

Lesson 9: Acts 6:8-15 and 7:54-60 Stephen's Arrest and Death

Introduction

In this lesson, we begin the second major section of Acts, Acts 6:8-9:31 The Church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Before we begin, I have a trivia question for you. Who is this phrase talking about in the book of Acts, "The God of glory appeared to [blank]"? Who goes in the "blank"? Who does the God of glory appear to? Who comes to mind first? The God of glory appeared to...? I'll let you think about that and come back to it.

We have two goals for this lesson. First, we are going to zoom out on this whole second section to consider the text from a wide-angle view. How has Luke organized this second section? A lot of benefit comes from reflecting on how Biblical author's structure or arrange their literary communication. The structure itself communicates meaning and provides a framework for understanding the parts. I love both zooming in to the phrases and sentences and following the story or the flow of thought, and then zooming out to reflect on how the various passages that are all collected together, how are they arranged, what do they communicate as a whole.

What was Luke's main theological emphasis in the first major section? When we look at the whole, what has he accomplished so far? And how is he developing that or adding to it in this second major section? We are starting this lesson with that kind of wide-zoom perspective. After considering that overview, we will zoom in to the beginning and end of Stephen's story, so we will get into some text this lesson and we'll consider those two short passages. We will save Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, that long speech, for our next lesson.

Overview of Acts, Part II

The Gospel Received in Judea and Samaria			
6:8-8:3 The Gospel and Judaism's Orthodox Worship (Stephen's Witness to Fellow Jews)	8:4-25 The Gospel and Samaria's Unorthodox Worship (Philip's Witness in Samaria)	8:26-40 The Gospel of the Suffering Servant (Philip's Witness to the Ethiopian)	9:1-30 The Gospel of the Son of God (Paul's Conversion)
9:31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it continued to increase.			

David Gooding, *True to Faith*.¹

Understanding Luke's Division of the Text

We begin with an overview of Acts Part II, chapter 6 verse 8 to the end of chapter 9.

⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

That's Luke's summary statement in 6:7. That's the end of our first major section of Acts. Skipping ahead to the next summary statement in 9:31, the end of the second section, we read,

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

The first summary statement tells us "the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem" and the second summary statement tells us "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up." Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 gave us a pattern to watch for. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." That's the pattern we are seeing. Our first section covered the Jerusalem Awakening. Our second section addresses the Gospel's spread into Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

¹ David Gooding. *True to Faith*. (Coleraine, N Ireland: Myrtlefield House, 1990) 133.

We might then expect the first story of our second section to take us out of Jerusalem. Instead, we find ourselves still in Jerusalem with a story about Stephen arrested for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in the city.

Stephen is one of the seven men just chosen to handle distribution of funds to the Greek-speaking widows. His story here seems to be a continuation of that story. Maybe the summary in 6:7 is not where Luke intended to end the first part. Maybe he intended for us to see the first section extending all the way to the end of Stephen's story at the end of chapter 7. Then our next section could start in chapter 8 with the persecution that propels believers out into Samaria and Judea.

That would make a clean cut between two sections, like laying one board down, end to end with another board. By ending the first section at the end of chapter 7, the Jerusalem Awakening would line up smoothly with the move of the Gospel out into Judea, Samaria, and Galilee that begins in chapter 8.

But that kind of alignment would miss an important aspect of Luke's style that we have already considered. Luke does not fit the boards smoothly together end to end. Luke creates a dovetail that attaches each section into the next one, like a puzzle piece fitting into another. We saw Luke use this method in connecting his Gospel - the Gospel of Luke - to the Book of Acts. The Gospel ended with the commission of Jesus and his ascension into Heaven. Instead of picking up chronologically at the beginning of Acts with a story that comes after that ascension, Luke begins Acts with a second telling of the commission and ascension. It is not a word-for-word repetition. The perspective of commission and ascension in Luke's is written as a conclusion to the Gospel. The report at the beginning of Acts gives us new information that works as an introduction for this book. And the resulting effect is a fitting together of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts through a stylistic overlapping.

Luke uses this same overlapping technique in the transition between each of the six major sections, or major parts of Acts. It doesn't happen just right here in chapter 6. We are going to see this kind of overlapping every time we come to a summary statement. So, the reports following each summary will connect back to the report that preceded the summary, while also propelling us forward into a new section. Stephen is present both before and after the summary statement in Acts 6:7, but we are to take the narrative as two separate reports. This is not one story about Stephen. It's two separate stories that fit Luke's arrangement of two separate major sections of Acts.

Along with this overlapping style, we see in the two stories including Stephen another stylistic technique. Stephen is introduced in the report about the Greek-speaking widows, but the story is not about Stephen. The story is about this threat to the early Church, that has to do with apparent prejudice or overlooking of a certain ethnic group in the community in the distribution of funds. That is what the story is about. Not about Stephen. And this is another one of Luke's repeated techniques. He introduces individuals in reports where they play a secondary role before giving us a report where that person is going to play a primary role. Luke introduced Barnabas in the story about Ananias and Saphira. And we will come back to Barnabas later, where he plays a much greater role in the story of the spread of the Church into Antioch and going and getting Paul. Luke introduced Stephen and Philip in the story about the widows and we return to both later. In this story about Stephen, he is going to introduce a young man, just briefly, named Saul, who is present at the trial and death of Stephen, it's just a secondary reference to him. But then we're going to come back, of course, to Paul later. The effect with this technique is that we already know something about each person when we encounter them in a story where they played a major role. They have already been introduced for us. And recognizing this technique encourages us to view the story of the Greek-speaking widows as separate, though related to, the story of Stephen's arrest and trial. They are two different stories but Stephen, kind of, creates a link between the two.

Both of these stories where Stephen is referenced help balance out the section in which they are contained. So, one story is the end of the first major section, the other story is the beginning of the

second major section. The first section contained eight reports divided into two halves of four reports each. We began with the four positive reports of Jesus' commission and ascension, the replacement of the 12th disciple, the miracle of Pentecost with Peter's speech, and the miracle of healing the lame man with Peter's second speech. This is the setup for the Spirit being poured forth and the witness going out and then the very positive response. The second half of the first section includes another four reports, this time highlighting threats to the new community. We have the external threat of Peter and John's arrest, the internal threat of Ananias' and Saphira's hypocrisy, the external threat of the 12 Disciples' arrest, and the internal threat of overlooking the Greek-speaking widows. So, in this first section we have got two halves with four stories each, and in the second half we have four threats, two external and two internal. And Luke includes the story about the widows to help create this balance, to get a fourth story in this second section and a second threat, internal threat, in the second section. And he is doing it primarily to teach us something about the early Christian movement, but he also uses it to introduce Stephen, kind of as a secondary purpose, before we get to the story where Stephen plays a major role.

The Four Reports of Acts, Part II

The second major section of Acts is the shortest of the six main parts. It only covers four reports in just under four chapters. The section starts with the persecution of Stephen. That's the first report. Then reports on the Gospel spread to Samaria, the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the conversion of Paul.

When we considering the Acts 1:8 pattern of the Gospel moving from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the remotest parts of the earth, that whole pattern is covered in this second section, at least ethnically if not yet geographically. We begin the section with Stephen in Jerusalem, then we move from full Jewish to half-Jewish when we move to Samaria, and then symbolically we move to the Gentile world with the conversion of the Ethiopian. In the big picture view of Acts, the Gospel is not propelled to the remotest parts of the earth until Paul's missionary journeys in the second half of the book. But when we look in closer at these sections, we see smaller waves lapping at the shore of Gentile territory in these earlier sections before the bigger waves of Paul's journeys flood the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

So, we see the reports in this second major section of Acts showing the beginning of geographic and ethnic expansion of the Gospel out of Jerusalem. That is the narrative pattern provided by the four reports. Something more is also going on here.

As Luke reports to us the history of the Gospel's spread, he is also theologically defining and defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The story is not only about how the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem, but also about the nature of the Gospel that did spread. We have already seen the theological development of the Gospel communicated through the narrative of our first major section. Luke does not only tell us that 3000 Jews placed their faith in Jesus on the day of Pentecost. He also gives us Peter's speech about the Gospel. We hear from Peter's own mouth the content of his message. And Luke further refines that core Gospel message through Peter's speech after the healing of the lame man and through both times that Peter defends himself when he's on trial. So we got all this content from Peter about the Gospel. Not just the fact that the Gospel is spreading, but what is the Gospel.

Let's remind ourselves of the core message communicated through the words of Peter in the first section. We are looking at all the words of Peter in kind of drawing up what are the elements of the Gospel that we see him proclaiming. And first, the message preached by Peter each of the four times he spoke to the Jews was fully Christ-centered. Every time Peter opens his mouth, he is talking about Jesus, or he is saying something that's going to give him a segue to be able to talk about Jesus. This is what Peter proclaimed. He proclaimed Jesus. But what did he proclaim about Jesus? Jesus, declared to be both son of man and son of God, is the Messiah. Jesus was rejected and murdered on a cross by you, Jews of Jerusalem through the agency of the Roman government. Jesus was raised from the

dead by God. Jesus was exalted to his right hand. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic promises of salvation found in the Jewish Scriptures. Forgiveness of sin is experienced through faith in Jesus and is expressed through repentance of sin and acknowledgment of Jesus as Savior. Forgiveness is exclusive to Jesus. There is no salvation apart from his name. Those who believe in Jesus are filled with the promised Holy Spirit, who enables believers to live as witnesses for Jesus. This salvation in the name of Jesus is for Jews and is for the blessing of all nations. And Jesus will return to bring about, not only the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, but the restoration of all things. This is the basic Gospel message communicated to us by Luke through the words of Peter.

Along with the words of Peter, Luke's choice of narrative reports further adds to our understanding of this Gospel message and this new Gospel community. Through the report of the replacement of the 12th Apostle and the story of Pentecost, we recognize the Gospel as a fulfillment of the Old Covenant promises and the start of a New Covenant people of God. Something new is going on here. This is the birth of the Church, the birth of the New Covenant people. With the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we recognize that the God of the New Covenant is just as holy as the God of the Old Covenant and expects his New Covenant people to live with sincere commitment to integrity. To treat God and the relationship with God as holy. Furthermore, the story of Ananias and Sapphira together with the story of the Greek-speaking widows and the repeated references about believers contributing out of their wealth to meet one another's needs, all those stories emphasize from the beginning of the Christian movement that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while meeting the most essential spiritual needs of human beings, also recognizes the material needs of human beings. The Gospel is very real and caring about the whole person in time and in space and in community. The Gospel is meant to be lived out, we see, in a community of fellowship, care, commitment to the Word of God, and with a central focus on Jesus Christ.

This is Luke's initial definition and defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this first major section. That's what he has accomplished theologically so far for us. The second major section of Acts will provide further definition and defense as believers encounter new opportunities and new threats. In the four reports of this second major section, we move from Jerusalem to Samaria to a Gentile God-fearer, to a Pharisee who hates Christians, who becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles. David Gooding in his commentary on Acts emphasizes what we learn about the Gospel in each of these four encounters. Stephen's clash with the Sanhedrin teaches us something about the Gospel and orthodox Jewish religion. The spread into Samaria teaches us something about the Gospel and the unorthodox Samaritan religion. The witness to the Ethiopian highlights the Gospel of the Suffering Servant. And the conversion of Paul highlights the Gospel of the Son of God. And we'll have to look at that. We'll take Gooding's perspective and see is that what we see in these four stories.

In our interpretation of the book of Acts, we want to become very familiar with the narrative. We do start there. We are trying to figure out the story, so that we can also observe the theology that Luke intends to communicate through the story, through the narrative. When we are able to hold in our minds the four reports of this section - you know, I've got them up here in my mind; okay, first we have Stephen in Jerusalem interacting with Orthodox Jews, and then we have Phillip and the Apostles interacting in Samaria; you know, how does the Gospel work out there in Samaria when it's a half-way between Judaism and something else, and then it goes to this Ethiopian eunuch, what's the emphasis there, and when it goes to Paul, what's communicated to Paul about who is this Jesus - and so we have these reports in our mind, we can observe the section both from a wide-angle view that takes into account all the stories together, and then we can also zoom in view and consider each story in its details.

At the beginning of this lesson, I asked, "Where in the book of Acts do we read the phrase, 'The God of glory appeared to [blank]?' " Who is that talking about? Who comes to mind? When you're thinking about the book of Acts and the God of glory appearing to somebody, who do you think of? I was hoping that you would think of Paul's conversion at the end of this section. You know, he is Saul. I'm going to call him Paul all the time. But he is Saul the Pharisee to whom Jesus appears to him in

blinding, bright light. And then he's going to become Paul. That is not where this quote comes from. The quote comes from the first line of Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, "The God of glory appeared to Abraham." We have the glory of God appearing at the beginning of this major section when Stephen starts to speak, and then at the end. There is actually a story of the God of glory appearing to Paul.

At the beginning of the section Stephen is reminding us that the God of glory called Abraham out from among the Gentiles to establish a special people who would become a witness to all the nations. At the end of this section the God of glory appears to Paul, calling him out from this special people to go to the Gentiles as a witness.

The people of God are to re-envision how they understand their basic calling. In the Old Covenant, the people of God are defined as a geopolitical entity. They are a nation with a land, with the Temple at the heart of that land. They do go out in missions, the Pharisees. They go and the proclaim Yahweh and living according to Moses. But they primarily envision the nations of the Earth coming to Jerusalem. Worldwide evangelization in the Old Covenant envisions the nations streaming into Zion. God has cast a new vision through the New Covenant. It is a new wineskin. It's not simply an upgrade of the old. We are not just modernizing the old traditions. God has planned some really new stuff here: the new wineskin. Part of that is that people of God are no longer tied to a geography or to a political nation. They are those who believe in Jesus Christ. And so, the Temple is no longer central to who the people of God are. The Law of Moses is fulfilled.

We have seen the core Gospel message proclaimed by Peter in the first section of Acts. And it's all about Jesus and salvation and forgiveness. Jesus is Messiah. Jesus will come back. Jesus is Lord. He is exalted. He is with God. And we have already seen push-back from the establishment. Well, what happens when we take this further? When the implications of the Gospel, not just about Jesus, but the implication of what we believe in Jesus affects our relationship to the Temple and our relationship to the law of Moses? What happens when that that begins to be clearly communicated as the leaders of the Christian movement are communicating their understanding of the Temple, their understanding of the Law of Moses, and they're communicating it to people who see themselves as keepers of Orthodox Jewish religion? That's where this second section starts. So, let's zoom in closer and consider the persecution of Stephen. Before moving out to the unorthodoxy of Samaria, we are first considering the response of first-century Orthodox Judaism to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Persecution of Stephen

So far, the Christian movement is not separate from Judaism. We can't think about it like we do today. The disagreement is not Jews versus Christians. The disagreement is between Orthodox Jews and Messianic Jews. The clash is within Judaism between Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah and want to hold onto their understanding of Jewish worship and life and those Jews who declare Jesus as the Messiah and, therefore, understand worship and life from a new Gospel vision. Can both groups exist in one Jerusalem, one Judaism? And it's not like this hasn't happened before. The Essenes, if you're familiar with them, this community that lived out near the Dead Sea and where we get the Dead Sea scrolls from, they were very committed to the Law of Moses, but they thought that the Temple system is so corrupt that there is no way that they could integrate their understanding of righteousness and holiness with what was going on in Jerusalem. So, they pulled themselves away. So far, we see Christians not doing that. These Christians are attending Temple worship and they are still participating in the festivals of Old Covenant in Jerusalem.

Well, can first-century Orthodox Jews allow for this sect of Christian Jews to go about showing up at Temple worship while still meeting from house to house with their own rabbis, proclaiming salvation in the name of Jesus? And can believers in Jesus continue to practice a New Covenant form of Judaism without pushing for significant change in the religious ritual and life of fellow Jews?

The story of Stephen is a story of New Covenant preaching crashing up against committed Orthodox Judaism. They will make charges against Stephen, and Stephen will speak out against those charges. The interchange teaches us something about the impasse between orthodox religions that do not see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as central to their beliefs, and a practice of faith that does see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as central.

The report of Stephen is long. That's why I am dividing it in two lessons. For the rest of this lesson, we will concentrate on the narrative which includes the initial confrontation at the beginning of the story, in Acts 6:8-15 and then the death of Stephen at the end of the story, in Acts 7:54-60. We will dig into the long middle part, the speech of Stephen, in our next lesson.

The conflict that arises in response to Stephen's ministry is reported in Acts 6:8-15. Here it is.

Arrest 6:8-15

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, *including* both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and *against* God." ¹² And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. ¹³ They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵ And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

Stephen's Exceptional Character

Luke sings Stephen's praises highly. The men chosen to administrate the distribution of funds to the Greek-speaking widows were to be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Stephen was then specifically identified as full of faith and the Holy Spirit. And now here in this story he is acknowledged as full of grace and power. What does that mean? To be full of grace and power? Grace could be a reference to the character of Stephen. When John refers to Jesus as full of grace and truth in John 1:14, he is referencing the name of God in Exodus 34:6, meaning that Jesus is full of lovingkindness, you know, grace is lovingkindness, and truth. It's his character, it's who he is. I do not think that is the intent of Luke's phrase here. Speaking about spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6, Paul writes that we have different gifts - that word is literally, "graces" - according to the grace given us. I believe this sense of grace as gifting is the idea Luke has in mind in this story. This use makes sense when we connect the fact that Stephen, being full of grace and power, is performing great wonders and signs and is speaking with the wisdom of the Spirit.

This sense of the word, "grace," as gifting of the Holy Spirit also works with the other two references of being full of something by creating a third pairing with the Holy Spirit. The other two referenced pairs mention the Holy Spirit directly. The use of grace as gifting implies the work of the Holy Spirit in Stephen. And if we change grace to Spirit and then consider the three pairs, Stephen is full of the Spirit and wisdom, full of the Spirit and faith, and full of grace, or full the Spirit and power. The wisdom, faith, and power Stephen displays in ministry flow from the fact that he is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Wisdom, faith and power are not automatic for a believer who is filled with the Holy Spirit. We know this when we consider the believers described in 1 Corinthians. A young Christian can be filled with the Spirit and exercise some powerful gifting apart from wisdom and faith. Luke's three references help define for us what kind of spirit-filled leadership we should look for or aspire to.

We do aspire to spiritual power. Why do we want spiritual power? That's another question. And that's a question that is actually going to get addressed in the next story in Samaria. There's going to be a guy there who wants spiritual power but not out of the same heart as Stephen. The body of

Christ aspires to be more than that which is humanly possible. We are not only a community of human beings. We are a community of human beings indwelt by the Spirit of God to proclaim the character of God, to love God, and to love our neighbor; to be a witness of who God is as we serve other people, just like our Lord and Savior served us. We imitate his love. So, this is our heart, and we want power to be able to carry out this mission. We want our leadership, our care, our witness, our giving, our speaking, our service, our love to be empowered through a dependence on the Holy Spirit working in and through us. The power of the Spirit in us is able to bring about spiritual fruit we cannot produce on our own. It only comes through abiding in Christ. We are the branches. He is the vine. We want to see that kind of power. Especially the power of love and proclamation of truth that makes and impact deeply in the lives of other people.

In the case of the Apostles and select others, like Stephen, the power of the Holy Spirit is made manifest not only through acts of love and proclamation but through miraculous signs and wonders. And that kind of power is attractive in leadership. But that kind of power alone, does not ensure good, Christian leadership. The gifts of the Spirit were at work in Corinth, but often disconnected from the fruit of the Spirit. There was a lacking of maturity. There was power without love. And Paul described that spiritual power to be a clanging gong, unhelpful, even ultimately damaging to the Christian movement.

Along with the power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen displayed two other attributes. And these are important to understand who he was as a leader. Stephen was also full of faith. The idea of faith includes both dependence on the person of Jesus Christ as well as submission to the Gospel truth about Jesus Christ. Power does not always lead to a mature understanding and proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus. In Corinth, the focus on the outward manifestation of spiritual gifts led to a corruption of the Gospel, a wrong view of morality, a wrong view about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So power from the Holy Spirit doesn't automatically equal a right understanding of the faith. The Gospel was not understood or communicated rightly in that church.

As we will see from his long speech in chapter 7, Stephen's message is not going to be about the Holy Spirit. He does not speak about the power of the gifts. Stephen's message is about Jesus Christ and the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ. The healing power displayed by Stephen is not the salvation he proclaims. He is not calling people to be healed in the power of the Holy Spirit. Those miracles are a witness to his words. He is glad for people to be healed through the power of the Spirit in the name of Jesus because he cares about people. But he also has a right understanding that their spiritual need is to have faith in Jesus and to walk with Jesus. His words line up with the Christ-centered faith Peter proclaimed in the first section of Acts.

In addition to being a man of power and a man of faith, Stephen is recognized as a man of wisdom. That quality is referred to in two different contexts with Stephen. It will take a man of wisdom to help distribute funds to the Greek-speaking widows. There is a need in Christian community for practical wisdom that understands finances and people and logistics, that understands ethnic differences. Stephen has that kind of wisdom. We are also told in this story that Stephen's opponents could not cope with "the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking." Stephen's wisdom also extends to a knowledge of the Word of God and the ability to communicate the Word of God in the defense of the Gospel against hostile opponents. That's not easy. We're going to see in his speech the grasp that Stephen has both on the Word and how to proclaim the Word.

In short, Stephen is an exceptional Christian leader. He displays a rare gifting of power not often seen apart from the Apostles. And with that power he was also full of faith. He understands the Gospel. He walks in dependence on Jesus. And he is full of wisdom, both practical wisdom in the care and service of people, and in proclamation of wisdom in proclaiming the Gospel.

The fact that Stephen performed miraculous wonders and signs raises some interesting questions without giving us much information to go on. We see in Stephen that the Holy Spirit did gift men other than the Apostles to do miracles. In the previous section, wonders and signs were primarily

described as healing miracles, so that seems to be what is in mind here. So, Stephen is performing healing miracles on a level similar to the Apostles.

The Apostles had laid their hands on Stephen, along with the other six chosen to administer funds to the Greek-speaking widows. Later, in the story of the Gospel going to Samaria, Samaritans do not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter goes and lays his hands on them. Did that happen with Stephen? Well, no. Stephen was already described as full of the Holy Spirit as one of the qualifications for the men who would administer the funds. So we do not know if his first miracles happened before he was appointed to his role by the Apostles or later. The text does not say. But in his case, the laying on of hands by the Apostles is not a conference of the Holy Spirit and of power: it is a recognition of authority to perform the task that he has been appointed to do. He is already full of the Spirit.

My opinion is that God empowered early believers, particularly the twelve Apostles, to perform signs and wonders in order to affirm with obvious power the Apostolic message that was eventually recorded for us in the New Testament. We can see here that the empowerment to do miracles was not limited to the Apostles but was extended to other members of the community. I like things to be well-defined with clear limits and boundaries and explanations. But so often, that's not the way God works. Not with his grace and his power. He pours out grace lavishly and abundantly. His gifting spills over. I am reminded of the pouring out of the Spirit on the 70 elders in Numbers chapter 11 and the two men who did not come up to Moses to the tent of meeting but still they were prophesying by the Spirit in the camp, and Joshua was upset about that. You know, that's not the way things ought to work but Moses was like, well, that's the Spirit then let them go. I am also reminded of King Saul, who ultimately would turn out to be a pretty bad king, being filled with the Spirit and dancing and prophesying at the beginning of his call. It may be true that the miraculous gifts were given as signs to confirm the Apostolic message. But at the same time there may be a messy lavishness to the outpouring of the Spirit. In the case of Stephen, we are going to get from him a long witness affirming Jesus Christ as Messiah. So Luke's acknowledgment that he performed signs and wonders show that his message was affirmed with power. The members of the Sanhedrin would have heard report of his miracles. And it would have increased their accountability to the message that he is now proclaiming to them.

Stephen's opponents

We noted in the last lesson that the men chosen to administer charitable gifts to the Greek-speaking widows also all had Greek names, suggesting that they grew up in Greek culture of the Roman Empire: that they grew up as Jews in the Greek culture of the Roman Empire somewhere and not in the Hebrew culture of Jerusalem and Judea. Stephen's call to ministry, as one with a Greek name and so we presume, a Greek culture, Stephen's call to ministry was to the believing Greek-speaking widows, but also in proclamation of the Gospel and in teaching to the believing and non-believing Greek-speaking Jewish community.

He must have become known as a leading witness for the Gospel among Greek speakers. That would explain why members of a Greek-speaking synagogue sought to debate him. The title of this particular synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen, implies that the synagogue was originally founded for Jews who had become slaves to Romans and were later set free. The term, "freedman," could also apply to sons of freed slaves. The title suggests the origin of the synagogue but does not necessarily imply that all the current members were former slaves or sons of former slaves. This synagogue attracted a range of Greek-speaking worshipers including Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa, as well as Asia and Cilicia in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor. Paul himself was from Tarsus in Cilicia. He was one of those Jews who didn't grow up in Jerusalem and Judea, so it is tempting to think he may have attended this synagogue. You know, who knows? But he also refers to himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, probably celebrating the fact that his parents brought him up with strong Hebrew, Jewish culture even if he was living outside of Jerusalem. And this suggests that Paul would have attended a synagogue that was more identified with Hebrew culture, and not one that was a gathering of those outside, who have this Greek culture.

We might think that Greek-speaking Jews would be more open than someone like Paul, who calls himself a Hebrew of Hebrews. But sometimes those brought up in the diaspora outside of the home country, and I guess this is true of Paul, who was brought up outside, can feel like they have more to prove to maintain their cultural identity. I have noticed a couple of examples in my own experience of living in Europe. Albanians in Albania can be open to the idea that a person can be Muslim or Christian and still be Albanian. They have some historical culture of that. There are Christian Albanians living in Albania. Whereas Albanians living outside of Albania see their Albanian identity and their Muslim identity as one and the same. Christian Albanians who preach the Gospel to them are traitors to their own culture and a threat to their Albanian identity. Albanian colleagues of mine who came to Christ in Albania have been physically abused while witnessing to Albanians who grew up in Macedonia. A similar reality seems to exist with Croatians living in Bosnia and Hercegovina, who hold on to Roman Catholicism as core to their identity more fiercely than Croatians who live in Zagreb, the capital.

So, I can imagine these Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem holding very tightly to their own understanding of Judaism. Their hatred of Stephen arises out of a perceived attack on their identity. Whereas a native of Israel might feel more confident in his or her Jewishness. They might not like what Stephen is saying, but it might not strike as deeply. I imagine Greek-speaking Jews feel that if they do not hold on to their Orthodox Jewish religion, then for them what does it even mean to be Jewish? Because they didn't grow up here. And Stephen unsettles them.

And they cannot defeat Stephen in a struggle of words, so they act deceitfully convincing some men to bring charges against him. We cannot help but notice the similarity with the false witnesses who accused Jesus. Even the charge regarding the Temple is the same: he is going to destroy the Temple. So, they brought that charge against Jesus. Now they are bringing that charge against Stephen.

The charges made against Stephen

His opponents claim, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and *against* God." The false witnesses explain Stephen's blasphemy this way,

This man incessantly speaks against this holy place (that's the Temple) and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, (and they mean that negatively; Nazarene, you know, he's not really from Judea or Jerusalem) this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place (the Temple) and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.

They repeat that claim that was supposed to have made by Jesus. And whether true or false, the charges against the Temple and the Law of Moses, they strike at the heart of Orthodox Jewish practice. We are moving past Peter's insistence that Jesus is the Messiah, and we are now considering the implications of Jesus being the Messiah. If I, as a Jew, accept that Jesus is the Christ, what impact does that have on my Jewish religion, specifically on Temple worship and the Law of Moses?

Jewish identity is at stake. And it is not only a question for them. This is an important question for us. How does living under the New Covenant change my obligations to the Old Covenant? So, how do I understand New Covenant and Old Covenant? And then the question is also important for me if I grow up in a certain denomination, or certain Christian faith, or certain Christian religion, and as I grow up, I start to perceive I don't hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or the morality that is being communicated here seems so different from what the Bible teaches. I start to have problems with the orthodox faith that is being communicated to me by my particular denomination, but I might be very tied to that, it's very deeply who I am, it's part of my identity, then what do I do? What do I do with this Gospel of salvation through grace by faith in Jesus Christ and the Christian principles I've learned growing up? This challenge between Bible-based Christianity and maybe some other Christian tradition that I've grown up in is a very real question, similar to these Jews who were being challenged with their tradition. Seems to have supposed to lead right into the Gospel. They should grow in their tradition and then embrace Jesus as the Messiah. But that's not what happened.

Somewhere along the way their tradition veered off and now they have no love for Jesus. They are not embracing him. The majority are not.

In our next lesson we will consider Stephen's response to the charges that were made against him. And so, let me give you some questions to think about before our next lesson. So, before we get to that next lesson, read through Stephen's speech in Acts 7 with these questions in mind.

- (1) Does Stephen respond to the charges that he promotes the destruction of the Temple and changes to the Law of Moses? Those were the charges just given. Does he respond to those in his speech?
- (2) If he does respond to the charges, how does he respond? What is his defense?
- (3) If he does not respond to the charges, then what is the purpose of his speech? What is he doing?

Stephen's speech is masterful. And again, it looks like it's narrative, so much of it, but it's narrative with a point. He is definitely communicating theology. And to get what Stephen is doing requires focusing in on close observation of the text. So, I really encourage you to, at least, read it over a couple of times before our next lesson so you have the text fresh in mind.

After the false charges are announced everyone's eyes turn to see how Stephen's going to respond. And Luke comments that they "saw his face like the face of an angel." That's a tough phrase to interpret. The one thing I am convinced of is that we are not supposed to imagine this kind of Rembrandt kind of painting of a wistful, delicate face, you know, the Renaissance version of Stephen on trial, with this clean-shaven, young man, almost feminine, wistfully, with his head tilted, gazing off into the distance. He only sees spiritual reality. That's not what "angelic" means in the Bible.

"Angelic" could here communicate a composure, a strength of confidence, and intensity. There is a possible connection with Moses. At the end of this narrative Stephen is going to gaze intently into Heaven and he is going to see the glory of God. It's not just Abraham who sees the glory of God and Paul who sees the glory of God in this story, but Stephen is going to see the glory of God. Moses saw the glory of God. His face shone with light when he was exposed to that glory. Literally shone with light. So rather than rejecting the law of Moses as he has been accused of, Stephen's looking like an angel might in some sense be understood that he is a model Moses, a little Moses. You know, he is delivering truth from God to the people of Israel. And Jews believed that God gave the Law to Moses through the mediation of angels. Angels are messengers who communicate God's will. Stephen boldly speaks the Word of God with confidence. And he speaks full of the Holy Spirit with power, and faith, and wisdom. So, I don't know that we're supposed to imagine Stephen as glowing like Moses glowed, because the text doesn't say that, so I don't know that we should put that on it. I mean, it could be that, of course, God could do that. But I can also imagine a sense of the Holy Spirit's power being expressed through Stephen that made this impression on the council. They look at him and there's an impression that he is angel-like, whatever that means.

The narrative continues with the longest speech reported by Luke in the Book of Acts. That's what we'll look at next time. And that speech ends with these harsh words.

⁵² "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; ⁵³ you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen follows Peter in accusing the Jews of Jerusalem, even all these leaders, with the murder of the Messiah, because they did it. That's why he accuses them. This is the Sanhedrin that went to Pilate and lobbied for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And these are the ones who said, "We have no King but Caesar!" That's this group. The first time Peter made this accusation 3000 Jews repented of their crime, of murdering the Messiah, and placed their faith in that Messiah. So, a great response. Both times Peter stood before the Sanhedrin he made the same charge, and he was threatened but he was

released. How will these leaders now respond to this charge made by Stephen on this occasion? Let's read the end of the story in Acts 7:54-60.

Execution 7:54-60

⁵⁴ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they *began* gnashing their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. ⁵⁸ When they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen's accusation brings out a visceral response. Members of the Council are cut to the quick and they gnash their teeth. The text literally says, "cut in their hearts." It is the same verb used in 5:33 when Peter last addressed the Sanhedrin. But Gamaliel does not speak out this time to defuse the situation as he did before. "Gnashing of teeth" is an expression that communicates despair sometimes, but here it communicates rage. When we go through the text of the speech, we will consider why Stephen's words built up an unstoppable rage. We cannot fully explain why the Council or people were held in check before at Peter's words but proved beyond restraint here. We will be able to show that Stephen's words really did contribute to this response. But why did it spill over here, and not before? The best way to understand why they were restrained before but not restrained now is to consider the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John when he said, "My time has not yet come." That is how Jesus explained not being stoned ahead of time. God had a plan for Jesus. Many times he was not put to death. One time he was. Until that time, his opponents were held in check or thwarted by God.

Many times Peter will not be put to death. One time he will be. It is not yet Peter's time. It is Stephen's.

This is one of the tricky things about wisdom. We are told that Stephen is full of wisdom. Were his words wise in this case? When we ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" The majority of the time we would say, "Don't antagonize the men who have the power to kill you." Or we might say, "Don't make the Gospel unnecessarily offensive." Or "Live to fight another day." And that's all wise.

And yet, even though Biblical wisdom has much to say about being prepared and being cautious and Proverbs are full of swallowing rash words, especially when you're standing before a King, even with all that, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord, not the fear of death. There are definitely occasions when young believers speak rashly, or harsh, or imprecisely, unnecessarily antagonizing. But wisdom does not recognize peace as the highest goal. Orthodox religions must yield to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They must be told they're on a wrong track. If they do not, then those religions keep their followers safely bound, nice and comfortable, on a road to Hell, to eternal damnation, separation from God. Accepted ritual, custom, tradition, and behaviors must be held up to and judged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the moral vision of the Bible. In this case, the Orthodox religion of first-century Judaism turned away from the bright glory of God revealed in Jesus. The leaders of the people screwed their eyes shut to that light and held on to the darkness of man-made traditions and rituals.

Stephen spoke wisely. He stood on the rock who is Jesus Christ. And he proclaimed the truth to the so-called shepherds of Israel.

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falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"
Having said this, he fell asleep.

The Jews are not supposed to kill people apart from permission from the Romans. They can get into big trouble for this. The Romans allowed them to practice their Law, except for capital punishment. There was exception made for blasphemy in the Temple, which is one reason why that charge was probably brought against Jesus and brought against Stephen. It's still a risky thing to enact that kind of execution. They don't know if they're going to get in trouble by the Romans. But here there's such an emotional response, it boils over, and it seems like in this case, you don't know what the Romans are going to do, but in this case, they just turn their eyes. So, that fear that might have kept the leaders back before was a real fear, but in this case, it turns out the Romans let it go. In his death, Stephen modeled himself after his Savior. As Jesus gave his spirit into the hands of God, Stephen gave his spirit into the hands of God, as Jesus forgave his executioners, Stephen forgave his executioners. Stephen's desire is not just to be a little Moses. His real desire is to be a little Jesus. He modeled himself after Jesus. The wisdom of Stephen did not involve a desperate hold onto this life. While alive, he lived out his faith in Jesus serving others both through his words and through his actions, caring for widows, caring for people, proclaiming the Gospel to those who needed to hear it. In his death, he went to be with his Lord and Savior.

On this day, a passionate and self-assured young Pharisee named Saul watched over the robes of his countrymen as they stoned Stephen to death. Later, this same young man would be given the new name Paul and he would come to learn for himself the wisdom of Stephen. We will see him write it in a letter to the Philippians. He will learn what Stephen knew. "To live is Christ and to die is gain."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 6:8-15. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Considering also the previous sections, Acts 6:1-7, what kind of man was Stephen? What kind of man was he? Where did he come from? How was he gifted? What character traits stand out?
3. What were Stephen's opponents like?
4. What charges were brought against Stephen?
5. Read Acts 7:54-60. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Does the story of Stephen's execution fit with who he was and who his opponents were?
7. What parallels do you see between Stephen and Jesus in both passages?