



• Lesson 9 (Acts 6:8-7:60) •
**Stephen, Full of
Grace and Power**

In the second half of Acts 6 and the whole of Acts 7, Luke documents the remarkable story of one of the seven men we noted in our last study. This is also a turning point in Luke's orderly account. While the Jewish authorities had previously imprisoned and beaten the apostles, Luke has yet to document anyone actually being put to death for "the faith" (Acts 6:7). However, when Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin and boldly proclaims Jesus as the risen Messiah, the rage of this council reaches a boiling point. It is in connection with Stephen's death that Luke will introduce Saul of Tarsus and record the scattering of Christians from Jerusalem, carrying the gospel to other places even as they are scattered.

A Dispute That Leads to a Violent Death

- ⇒ Luke has already described Stephen as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). Now, in Acts 6:8, he is described as "full of grace and power." What do you make of these descriptions? What does Luke want us to understand about Stephen?

The synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9) - synagogues are believed to have grown out of the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the majority of survivors had been taken far from home into captivity. Jews, wishing for a place to worship, established synagogues—places of assembly devoted to the reading of the Law and teaching of the Old Testament commandments. *Freedmen* is a translation of the Greek word *libertinoi*, a transliteration of the Latin *libertini*. It is an expression used to describe emancipated slaves. This particular synagogue probably consisted of Jews from Rome who had been freed from slavery and migrated back to Jerusalem.



⇒ “But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (Acts 6:10). The question is, why?

⇒ What were the charges brought by these men against Stephen (Acts 6:11-14)? What did they hope to gain with these charges? And do the charges sound familiar? Who else had been falsely charged in much the same way?

At first glance, Stephen’s lengthy address, recorded in Acts 7:2-53, might seem to be just a tedious recounting of Israel’s history. “What does he hope to accomplish by this Old Testament review, and what does it have to do with the charges that have been brought against him?” However, a careful examination of the speech demonstrates that this is a highly-reasoned message aimed at refuting the charges and bringing these Jewish authorities face-to-face with their rejection of God’s ultimate plan. “Are these things so?” (Acts 7:1) Let’s do what we can to dissect Stephen’s address.

⇒ First of all, chart below the basic flow and progression of Stephen’s response. What major story lines from the Old Testament does he bring to the forefront of his audience’s minds?

⇒ In your own words, what is Stephen’s point? What connections is he seeking to make between the past and the present?

⇒ Go back and review the charges against Stephen in Acts 6:11-14. What is his implied response to the charge of:

- ◆ “Blasphemous words against Moses and God” -

- ◆ “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law” -

- ◆ “For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us” -

Stephen’s use of “the God of glory” (Acts 7:2) would have had great significance to his Jewish audience. The “glory” of God had been experienced in tangible ways throughout Israel’s history, proving to Abraham’s descendants that the I AM was among them.

- In the cloud that had settled on Mount Sinai (Exo 24:15-18)
- In the cloud that filled the tabernacle (Exo 40:34-35)
- In the cloud that filled the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11)

What does Stephen want his audience to grasp concerning the latest and most profound manifestation of the “glory” of God? Perhaps John 1:14-18 would be helpful.

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

In Acts 7:51-53, Stephen concludes his address with a number of scathing rebukes. In fact, they are rebukes with roots in the Old Testament. Take the time to go back and read these Old Testament passages. What is Stephen saying about the men on the receiving end of these rebukes?

⇒ “You stiff-necked people” (Exo 32:9; 33:3-5; 34:9; Deut 9:6, 13) -

⇒ “Uncircumcised in heart and ears” (Lev 26:40-42; Deut 10:12-16; Jer 4:4; 6:10) -

⇒ And what about the description of Jesus as “the Righteous One” (Isa 53:11)? What is Stephen communicating?

⇒ “You always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). Is it possible for us to do the very same thing today? If so, in what way? How can I be guilty of this serious offense?

Luke records that Stephen, “full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). Jesus at God’s right hand is a common thread throughout the New Testament (Matt 26:64; Mark 16:19; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3). What is unusual is that Jesus is described in Acts 7: 55 as standing, not sitting. A variety of explanations have been suggested:

- Jesus is standing to welcome Stephen into his presence
- Jesus rises to make intercession for Stephen
- Jesus stands to cheer Stephen on to victory
- Jesus stands as a witness against Stephen’s murderers and as an advocate in Stephen’s defense

Common to all of these possibilities is the fact that Jesus is actively watching, involved, and even responding to the needs of his people from his exalted position at the Father’s side.

⇒ **THOUGHT QUESTION:** What difference could remembering that wonderful truth make in your life this week?

A-C-T-S made personal

Based on my study of Acts 6:8-7:60:

A - doration: God is worthy of my **praise** because...

C - aution: this section of Scripture reminded me to **evaluate**...

T - rust: my **faith** in my Savior has grown because...

S - trength: I was particularly **helped** and **encouraged** by...

