

# Stephen: Full of Grace and Power

Acts 6:8 – 7:1

Before studying this passage all I really knew about Stephen was that he was chosen to take care of the Hellenistic widows and that he was the first person martyred for his faith in Jesus. After studying this passage I am convinced that he was a man uniquely used by God. Stephen was an incredibly mighty man of God. Stephen was very special. The Spirit of God was mightily upon him and in many ways he was like his Savior. My hope and prayer this morning is that you will become like him.

Like Jesus, Stephen was a bold preacher. He was willing to preach the truth even if it meant he had to die while doing it. He was a servant. He was willing to feed widows. Like Jesus, he was a miracle worker.

And, like Jesus, He was willing to forgive and pray for those who were murdering him. I am convinced that it was the content of his message that got him killed. We will get to the content of his message in greater detail next week.

Today we will look generally at what he was preaching and why it was so offensive. His accusations are almost identical to those Jesus was charged with. And just like Jesus, in the end he didn't even defend himself.

## A Turning Point

This passage is a turning point in the book of Acts. Up to this point Peter has been the predominant preacher. This will no longer be the case. Luke has recorded three of Peter's sermons (2:14-36; 3:11-26; 10:34-43) that total 46 verses. In the next chapter, chapter seven, Luke records Stephen's final sermon and will take up 52 verses to do it. That is a lot of space. Why does he give Stephen so much space?

## Stephen Stands Between Peter & Paul

Stephen is a pivotal preacher. He stands between the two primary preachers in the book of Acts. He stands between Peter and Paul. At Stephen's stoning (at the end of chapter 7) Luke will introduce us to the young Pharisee Saul who will become the apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Peter was the apostle to the Jews (Acts 11:2) and Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13; 1 Timothy 2:7).

## Taking the Gospel to the Greeks

Up to this point the gospel has only been proclaimed in Jerusalem. Recall that Jesus said, "*Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*" (Luke 24:47). We learned from Acts 5:28 that the disciples had "filled Jerusalem with this teaching." It's time for the gospel to grow beyond Jerusalem. Stephen is the first person to go preach the gospel to the Hellenistic or Greek speaking Jews in their own synagogue (6:9). Stephen is the beginning of the gospel going to the Greeks.

After Stephen's death, and the resulting persecution, the gospel will leap out of Jerusalem and spread to Samaria (and Ethiopia) through Philip and then, after his conversion, through the apostle Paul, to the ends of the earth i.e. throughout the Roman Empire. Stephen stands between Jerusalem and the ends of the earth.

## Stephen's Character

Who was Stephen? What was he like? Let look at his Character. There are six characteristics of Stephen that are listed for us.

### Acts 6:3-5

*Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip.... et al...*

### Acts 6:8

*And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*

- 1) Good reputation (Acts 6:3)
- 2) Full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3)
- 3) Full of wisdom (Acts 6:3)
- 4) Full of faith (Acts 6:5)
- 5) Full of grace (Acts 6:8)
- 6) Full of power (Acts 6:8)

The church was in need. The apostles were in need of men to help serving in the daily distribution of the food to the widows so they could remain focused on prayer and preaching. So they told the church to pick out seven men who had good reputations and were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

### 1) A Good Reputation

Remember there is probably about 20,000 people in the church at this time and the first person they picked was Stephen. Stephen was a man whom had a good reputation among the church. That means that no one in all that number had anything bad to say about Stephen. When they put Stephen before the congregation as a candidate, no one came forward with any bad report. He had a good reputation with all the people. That's quite a statement.

### 2) Full of the Holy Spirit

Not only did he have a good reputation, he was also full of the Holy Spirit. Being full of the Spirit was stated as one of the requirements (6:3) for service, but Luke states it a second time in verse 5. He says this twice about Stephen and does not do that with any of the other six. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. Being full of the Spirit means he was controlled by the Spirit. Stephen's life was notably marked, influenced, and controlled by the Spirit.

Acts 6:8 tells us that Stephen “was doing great wonders and signs among the people.” One of the evidences of the activity of the Holy Spirit was the miracles he performed. God had put His Spirit within Stephen and by His Spirit Stephen was doing “great wonders and signs.”

*He is the first person other than the disciples who is said to perform signs and wonders.*

### **3) Full of Wisdom**

Stephen was also full of wisdom. Wisdom is possessing experience, knowledge, and good judgment and then rightly applying those qualities in a beneficial and appropriate way. Wise people are a blessing to everyone around them. Stephen was a wise man. He understood people and he was able to apply his knowledge and experience in the right way at the right time. Stephen was full of wisdom.

### **4) Full of Faith**

Stephen was also full of faith. His life was controlled by faith. His actions were determined by his faith. If you are full of faith, then there is no room for doubt. This was the kind of man Stephen was, full of the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom, and full of faith.

Paul described this kind of fullness of faith in Abraham when he wrote that Abraham did not weaken in his faith even though he considered his own body “as good as dead” and Sarah’s womb was barren, yet *“no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He promised”* (Romans 4:19-21).

That’s the kind of fullness of faith that Luke is talking here in relation to Stephen.

### **5) Full of Grace**

The next characteristic is grace. Stephen was full of grace. The fact that Stephen was full of grace is most clearly demonstrated in how he died. Look at Acts 7:60.

*Acts 7:60 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.*

While Stephen was in the middle of being murdered to death by stoning, he was praying for the forgiveness of the very ones throwing the stones! As the stones were flying, Stephen was praying.

Being stoned is brutal way to die. These people were so angry that Stephen, that they were filled with rage (Acts 7:54). They ground their teeth at him (7:54), they stopped their ears so they wouldn’t hear him preaching (7:57), they rushed violently upon him (7:57), threw him out of the town (7:58) [not wanting his blood to stain the council hall] no doubt beating him and kicking him all along the way, and picked up rocks and began killing him.

***And yet, as he was dying, his final words were a gracious request of their forgiveness.*** Stephen was just like Jesus. This is almost exactly what Jesus said as He was dying.

Luke 23:34 *And Jesus said, **Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.***

Oh to be that filled with grace! Oh, to be so filled with grace that we could from the heart pray for our enemies out of a genuine love for them and a desire for them to come to repentance! That's the kind of man that Stephen was. He was just like Jesus.

## 6) Full of Power

Stephen was also full of power. This fullness of power results from being filled with the Holy Spirit and this power is expressed in two ways, performing signs and wonders (i.e. healing the sick and casting out demons), which we've already seen, and in the way he preaches and teaches.

Remember what that Jesus said, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses...*" (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit empowers for bold witness. We see this power (along with wisdom) demonstrated in how he spoke.

### Acts 6:9-10

*Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

Some men from this synagogue rose up, (were enraged, i.e. stirred up to action) and argued with Stephen but they could not overcome him. He spoke in a powerful way bringing his wisdom to bear under the influence of the Holy Spirit. They could not refute Stephen. This powerful, wisdom-filled, Spirit-influenced witness was a fulfillment of Jesus' promise.

### Luke 21:12-19

*But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. 13 This will be your opportunity to bear witness. 14 Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, 15 for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.*

This is our memory verse for this week.

*17 You will be hated by all for my name's sake. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives.*

Jesus always keeps His promises. Stephen had gone into the synagogue to preach about Jesus and Jesus had given him a mouth and wisdom that none of his adversaries were able to withstand or contradict! And they were furious over it too. So they delivered him up to the Sanhedrin.

## The Synagogue of the Freedman

This synagogue of the Freedman is made up of Jews from North Africa and Asia. The Freedman "were descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompey in 63 B.C. and taken to Rome. They were later granted their freedom and formed a Jewish community."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Acts 1-12* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 193.

### **A Formal Debate**

Verse 9 says that these men “disputed” with Stephen. The Greek word *suzeteo* translated “disputed,” means a formal debate.<sup>2</sup> Stephen’s teaching had aroused such a stir that the rulers of the synagogue called for a debate to hear the issue. Stephen won the debate.

### **Saul and the Debate???**

The synagogue is made up of four nationalities. The Cyrenians and Alexandrians were from two cities in North Africa. Cilicia and Asia were Roman provinces in Asia Minor. Tarsus was a city located in Cilicia. Tarsus was the apostle Paul’s hometown. It is very likely that he attended this synagogue, given the fact that ethno-linguistic groups tend to worship together.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, it is quite likely that Saul (Paul) may have even attended the debate and given his zeal for Judaism, he may have even participated in the debate with Stephen.<sup>4</sup> The least we can say is that Saul (Paul) heard Stephen preach and teach. We know that he approved of Stephen’s execution (Acts 8:1).

### **New Tactics**

These men could not defeat Stephen in debate so they changed their method. They began a defamation campaign. They were unable to successfully attack the message so they launched an attack on the messenger.

### **Acts 6:11**

*Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.*

The Greek word *hupoballo* here translated “secretly instigated,” means “to suggest or prompt with an evil motive.” Their plan was evil from the beginning. So they induced men to spread the rumor that Stephen was “speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.”

According to Leviticus 24:16 blasphemy against the name of God was punishable by death. Numbers 15:30 defines any “defiant” sin as blasphemy.

### **Moses Before God**

It is interesting that Moses is mentioned first before God. They are more concerned with blaspheming against Moses and the law than they are with blaspheming against God. They had gotten it all backwards. These Jews had begun to revere Moses over God.

Jesus exposed this misunderstanding to the Jews. At some point they began to think that it was Moses instead of God the Father who gave them manna in the wilderness. So Jesus said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but My Father...”* (John 6:32)

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur, p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary on Acts*, vol. 5 Leon Morris, ed. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1980) p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, p. 193.

They had gotten their religious priorities all mixed up. This was one mistake Stephen did not make. Stephen had his priorities in the right place and Jesus was uppermost in his mind and heart. But to these zealous Jews, Stephen's Christ exalting preaching of Jesus above Moses was **blasphemous**.

Blasphemy is same charge brought against Jesus.

#### **Mark 14:61-64**

*61 Again the high priest asked him, Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?*

*62 And Jesus said, I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.*

*63 And the high priest tore his garments and said, What further witnesses do we need?*

*64 You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision? And they all condemned him as deserving death.*

#### **They Stirred Up the People**

As these lies of blasphemy hit a nerve. As the charge of blasphemy was circulated it begins, for the first time, to change the heart of the people. Up to this point in the book of Acts, **the people** have held these followers of Jesus "in high esteem" (Acts 5:13).

And it was the fear of **the people** that kept the high priest from forcibly arresting the apostles as they were teaching in the temple (Acts 5:26). Now that restraint is gone and the young Christian movement no longer has the respect of the people. This fact changes everything.

#### **Acts 6:12**

*And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,*

The whole group of people, elders, and scribes "came upon him" and "seized," or "grabbed him violently" and dragged him before the council.

#### **Acts 6:13-14**

*and they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.*

#### **False Witnesses**

They brought in false witnesses against Stephen. This is exactly what happened to Jesus.

#### **Mark 14:55-56**

*55 Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. 56 For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.*

These false witnesses find no fault with anything that Stephen himself has said. They fault him for quoting Jesus. Yet this quote is the heart of the matter. What is wrong with what he's saying? Why are they so angry that they will kill him?

Now we know what they have been debating about. The issues are two;

- 1) 6:11 he spoke against Moses; 6:13 he spoke against the law
  - 2) 6:11 he spoke against God; 6:13 he spoke against “this holy place” i.e. the temple
- To speak against the law was to speak against Moses who wrote the law.
  - To speak against the temple was to speak against God whose presence dwelled in the temple.

Verse 14 tells us that they boiled down all their problems with what Stephen was teaching into one quote from Jesus. This is the same quote that was used against Jesus at his trial (Matthew 26:59-66; Mark 14:55-65).

Evidently Stephen picked up on a line of reasoning that struck a cord with every member of Jewish culture. The people are now stirred up against him along with the elders and the scribes.

This quote takes place after Jesus cast out all the money-changers from the temple.

### **John 2:18-22**

*18 So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things?*

*19 Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*

*20 The Jews then said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?*

*21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body.*

*22 When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*

Jesus was standing in the temple and he said, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days raise it up.*” It was only after his resurrection that the disciples figured out what He meant. He was talking about His body not the physical temple.

However, Luke 21:5 records Jesus’ prediction that the physical temple *would* be leveled, leaving not “one stone upon another.”

So why would Jesus, standing in the temple, allow the Jews to misunderstand him? They understood Him to be talking about the physical temple because they said, “Are you nuts? It took 46 years to build this temple and will you raise it up in three days?”

He didn’t correct them. He didn’t even explain it to the disciples. Perhaps the reason He didn’t is because He was talking about both His body and the temple. His body would be raised in three days and one day the temple would be torn down.

The seeds of the destruction of the temple and completion of the sacrificial system were sown in the Old Testament and Stephen saw it and he boldly preached it, which got him killed. Yes, the temple was a “holy” place but the presence of God’s presence was not limited to the temple! When Solomon had built the temple (the first one) he said,

1 Kings 8:27 “*Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house I have built?*”

### **The Lamb of God?**

If Jesus was the Messiah and the perfect, sinless Lamb of God, what happens to the temple and all its sacrificial systems when that Lamb is offered? Are the daily sacrifices needed anymore???

Remember what Acts 6:8 revealed. “A great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” I think they became believers through the preaching of Stephen.

Hebrews 10:4

*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* How do you know? Because you have to keep offering them again and again and again.

Hebrews 10:12

*But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God.*

Hebrews 10:14

*For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

Jesus was one sacrifice to end all sacrifices because God raised Him from the dead proving that His blood was sinless and thus completely acceptable to atone for the sins of all who would trust in Him.

The Law “was but a shadow of the good things to come” but when the full reality of the promise came in the person of Jesus everything changed!

The result is a dramatic change in the “customs of Moses.” Jesus fulfilled everything the shadowy Law pointed to! He did not abolish the Law. He completely fulfilled it!

Jesus’ body was “torn down,” i.e. when He died, He shed His innocent blood, but when He was “raised up” He became the living proof that a **new place of worship** was now in place – **HE** is the new temple of worship, **HE** is the new place of worship.

When Jesus died the veil in the temple that separated off the holy of holies was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) demonstrating that “we can enter the holy places” or enter into the Presence of God through the blood of Jesus! (Hebrews 10:19-20).

### **The Samaritan Woman and the Location of True Worship**

Jesus told the woman at the well, as they debated the location of worship, “*Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.*” (John 4:21)

Jesus’ coming changed everything. Travel to the temple in Jerusalem to worship God is no longer required. You simply have to go to Jesus.

### **Revelation 21:22-23**

**22** And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

**23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.



There is no need for a temple any more because Jesus is the place of worship. There is no more need for any animals to have their blood shed because Jesus is “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

And there is no need for light, because the glory of the Lord continually shines. And I believe it was this glorious radiance that lit up Stephen’s face when everyone looked at him.

#### **Acts 6:15**

*And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

Stephen had simply been preaching the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus and the arrival of the promised New Covenant from Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36.

#### **Ezekiel 36:25-27**

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

**26** And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

**27** And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Lord Jesus, let us love You like Stephen loved You. Let us serve You like Stephen served You. And may we be as obedient as this man was, for Your name’s sake and for Your glory. Amen.