

Acts 7

Who was Stephen? A Hellenistic Jew, he was one of seven hand-picked men chosen to wait on tables in the early church (6:5). He had outstanding spiritual credentials; he was a man full of faith, wisdom and the Holy Spirit.

What had Stephen been (falsely) charged with? Stephen was responding to the charges levied against him by the false witnesses of blaspheming against God, the temple, Moses and the Mosaic Law in 6:11, 13-14.

Why does Stephen start his defense against the first charge of blaspheming against God (6:11) with a historical review of the days of Abraham and the Patriarchs (vv. 2-16)?

- By going back to the beginning of Jewish history, starting with the father of the Jewish nation, and the Abrahamic Covenant, he was able to show that his Judaism was unquestionably orthodox. The charges of blaspheming against God were unjustified. His point was "I believe the same thing you understand and believe....I read the same scriptures....we both trace our heritage back to Abraham."
- The reason he's reviewing Jewish history is to establish a link between the Jewish past and Jesus. By summarizing Jewish history, he began with a subject the Jews knew and loved – their history/their heritage. Then he used it to show that they had rejected God's word just like their ancestors had repeatedly done, culminating in the rejection of the long-awaited Messiah. Stephen's arguments are ultimately designed as a defense not of Stephen but a defense of Christianity.

Note Stephen's use of the word "our" throughout his defense (vv. 2-50). **Why was that important? What message does that send to the Sanhedrin?** I'm one of you. We're all Jews. We're in this together. It was a position of humility as opposed to confrontation. As a result, they were willing to listen.....at this point.

What point was Stephen trying to make (vv. 17-43) in his defense of blaspheming Moses (6:11) and speaking against the Law (6:13)? He showed how God had been faithful to His promise to the nation of Israel by using Moses to deliver His people. He was presenting a historically accurate account of the life of Moses. By doing so, he was refuting the bogus charges that he was blaspheming against Moses (6:11) and speaking against the Mosaic Law (6:13). As if to say, "I think just as highly of Moses as you do. I'm not distorting the truth about Moses. I believe the same as you about Moses. Your blasphemy against Moses charges are baseless."

The false witnesses had accused Stephen of blaspheming against the Mosaic Law. How does Stephen refute their charges (vv. 37-43)? The Jews revered the Law and prided themselves on following it precisely, but Stephen is making a case that the religious leaders really rejected what Moses taught. It was Moses who had predicted that a prophet like himself would come (Deuteronomy 18:15, Acts 3:22).

What two examples does Stephen provide of Israel's disobedience (vv. 40-43)? Their worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai and their worship of Moloch and Rephan throughout their forty years in the wilderness. **What was his point?** The people worshiped idols repeatedly throughout their history. But God was faithful and kept His promises, even though the people disobeyed Him and did not keep their part of the covenant.

The Sanhedrin had accused Stephen of blaspheming against the temple (v. 6:13). What was the Jews' attitude toward the Temple? To the Jew, the temple was the holiest place on earth, the center of worship as well as the center of God's dealings with man. The Jewish leaders of Stephen's day attached inordinate importance to the temple, as they did to the Mosaic Law. They had distorted God's view of the temple as they had distorted His meaning in the Law.

The Jewish people were justifiably proud of this great building. It was one of the magnificent structures of the ancient world. It was the center of Jewish life for almost a thousand years. For many Jews, the temple had become an idol - it subtly got to the point where it began to mean more to the people than God Himself (Mark 13:1).

How did Stephen address their argument (vv. 44-50)? *"The Most High does not live in houses made by men (v. 48)." God is omnipresent; He is not confined to a building. He quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2: "Heaven is my throne, and*

the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? 2 Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the Lord. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."

Isaiah warned that buildings are not what counts with God but rather the moral and spiritual condition of peoples' lives. God values a broken and contrite heart above all (Psalm 51:16-17).

How did Stephen conclude his defense (vv. 51-53)? By indicting (formally accusing, charging) his accusers. They had brought charges against him, but now he turned the table and brought more serious charges against them.

How did Stephen describe the religious leaders of the council (v. 51)? He described them as stiff-necked with uncircumcised hearts and ears. Almost 20 times in the Old Testament, God calls Israel stiff-necked, a figure of speech for self-willed.¹

What sins did Stephen say the Jews were guilty of? They did the same things as their fathers -- resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting the prophets, murdering those who predicted the coming of the Messiah and disobedience. God had given the Israelites great promises through Abraham, deliverance and the law through Moses and the temple through Solomon. They seemed to think these things assured them of God's favor. Stephen showed that they were mistaken. They still had to obey God.

The greatness of Stephen's sermon lies not only in its content, but especially in its courage. He is confronting the same group of religious leaders who had condemned Jesus to death on the same basis of false testimony by lying witnesses.

How did the Sanhedrin respond to Stephen's charges (v. 54)? "Gnashed their teeth" or "Cut to the quick" is a figure of speech that describes being painfully wounded. They became violently angry.

What did Stephen see (vv. 55-56)? The glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God

Why was Jesus standing? To welcome Stephen home. To honor him as the first Christian martyr.

How did the Sanhedrin then act (vv. 57-58)? Covering their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him. These were distinguished older men, religious leaders. The reaction of the Sanhedrin seems extreme, but is typical of those rejecting God and lost in spiritual insanity. They wail in agony and cover their ears at the revelation of God, which they regard as blasphemy.

At whose feet did the witnesses lay their garments (v. 58)? A young man named Saul. **What role did Saul have in Stephen's execution?** Watching....approving.....an accomplice to murder.

What observations do you have about the way Stephen died (vv.59-60)? Stephen was willing to die rather than compromise. The "first Christian martyr" died calling on Jesus to receive his spirit and to not charge this sin against the murderers. In doing so, he responded just as his Master had on the Cross.

What was accomplished by Stephen's death? It ignited the first mass persecution of Christian Jews (8:1). Stephen's death was somehow used by God to influence Saul; there is a link between Stephen's death and Saul's conversion. Saul, the greatest missionary of all time, the one who arguably influenced the world more than anyone else, was watching. Nobody handled stoning before like Stephen. Saul never forgot Stephen's death (Acts 22:20). It left an indelible imprint on his heart and mind.

Augustine said, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul."

Application: Others are watching us to see how we handle life's difficulties.

¹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Acts, 2017 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>) p. 129