

The Book of Acts

Lesson 11: Stephen's Defense and Martyrdom -- Acts 7:1-60

Stephen stands before the council, false witnesses arrayed against him, the charge of blasphemy hanging in the air. The high priest asks, are these things so? And Stephen answers, not with a frantic defense of himself, but with a sweeping journey through the entire story of Israel. From Abraham in Mesopotamia, to Joseph in Egypt, to Moses in the wilderness, to David and Solomon and the temple, Stephen walks his accusers through their own history, and as he does, two themes rise to the surface like a current beneath the words.

The first is that God has never been confined to one land or one building. He appeared to Abraham far from the holy land, was with Joseph in a foreign prison, met Moses at a burning bush in the desert. The Most High, Stephen says, does not dwell in houses made by hands. God is bigger than the temple they idolize. The second theme is harder to hear: at every turning point, God's people resisted the very messengers He sent. They rejected Joseph. They rejected Moses. They persecuted the prophets. And now they have done it again, in the worst way of all.

Then Stephen stops recounting history and turns to face them directly. You stiff-necked people, he says, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. They killed the prophets who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have betrayed and murdered Him. The room erupts in fury. They grind their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazes up and sees heaven opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Look, he cries, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. It is too much. They cover their ears, rush him, drag him out of the city, and begin to stone him. And as the stones fall, Stephen prays two prayers that echo his Lord: Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, and then, on his knees, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. Then he falls asleep. A young man named Saul stands nearby, holding the coats of the killers, watching it all. The first Christian martyr dies forgiving his murderers, and the gospel marches on.

Group Discussion: As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed for God to forgive his killers, echoing the words of Jesus on the cross (v. 60). What does it take for a person to forgive like that in the moment of greatest injustice, and what does Stephen's prayer reveal about the work Christ had done in him?

Personal Reflection: Stephen accused the council of being stiff-necked and always resisting the Holy Spirit (v. 51). Resisting God is not only a sin of unbelievers; believers can resist His word too. Where in your life have you been resisting what God is clearly saying to you?

Read Acts 7:1-60

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 66:1-2, heaven as God's throne and the earth His footstool, no house able to contain Him; Luke 23:34, Jesus praying for His killers, which Stephen echoes; 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, the confidence that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord; Hebrews 3:7-15, the warning not to harden the heart but to hear God's voice today; Revelation 2:10, the call to be faithful unto death and receive the crown of life