because we have already seen something very similar earlier in Acts. In Acts 2, after Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, the people were “cut to the heart” and responded by asking, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Conviction led them toward repentance.

Here, conviction produces the opposite response.

These men hear the truth, they feel the weight of it, and rather than humble themselves, they become enraged.

APPLICATION

That tells us something important about the work of conviction. The fact that a person feels convicted does not automatically mean they will respond rightly to God. Conviction can lead to repentance, but if the heart is proud, conviction can also produce anger, defensiveness, resentment, and hostility toward the person who spoke the truth.

That is exactly what happens here.

Stephen has just told them, “You always resist the Holy Spirit,” and their reaction proves his point.

They gnash their teeth - a response of bitterness and anger.

APPLICATION

There is a warning in that for all of us. When the Word of God confronts something in our lives, our first instinct is often to defend ourselves. We explain, justify, compare ourselves to someone worse, or become irritated with the person who said something that touched a nerve.

But sometimes the reason something touches a nerve is because it is true.

And while the council is filled with rage, Stephen is filled with something completely different.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:55-56 (NKJV) [55] But he, being 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 said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

What a contrast. They are looking at Stephen with hatred, Stephen is looking at Jesus in glory.

That is really the secret to everything that follows.

If Stephen had been consumed with the faces of the people around him, with their accusations, their hatred, their injustice, or even the pain he was about to suffer, I do not know that he could have responded the way he did.

But Stephen's attention is fixed somewhere else. He sees Jesus.

Seeing Jesus doesn't remove the danger, but it changes Stephen's perspective.

And there is a profound principle in that.

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

“We will never endure the pressure of this world faithfully if our eyes are constantly fixed on the world.”

APPLICATION

If all we see is the hostility, the rejection, the injustice, the criticism, and the people who oppose us, eventually our hearts will become bitter, fearful, angry, or discouraged.

Faithfulness requires a higher focus. Stephen sees “the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is commonly described as seated at the right hand of the Father, the place of authority and completed work. But here Stephen sees Him standing.

CUSTOM

Now, the text does not explicitly tell us why Jesus is standing, so we should be careful not to make more of the detail than Luke gives us. Some have suggested that Jesus stands to receive Stephen, others see the picture of Christ standing as Stephen's heavenly advocate, and others view it simply as a remarkable expression of honor toward His faithful servant.

Whatever the exact reason, the image is powerful.

The earthly court has condemned Stephen, but the heavenly court has received him. And I still love the picture this gives us: **as Stephen falls for Christ, Christ stands for Stephen.**

There will be moments in the Christian life when obedience to Jesus costs you something. You may be misunderstood, falsely accused, rejected, mocked, or even hated because you refuse to compromise what God has said. But Acts 7 reminds us that the judgment of this world is never the final judgment.

The question is not ultimately whether men approve of your faithfulness. The question is whether Christ does. Stephen's enemies then respond in almost animalistic rage.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:57-58 (NKJV) [57] Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; [58] and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Notice the imagery. They literally stop their ears.

ILLUSTRATION

Like a toddler who sticks his fingers in his ears and repeats the phrase "I can't hear you," so these people block out the voice of truth so they could only hear the voice of their own rage.

Stephen had just accused them of being "uncircumcised in heart and ears," unwilling to hear what God was saying, and now they physically demonstrate the spiritual condition he described. They do not want to hear anymore.

Then Luke includes one small detail that becomes very important later:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:58 (NKJV) [58] and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

At this point, Saul says nothing. He is simply standing there approving of what is happening. But Acts is already preparing us for what comes next.

The man who watches Stephen die will soon encounter the risen Jesus for himself. And I cannot help but wonder how much Stephen's witness stayed in Saul's mind.

- Saul heard the sermon.
- He watched Stephen's face.
- He saw a man being murdered who did not curse his enemies.
- He saw a man die with complete confidence in Jesus.

We cannot prove exactly what Saul was thinking in that moment, but Luke certainly wants us to notice that he was there.

APPLICATION

Sometimes the witness of a faithful Christian reaches farther than that Christian will ever know. Stephen probably died thinking the council had rejected everything he said.

But standing in the crowd was a man whom God would soon turn into the apostle Paul.

That should encourage us that faithfulness is never wasted. We do not always get to see what God does with our obedience. We may plant seeds that someone else waters years later.

Then we come to Stephen's final words.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:59-60 (NKJV) [59] And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

This is where Stephen's faith becomes more than something he preaches. It becomes something he dies by. His final words intentionally echo the words of Jesus from the cross.

- Jesus said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."
- Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
- Jesus prayed for the men crucifying Him, "Father, forgive them."
- Stephen prays, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin."

APPLICATION

It is one thing to say that we want to be like Jesus when everything is going well. It is another thing to look like Jesus when people are hurting us. Stephen models the heart of His Savior, even in his death.

And that is exactly what Luke told us about Stephen from the beginning. He was a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit." The Spirit who empowered Stephen to preach boldly was the same Spirit who empowered him to forgive while dying.

That is an important part of what Christian maturity looks like. Spiritual power is not only demonstrated when someone speaks courageously or performs some visible act of ministry. Sometimes the greatest evidence of the Spirit's work is seen in the ability to forgive people who have genuinely wounded us, and commit ourselves to God's plan in the midst of our greatest pain.

And that brings us back to the larger theme of this entire series. What are the signs of spiritual life? Stephen gives us one of the clearest pictures in the book of Acts.

A living faith knows the Word, speaks the truth, refuses to compromise, and keeps its eyes on Jesus even when faithfulness becomes costly.

And perhaps the final question of this chapter is not simply, "Would I die for Jesus?"

Most of us will probably never be asked to make that decision.

The better question is, "Am I living for Him now?"

Am I willing to obey when it costs me something?

Am I willing to speak truth when it is unpopular?

Am I willing to forgive people who hurt me?

Pray for love packages team