

# The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

## Lesson 11: Stephen's Defense and Martyrdom

### Acts 7:1-60

#### Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 7 is Stephen's great defense and martyrdom, and it carries enormous doctrinal weight. Stephen surveys Israel's history to show two truths: that God has never been confined to the temple or the land, and that God's people have a long pattern of resisting the messengers He sends, a pattern that climaxed in their betrayal and murder of the Righteous One. What is at stake includes the fulfillment of the temple in Christ, the danger of resisting the Holy Spirit, the deity and exaltation of Jesus (Stephen prays to Him and sees Him at God's right hand), and the call to faithfulness unto death.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on Stephen's vision of the Son of Man at God's right hand and his dying prayers to the Lord Jesus, which testify to the deity and exaltation of Christ, the believer's hope at death, and Christlike forgiveness of enemies. Teach these clearly, along with the truth that the temple and the old order find their fulfillment in Christ.

Yet aim at the heart. Stephen shows us a life so filled with Christ that he reflects his Lord even in death, forgiving his murderers and entrusting his spirit to Jesus. Help students examine where they resist God, soften their hearts to His word, treasure the exalted Christ, and aspire to the kind of faithfulness that holds firm even unto death.

#### Question 1

##### Student Question:

*Stephen traced God's work through Abraham in Mesopotamia, Joseph in Egypt, and Moses in the wilderness, showing that God was present with His people far from the holy land or any temple (vv. 2-36). What point was Stephen making about God's presence, and why did it matter so much to his accusers?*

#### Commentary and Teaching Notes

Stephen's tour through history is not a random recital; it builds a careful argument. At every stage, God was powerfully present with His people outside the holy land and apart from any temple. He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia before he ever reached the promised land. He was with Joseph in Egypt, even in prison. He met Moses at a burning bush in the Midianite desert, calling that distant ground holy.

The point is that God is not confined to one place. He is the Most High, the Creator of heaven and earth, present wherever His people are. The temple, precious as it was, never contained God; it was a gift pointing beyond itself.

This mattered intensely to Stephen's accusers because they had made the temple an idol. They had come to treat the building itself as their security and identity, as though God were bound to it and to them. Stephen's history lesson gently but firmly dismantled that idolatry.

Help students see the enduring truth. God cannot be boxed into a building, a ritual, or a place. He is everywhere present, and He meets His people wherever they are. This both humbles our pride and comforts us, for there is nowhere we can go from His presence (Psalm 139:7-10).

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- God's presence with His people apart from the temple or the land
- God as the Most High, not confined to any place (Acts 7:48-50)
- The temple as a gift pointing beyond itself, never containing God
- The danger of making sacred places into idols
- God's omnipresence as both humbling and comforting (Psalm 139:7-10)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What point was Stephen making by showing God at work outside the holy land?
- Why did this threaten his accusers so deeply?
- How do people still try to confine God to certain places or forms today?

### **Question 2**

#### **Student Question:**

*Stephen's accusers had made the temple itself their security, as though God were bound to a building (vv. 47-50). Do you ever confine God to certain places or times, church on Sunday, a particular setting, while living the rest of life as though He were absent? How might you grow more aware of His presence everywhere?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The accusers' error has a subtle echo in our own lives. We can compartmentalize God, associating Him with church buildings, Sunday services, and religious moments, while functioning the rest of the week as though He were far away.

Invite honest reflection. Do I treat God as present in worship but absent at work, in my home, in my private moments? Does my sense of His nearness switch on and off with the setting? This compartmentalizing diminishes God and impoverishes our walk.

The truth is that God is fully present everywhere, at all times. He is with us in the workplace, the kitchen, the car, the hospital, the difficult conversation. The whole of life is lived before His face, and He desires fellowship with us in all of it.

Encourage students to cultivate awareness of God's constant presence, through brief prayers throughout the day, through remembering He is near in ordinary moments, through inviting Him into the whole of life. We do not visit God at church; we walk with Him everywhere, for in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The danger of compartmentalizing God to certain places and times
- God's full presence in all of life
- The whole of life lived before God's face
- Cultivating awareness of God's constant presence (Acts 17:28)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Do you tend to confine God to certain places or times?
- Where do you most live as though God were absent?
- How could you grow more aware of His presence throughout the week?

### **Question 3**

#### **Student Question:**

*Stephen showed that God's people had repeatedly rejected the messengers He sent, from Joseph to Moses to the prophets, culminating in their betrayal of the Righteous One (vv. 9, 35, 51-52). What does this recurring pattern reveal about the human heart, and why is it sobering for every generation?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Stephen exposes a tragic pattern woven through Israel's history. The brothers rejected Joseph and sold him into slavery. The people rejected Moses, the very deliverer God sent. They persecuted and killed the prophets who pointed forward to the Messiah. And finally they betrayed and murdered the Righteous One Himself. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? Stephen asks (v. 52).

This pattern reveals something sobering about the human heart: its deep resistance to God and His messengers. People did not reject these messengers because they were unclear or unfaithful, but because the message confronted their sin and demanded change. The human heart, left to itself, resists the God who calls it to account.

This is not merely an indictment of one nation long ago. The same resistance lives in every human heart, including ours. We too are tempted to reject God's word when it confronts us, to silence the voices that call us to repentance, to prefer our own way over God's.

Help students see the warning for every generation. The danger is not only out there in obvious unbelievers but in here, in the subtle ways we resist God's correction. The history Stephen recounts is a mirror, calling us to examine whether we are receiving God's word or resisting it as our fathers did.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The recurring pattern of rejecting God's messengers (vv. 9, 35, 52)
- The human heart's deep resistance to God and His correction
- Rejection rooted in the message confronting sin
- The pattern as a mirror for every generation, not only ancient Israel
- The climax of rejection in the murder of the Righteous One

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What does the pattern of rejecting God's messengers reveal about the human heart?
- Why do people resist messengers who confront their sin?
- How is this pattern a mirror for us, not just ancient Israel?

### **Question 4**

#### **Student Question:**

*Stephen called his hearers stiff-necked, resisting the very God they claimed to serve (v. 51). Where in your own life have you been stiff-necked, resisting God's clear word or correction in some area? What would it take to soften your heart and yield?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The word stiff-necked pictures a stubborn animal that refuses to be led, locking its neck against the gentle pull of its master. It is a vivid image of resistance to God, and it applies not only to Stephen's accusers but to all of us in our stubborn moments.

Invite honest self-examination. Where am I stiff-necked right now? Is there a clear command of God I keep sidestepping, a correction I keep resisting, a conviction I keep silencing, an area where I have dug in my heels against what I know God is saying?

Resisting God is rarely dramatic; it is usually quiet and persistent, a steady refusal to yield in one particular area while remaining outwardly religious in all the rest. We can be devout in general and stiff-necked in particular.

Encourage students that softening the heart begins with honesty and surrender. It means naming the area of resistance, confessing it, and yielding to God's clear word, trusting that His way is good. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). The tender, yielded heart is the one God can lead.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Stubborn resistance to God as a danger for believers
- Resistance as quiet and persistent rather than dramatic
- Softening the heart through honesty and surrender
- God giving grace to the humble and yielded (James 4:6)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where have you been stiff-necked, resisting God's clear word?
- What conviction have you been quietly silencing?
- What would it take to soften your heart and yield in that area?

### **Question 5**

#### **Student Question:**

*Stephen declared that the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, quoting Isaiah that heaven is God's throne and the earth His footstool (vv. 48-50). How does this truth show that the temple was always pointing beyond itself, and how is it fulfilled in Christ?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Stephen reaches the heart of his argument with a quotation from Isaiah 66: heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? The infinite God cannot be housed in any building. The temple, glorious as it was, was never God's container; it was a sign and a shadow.

The temple was always pointing beyond itself to a greater reality. It was the place where God's presence was symbolically located and where sacrifices were offered, but all of this anticipated something, or rather Someone, greater. The shadow was meant to lead to the substance.

That substance is Christ. Jesus is the true temple, the true meeting place of God and humanity. When He said, destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up, He spoke of His body (John 2:19-21). In Christ the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9), and through Him we have access to the Father. The sacrificial system of the temple found its fulfillment in His one perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9-10).

Help students grasp this great transition. The Old Covenant, with its temple and sacrifices, was holy and God-given, but it was preparatory, pointing forward to Christ. To cling to the shadow after the substance has come is to miss the whole purpose. Today God dwells not in a building

but in His people, the church, by His Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21-22). The temple has done its work; Christ has come.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- God not dwelling in houses made by hands (Isaiah 66:1-2; Acts 7:48-50)
- The temple as a sign and shadow pointing beyond itself
- Jesus as the true temple and meeting place of God and man (John 2:19-21)
- The fullness of deity dwelling in Christ (Colossians 2:9)
- The sacrificial system fulfilled in Christ's one sacrifice (Hebrews 9-10)
- God now dwelling in His people by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21-22)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why can no building contain the Most High God?
- How was the temple always pointing beyond itself?
- How is the temple fulfilled in Christ and in His people today?

### **Question 6**

#### **Student Question:**

*The accusers trusted in the temple and its rituals while their hearts were far from God (vv. 48-51). Where might your own worship be more about external forms and routines than about a heart truly engaged with God? How can your worship become more genuine?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The accusers had the forms of worship, the temple, the sacrifices, the rituals, but their hearts were resistant to God. This is a perennial danger: keeping the external machinery of religion running while the heart grows cold and distant.

Invite honest reflection. Has my worship become mostly routine, going through familiar motions while my heart is elsewhere? Do I rely on attending, performing, and participating, while my actual engagement with God has thinned? External forms are good and right, but they can become a shell when the heart withdraws.

God has always sought heart-worship, not mere ritual. He desires truth in the inward being (Psalm 51:6), and Jesus said true worshipers worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). The outward forms are meant to express and feed an inward reality, not to replace it.

Encourage students toward genuine worship. This may mean coming to worship prepared and expectant, engaging the heart and not just the body, confessing where worship has grown cold, and seeking to meet God truly rather than merely perform religion. The forms are a gift; the goal is a heart truly engaged with the living God.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The danger of external religion without heart engagement
- God's desire for truth in the inward being (Psalm 51:6)
- Worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24)
- Outward forms meant to express inward reality

## **Discussion Prompts**

- Where has your worship become more routine than heartfelt?
- What is the difference between performing religion and truly meeting God?
- How can your worship become more genuine this week?

## **Question 7**

### **Student Question:**

*Stephen told the council, you always resist the Holy Spirit (v. 51), linking their rejection of God's word and messengers to resisting the Spirit Himself. What does it mean to resist the Holy Spirit, and why is a hardened, resistant heart so dangerous?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Stephen makes a profound connection: to resist God's word and reject His messengers is to resist the Holy Spirit Himself, for it was the Spirit who spoke through the prophets and who convicts the heart. The accusers' long history of rejecting God's call was, at its root, resistance to the Spirit of God.

To resist the Holy Spirit is to push back against the convicting, calling work of God, to harden the heart against His word, to refuse the repentance He urges. The Spirit convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8), and resisting that conviction is a perilous thing.

Why is a hardened heart so dangerous? Because each act of resistance makes the heart harder and the voice of God easier to ignore. Scripture warns, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (Hebrews 3:7-8, 15). A heart repeatedly hardened can become deaf to God altogether, a terrifying condition.

Help students see the seriousness without despairing. The danger is real: persistent resistance to the Spirit can deaden the conscience and lead to ruin. But the remedy is near: a soft, responsive heart that says yes to God's word and conviction. The Spirit who can be resisted can also be welcomed, and the heart that yields to Him is led into life.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Resisting the Holy Spirit through rejecting God's word and messengers (v. 51)

- The Spirit's convicting work and the danger of resisting it (John 16:8)
- The progressive hardening of a resistant heart (Hebrews 3:7-8, 15)
- The peril of a conscience deadened by persistent resistance
- The remedy of a soft, responsive heart

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What does it mean to resist the Holy Spirit?
- Why does each act of resistance make the heart harder?
- How can we cultivate a soft, responsive heart toward God?

### **Question 8**

#### **Student Question:**

*When Stephen confronted the council with the truth, they were enraged and could not bear it (vv. 54-57). When God's word, through Scripture, a sermon, or a fellow believer, confronts you with something you do not want to hear, how do you tend to respond? What would a humble, teachable response look like?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The council's reaction to Stephen's words was fury: they were enraged, ground their teeth, covered their ears, and rushed at him. They could not bear to hear the truth, so they tried to silence it. Their response exposed their hearts.

Our reactions to confronting truth also expose our hearts. When Scripture, a sermon, or a brother or sister says something we do not want to hear, do we bristle, defend ourselves, get angry, change the subject, or avoid the person? These reactions, though less violent, share the same root as the council's: resistance to a word that confronts us.

A humble, teachable response is very different. It receives confronting truth with openness, even when it stings. It is willing to consider, examine, and accept correction. The wise person loves reproof, while the one who hates correction is foolish (Proverbs 9:8-9; 12:1).

Encourage students to notice their reactions to hard truth as a window into their hearts. The goal is to become people who welcome correction, who would rather be confronted and changed than comfortable and wrong. A teachable heart is a great safeguard, and it is the opposite of the stiff-necked resistance Stephen rebuked.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Reactions to confronting truth as a window into the heart
- Resistance to correction sharing the root of the council's fury
- The wise person loving reproof (Proverbs 9:8-9; 12:1)
- A teachable heart as a safeguard against hardening

## Discussion Prompts

- How do you tend to respond when confronted with truth you do not want to hear?
- What do your reactions to correction reveal about your heart?
- What would a humble, teachable response look like for you?

## Question 9

### Student Question:

*As he was dying, Stephen saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, prayed Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, and asked the Lord to forgive his killers (vv. 55-60). What do Stephen's vision and dying prayers teach about the deity and exaltation of Christ, the believer's hope in death, and Christlike forgiveness?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, rich with truth, so give it ample time. As Stephen dies, three glorious realities shine forth: the exalted Christ, the believer's hope, and Christlike forgiveness.

First, the deity and exaltation of Christ. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, sees heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. This vision confirms that the crucified Jesus is now exalted to the place of highest honor and authority, reigning with the Father. And then Stephen does something deeply significant: he prays directly to Jesus, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. To pray to Jesus, to entrust one's eternal soul to Him, is to treat Him as God. Stephen, a faithful monotheist, prays to the Lord Jesus because Jesus is Lord, fully divine, worthy of worship and prayer (compare John 20:28; Philippians 2:9-11). This is a powerful testimony to the deity of Christ.

Second, the believer's hope in death. Stephen faces death not with terror but with confidence, entrusting his spirit to the Lord Jesus. For the Christian, death is not annihilation or a leap into the dark; it is being received by Christ. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23). Luke even says Stephen fell asleep, a gentle word for the death of one who belongs to Christ and will be raised. The exalted Christ who received Stephen's spirit will receive every faithful believer.

Third, Christlike forgiveness. As the stones fall, Stephen kneels and prays, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. These words echo his Lord's own prayer from the cross, Father, forgive them (Luke 23:34). The grace of Christ had so filled Stephen that he reflected his Savior even in death, loving and forgiving his murderers. This is the fruit of a life truly transformed by Christ.

Finally, this whole scene models faithfulness unto death. Stephen held firm to his witness even when it cost him his life, becoming the church's first martyr. Jesus calls His people to be faithful unto death, promising the crown of life (Revelation 2:10). Stephen shows us what such

faithfulness looks like: filled with the Spirit, fixed on the exalted Christ, hope-filled in the face of death, and forgiving toward enemies. Help students treasure the exalted Christ, rest in the hope of being received by Him, and aspire to the kind of Spirit-filled life that can forgive and stay faithful even unto death.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The exaltation of Christ at the right hand of God (vv. 55-56)
- The deity of Christ shown in Stephen's prayer to the Lord Jesus (v. 59; compare John 20:28)
- Death for the believer as being received by Christ (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23)
- The gentle hope pictured in falling asleep in Christ
- Christlike forgiveness of enemies echoing the cross (Luke 23:34)
- Faithfulness unto death and the crown of life (Revelation 2:10)
- A transformed life reflecting Christ even in death

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How does Stephen's prayer to the Lord Jesus testify to the deity of Christ?
- What does this passage teach about the believer's hope in the face of death?
- How was Stephen able to forgive his murderers, and what does that reveal about Christ's work in him?

### **Question 10**

#### **Student Question:**

*Looking back over Stephen's defense and death, his courage, his confrontation of sin, his vision of the exalted Christ, and his forgiving spirit, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to greater faithfulness, a softer heart, or deeper forgiveness, and what is one step you will take this week.*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Stephen's life and death confront and inspire us: to receive God's word rather than resist it, to treasure the exalted Christ, to face the future without fear, and to forgive even those who wrong us deeply.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to yield in an area where they have been stiff-necked, to worship more genuinely, to soften toward correction, to entrust their fears and even their death to Christ, or to forgive someone who has hurt them.

Keep the focus on the transforming power of Christ. Stephen could die forgiving his enemies because Christ had so filled and changed him. The same Christ can shape us into people of courage, tenderness, and forgiveness.

Close by reminding students that the same exalted Lord whom Stephen saw standing at God's right hand sees them, stands ready to receive them, and is at work transforming them into His likeness, even unto the kind of faithfulness that holds firm to the end.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Personal response to Stephen's example and to the exalted Christ
- Yielding to God rather than resisting Him
- Forgiveness as the fruit of Christ's transforming work
- Faithfulness unto death as the believer's calling

#### **Discussion Prompts**

- What most challenged or moved you in Stephen's defense and death?
- What specific step toward faithfulness, a softer heart, or forgiveness will you take?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you?