

THE VERY FIRST CHRISTIAN SERMONS

Stephen's Saucy Sermon Stirs Sanhedrin Spite

Acts 7

As the church grew, opposition grew alongside it. One prominent disciple, a man named Stephen, became known for his Spirit-given ability to refute those who argued against the faith.

Acts 6:8-10. “Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. **But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.**”

These debate opponents of Stephen then decided to silence him by other means. They paid false witnesses to claim that Stephen had blasphemed God (a tactic that enemies used against Jesus himself). So Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews and the same council that had condemned Jesus to death.

Acts 6:12-14. “So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses¹, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

What they accuse Stephen of saying about Jesus is what it was also claimed that Jesus had himself said (Matthew 26). It’s an effective charge. While they distorted it to suit their ends, this message that Stephen’s opponents ascribed to him was recognizably the same message that Jesus had proclaimed and which Stephen, following his Lord, boldly and joyously proclaimed as well. And for that reason, Stephen really doesn’t have a defense to make. If they will condemn us for speaking the truth, what can we do except double down?

Acts 7:1-2. “Then the high priest asked Stephen, ‘Are these charges true?’
To this he replied...

¹ It’s interesting to note here that the Greek word for “witnesses” (used here) is the same word that would eventually give us the English word “martyr.” That word is μάρτυς, *martys*.

Getting Into It

Before we start reading...

This is something of a different way to start tonight's class, but it'll be helpful to orient us to Stephen's message. Vicar Walsh will randomly assign participants into four break-out groups, each with the same task but a different subject.

BEFORE READING FURTHER IN STEPHEN'S SERMON, write down/type up what your group remembers regarding the life of the Biblical person assigned to your group. Nominate someone in your group who will be willing to share with the whole class the highlights of this Biblical figure's life.

Abraham

Joseph

Moses

David

Read Acts 7:2-50.

Stephen gets deep into Israelite history here. In fact, going back to Abraham means he's going back to the very beginning of Israelite national history, when God's calling of Abraham first separated the Hebrews as a people from all the other nations.

We'll take volunteers as we read this whole section of the sermon. **The first volunteer will read verses 2-8, the second verses 9-19, the third 20-44 (longest section), and the fourth 45-50.**

The common thread in the lives of the four Old Testament figures Stephen focuses on in these verses is that they were all *rejected* or *lived as outsiders* in some way. In what way is that seen in the life of...

- **Abraham as Stephen recounts it?**

- **Joseph as Stephen recounts it?**

- **Moses as Stephen recounts it?**

- **David as Stephen recounts it?** (See 1 Chronicles 22:7-10 for a note on David's "rejection.")

Read Acts 7:51-53.

At last, Stephen finally gets to the point of his history lesson. (*One has to wonder what the members of the Sanhedrin thought he was building up to.*) Stephen has told the story of four of Israel's greatest heroes who were rejected during their lives; now who is the focus of this final part, who was rejected by the Sanhedrin?

Stephen sees in all of these Old Testament stories Jesus and his life foreshadowed. As we read these sermons of Acts, we will also seek to dig into the Old Testament stories and texts cited to see Jesus in them as the apostles did.

- How is Jesus foreshadowed in Abraham's life as a landless wanderer?
- How is Jesus foreshadowed in Joseph's rejection by his brothers?
- How is Jesus foreshadowed in Moses' life?
- How is God's rejection of the Jewish leaders foreshadowed by God's rejection of David as his temple-builder? (*Note the difference in this last one!*)

Read Acts 7:54-60.

Stephen knew what this court had done to Jesus his Lord. He had to have known that this outcome was guaranteed if he stood before them and confessed Jesus to be God and Savior. Yet that is exactly what he did. May we also by God's Spirit have the same faith and confident hope in our Savior under trials and tribulations.

When Stephen looks up into heaven and sees Jesus at God's right hand, Jesus appears to him as "the Son of Man." This title for Jesus emphasizes his humanity.

- Why would Jesus appearing to Stephen in a way that emphasized his humanity comfort Stephen in that moment?
- What does Jesus appearing in heaven at God's side as the "Son of Man" teach us about our ascended Lord Jesus? What comfort is that to us also?

A Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, Son of God, even before you were born you were with your people. You strengthened them and comforted them in trials, and in their lives you left little hints at the life you would lead. As the incarnate Son of Man you suffered in our place and rose to guarantee us a place at God's side in heaven along with you. By your Spirit, give us strength daily to face trials and testing with faith and hope. Lead us to your Word and open our hearts to learn from the examples of your people of long ago. When we stumble, remind us of the faithful love you showed to your people over generations and generations. In your name we pray, Jesus the Righteous One. Amen.

Bonus Material

A basic thrust of Stephen's message is to condemn the Sanhedrin as leaders of the nation for following in the pattern of Old Testament Israel in rejecting God and his promises. **Read Hebrews 3 and 4.** The audience to which this letter was written was being pushed (through persecution) to reject Jesus and turn back to Judaism.

- Notice the way that the writer uses "we-us" language throughout this section.
- What promise from God does the writer remind his readers of? (*Especially 3:11-4:11.*)
- In what ways do you find that the world around you today tries to "harden your heart with sin's deceitfulness"? (*3:13*)
- What does 3:13 tell you about to whom to turn when you are tempted? *Not only to God, but also to...*

Read Psalm 2. This Messianic psalm reminds us that the powers of this world will always be opposed to Christ and his rule.

- As you read this psalm, find where **you** are mentioned. (*See especially verses 6, 8, and 12.*)
- What comfort do you take from this psalm?

Pastor (and former Grace vicar) Ethan Cherney's podcast *Dust and Breath* hasn't gotten to Stephen yet (unless by Wednesday morning that has changed and I don't notice), but his episode on Abel is worthwhile as we think about what it is to die as a martyr. (The episode just before *Abel* is on Cain.)

<https://dustandbreathpod.buzzsprout.com/1071946/3762788-040-abel?play=true>