

Acts 6:8-7:1;7:35-8:2

Stephen

A case study in how to live and die well.

Introduction: Why is this story here in Acts? Stephen kind of appears out of nowhere yet he has the longest speech in all of Acts. Here are a few reasons:

- Over the years of reading this story I believe that more than anything this story is to be a picture to us of what it looks like to be a Jesus follower.
- This story also serves as a testimony to the powerful way Jesus' follower's faced death.
- This is the story that propels the Jesus community out to the mission that Jesus gave them - take the gospel to Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth.
- We can also see from Stephen's narrative of the O.T. how the early church viewed the Law and the Temple and other ways in which they saw Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of the O.T.
- Finally this story is the introduction and perhaps the beginnings of the Holy Spirit drawing Paul the Apostle to the faith..

Stephen full of grace and power, was doing many signs among the people.. it seems he was also preaching in the synagogues and no one could withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking... As I hope to show you in this text Stephen is not just some random person that comes into the Acts narrative but I believe he is a picture to us of what God wants to do with all followers of Jesus. What is that? That we would be more like Jesus. That our lives would reflect more and more the Life of our Savior, both in word and in deed...That we would be a people of character, full of wisdom and the Sprit, that we would both serve the church and be proclaimers of the good news. That our lives would be a faithful testimony to the Truth, and that each of us would bring glory to God both in our life and death

Luke without saying explicitly connects Stephen with Jesus in a number of ways. Stephen trial and death:

A trial before the high priest and Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53)

False witnesses (mark 14:56-57 and Matt 26:60-61)

Testimony concerning the destruction of the temple (Mark 14:58; Matt 26:61)

Temple “made with Hands” (Mark 14:58)

Son of Man saying (Mark 14:62)

Charge of blasphemy (Mark 14:61)

High Priest question (Mark 14:61)

Committal of Spirit (Luke 23:46)

Cry out with a loud voice (Mark 14:34)

Intercession for Enemies (Luke 23:34)

1. What Stephen Said

1. Accusation? Stephen is being accused before the high court of Israel that he has spoken against the Temple and the Law
2. So what does Stephen do? He retells their history in a very particular way. It almost seems bizarre the things that he leaves out as well as the detail he includes. But the whole thing is very calculated as I hope you'll see. Stephen picks certain people and events to highlight in the same way that we as Americans would talk about our nation and it's history most likely focusing on the big events like the coming of the Pilgrims, the revolutionary war, the founding fathers, and the constitution. These are major events that have defined our history and often put people in their different camps - politically speaking.
3. So Stephen is going to answer these two accusations against him the one about the Temple and the Law.. well sort of. Stephen's plea is not of innocence but a plea for truth. Here's what he's been saying.

4. The question of the Temple -

1. Abraham - **“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia.”** - God appeared to Abraham in a foreign land. No temple for meeting with God.
2. Joseph - **“the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household”**..no temple for meeting with God, yet God was with Joseph even in a foreign land.

3. Moses -God appeared to Moses in the wilderness and said the place where you are standing is holy ground. -No temple for meeting with God.. Our you catching the pattern here??
4. David and Solomon - The designers and builders of the Temple. Yet even Solomon said and Isaiah repeated that God does not dwell in temples made with men's hands. Yahweh is not a tribal deity, you can't put him in a box, you can't confine him to a certain place or space. So he doesn't speak against the temple as much as to critique this idea of confining God, and limiting his scope of salvation and grace to Israel alone.
5. **The Question of the Law** - They've never kept it.
 1. He says, concerning Moses, **"This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. 39 Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, 40 saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'**
 2. Conclusion - the Law is good, given by God, his living oracles, mediated by God's faithful servant Moses - the problem..our Father's never kept it and neither can we. **"Moses received living oracles -they refused to obey, they thrust him aside and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt."**
6. **And just as an add on** -They have always rejected God's saviors and messengers.
 1. **"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.”

2. They claim to care about God’s law and the worship of God but this is false. They have in fact murdered the righteous one - the one that all of the law and prophets and even the Temple pointed to. This is one of the only places in scripture that Jesus is called the righteous one. The righteous one is the one who has kept the Law perfectly.

2. What Stephen Saw

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^[b] at him.**

1. Stephen’s words enraged them. Actually the word enraged in greek means to saw in two. Their hearts were cut open and they were exposed and they hated this exposure. so what do they do?? They kill him
2. But I want us to notice something so very powerful about this passage and that is that at the moment that Stephen is being condemned by this earthly court - the highest court of Israel. All of a sudden the courtroom is transformed in his eyes. He no longer see his accusers but he sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He is transferred in this vision before the bench of the universe and as the earthly court condemns Stephen to death, Jesus stands to declare his righteousness before the Father and the court of the universe.
 1. This harkens us back to Jesus’ words in the gospels - **“I tell you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will also confess him before the angels of God.” - Luke 12:8**

2. **Or as Matthew records Jesus' saying - "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.." - Matthew 10:32**
3. John, in his 1st epistle says, - **"We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins."**
 1. Everyone of us lives in a world where we look for approval, we put our selves in the human court room every day looking for some justification for our lives some validation and we let people's verdict rest on us. As I've said before we cannot even keep our own righteous standards, let alone God's. What hope is there for us? what hope is there for anyone? As Stephen said, the Fathers never could keep the law and neither can we. What hope is there not just for good people who sometimes get it wrong but for bad people like you and me??
 2. What an amazing picture for us to see that for all who put their faith and trust in Christ, to all who make that Good profession - that Jesus is Lord - though the world might write us off, condemn us, call us fools and ignorant and narrow minded - Because of Jesus Christ the righteous one! We are justified before the only one in the universe that really matters!
 1. Augustine said, "Only love of the immutable can bring tranquility."
 2. "There is only one thing that is immutable. It is God, his presence and his love. The only love that won't disappoint you is the one that can't change, that can't be lost, that is not based on the ups and downs of life or of how well you live. It is something that not even death can take away from you. God's love is the only thing like that. Not only can your poor performance not block it, but even the worst possible circumstances in this life - sudden death - can only give you more of it." -Tim Keller
 3. As followers of Jesus who have already been justified by God we need to let that verdict rest on us. This is the only verdict in the universe that actually sets us free, truly free to no longer be moved by what people think, by what

the world and culture thinks, by even what we think of ourselves.. To the degree that we know the Love and acceptance of the Father because of the work of Jesus, to that degree you'll be able to face anything.

1. Stephen saw the ultimate courtroom and he was being commended.

3. What Stephen Did - or what did Stephen's life do, what did it accomplish?

1. This is loaded as I said earlier Stephen is a picture for us of what a faithful follower of Jesus looks like in the Church, in the world, and in times of great crisis - even death. It's all there though we don't have time for the details.

2. But two things Stephen's death does immediately:

- 1. The further spread of the Gospel - "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."**

1. The Church had been hanging around in Jerusalem, but Jesus kept on telling the Apostles, throughout the gospels and even early on in Acts, my kingdom is for all people, take this everywhere and to everyone..But now the death of Stephen launches the church back on it's mission to the world.

- 2. It Gives the Church it's greatest theologian and perhaps it's greatest Christian - Paul the Apostle.**

- 3. We are told, "Then they (those who condemned Stephen) 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...And Saul approved of his execution."**

4. Saul who's name will be changed to Paul was there at Stephen's trial and execution. Where do you think Luke got these details from?? Not only that but all the themes that Stephen hits on here in his sermon are developed by Paul in his preaching and his writings. Truly the blood of Christians is seed. The testimony of Stephen, the way he died...I believe this haunted Saul, he had never seen anything like it in his life. (remember when Jesus meets Saul on the road to Damascus he says, it's hard for you to kick against the goads - in other words, you're resisting my advances, you're running from me...)

5. This is a true fact of Christianity, no other religion has suffering at the heart of its doctrine like Christianity and Buddhism, but Buddhism teaches you how to ignore or become numb to it, only Christianity teaches that suffering and glory go hand in hand...I've said this before but there is a large irony of the Christian faith and movement -God and his followers win by losing, "by letting their opponents win and then transforming the expectant result." the suffering and even death of disciples, like that of their master, doesn't lead to the squelching of the Jesus movement, it leads to its success and expansion.
 1. How should the Life of Stephen challenge us to follow Jesus more closely, to rest in his perfect sacrifice for our justification?
 2. How should the Life of Stephen challenge us in boldly, and bravely facing opposition, or even death for Jesus' sake?
 3. How should the life of Stephen challenge us to think more biblically about suffering and Glory?
 4. May God grant us insight and repentance by the power of His spirit