***Stephen: The Drama is the Dogma***

**Summer 2021, Acts 6:8-8:3 August 8, 2021**

***“You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears!  
You are just like your fathers: you always resist the Holy Spirit!  
Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?”*Acts 7:51, Stephen’s “defense” before the Sanhedrin**

**We shouldn’t be surprised**

8 *Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great numbers of miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however . . . .*

Acts 6:1

1) About Stephen:

2) About the opposition:

**The heart of Stephen’s response**

*37 “This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’ 38 He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.*

*39 “But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.*

Acts 7

1) From Trueman: The drama reveals the dogma (this is why Stephen reveals the drama)

2) A “true Hebrew” would recognize the “prophet like Moses”, not be focused on the Temple

3) A “false Hebrew” will have a heart looking back to Egypt

**The end of the beginning of Stephen’s story (or HWJD)**

*51 “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”*

*54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”**54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

*57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

*59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

Acts 7

1) Once again, expect “furious”

2) Stephen might not have know Jesus, but he recognizes and follows Jesus’ example in death

**“On that very day”**

*1* *And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.*

*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.*

Acts 8 (but the wise Bible reader will continue on to 8:4!)

1) Some stay, most go the to where the Gospel is received with joy (see Acts 8:8)

2) Sometimes the Farmer gets help in his “scattering” (see the 8:4 to 11:19 connection)

3) Saul begins his life as persecuter, ends his life as prisoner

4) Who now does the preaching? (see 8:4 which is the key passage in Keller’s sermon)



**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has fewer sermons on Acts available than I would hope at [*http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r\_ac.htm*](http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r_ac.htm)

I really appreciate J.C. Ryle’s essay on conversion in Acts: *https://www.monergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle*[*https://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle*](https://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle)

Alexander Maclaren has an especially helpful commentary on Acts available at [*https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html*](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html)

Deffinbaugh has a helpful introduction at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts*](https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts )  
His Acts series is at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts)His sermon on this text is at  
<https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60>

Tim Keller has a wonderful sermon at [*https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47*](https://www.monergism.com/signs-king-%E2%80%93-acts-237-47)and his important [“Hope for the City”](http://storage.cloversites.com/highpeakfellowship/documents/Hope_For_The_City.pdf) sermon on Acts 8 begins with the Stephen story.

I have really appreciated John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984).

Carl Trueman has a good analysis of the world’s opposition in his recent essay “Dogma Drives the Christian Life” at [*https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/dogma-drives-the-christian-life*](https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/08/dogma-drives-the-christian-life)

Carl Trueman’s conclusion in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Crossway, 2020) influenced my thinking on the church. His third point, the importance of proper natural law thinking, is reflected in Kevin DeYoung’s blog at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/gods-good-gift-in-making-us-men-and-women/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/gods-good-gift-in-making-us-men-and-women/)

# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

# Table Description automatically generated

### Alexander Maclaren’s commentary on Acts: at [*https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html*](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8397/pg8397.html)

### FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

'Men … full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.' … 'A man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost….' 'Stephen, full of faith and power.'—ACTS vi. 3, 5, 8.

I have taken the liberty of wrenching these three fragments from their context, because of their remarkable parallelism, which is evidently intended to set us thinking of the connection of the various characteristics which they set forth. The first of them is a description, given by the Apostles, of the sort of man whom they conceived to be fit to look after the very homely matter of stifling the discontent of some members of the Church, who thought that their poor people did not get their fair share of the daily ministration. The second and third of them are parts of the description of the foremost of these seven men, the martyr Stephen. In regard to the first and second of our three fragmentary texts, you will observe that the cause is put first and the effect second. The 'deacons' were to be men 'full of the Holy Ghost,' and that would make them 'full of wisdom.' Stephen was 'full of faith,' and that made him 'full of the Holy Ghost.' Probably the same relation subsists in the third of our texts, of which the true reading is not, as it appears in our Authorised Version, 'full of faith and power,' but as it is given in the Revised Version, 'full of grace and power.' He was filled with grace—by which apparently is here meant the sum of the divine spiritual gifts—and therefore he was full of power. Whether that is so or not, if we link these three passages together, as I have taken the liberty of doing, we get a point of view appropriate for such a day [Footnote: Preached on Whit Sunday.] as this, when all that calls itself Christendom is commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit, and His abiding influence upon the Church. So I simply wish to gather together the principles that come out of these three verses thus concatenated.

I. We may all, if we will, be full of the Holy Spirit.

If there is a God at all, there is nothing more reasonable than to suppose that He can come into direct contact with the spirits of the men whom He has made. And if that Almighty God is not an Almighty indifference, or a pure devil—if He is love—then there is nothing more certain than that, if He can touch and influence men's hearts towards goodness and His own likeness, He most certainly will.

The probability, which all religion recognises, and in often crude forms tries to set forth, and by superstitious acts to secure, is raised to an absolute certainty, if we believe that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Truth, speaks truth to us about this matter. For there is nothing more certain than that the characteristic which distinguishes Him from all other teachers, is to be found not only in the fact that He did something for us on the Cross, as well as taught us by His word; but that in His teaching He puts in the forefront, not the prescriptions of our duty, but the promise of God's gift; and ever says to us, 'Open your hearts and the divine influences will flow in and fill you and fit you for all goodness.' The Spirit of God fills the human spirit, as the mysterious influence which we call life permeates and animates the whole body, or as water lies in a cup.

Consider how that metaphor is caught up, and from a different point of view is confirmed, in regard to the completeness which it predicates, by other metaphors of Scripture. What is the meaning of the Baptist's saying, 'He shall baptise you in the Holy Ghost and fire'? Does that not mean a complete immersion in, and submersion under, the cleansing flood? What is the meaning of the Master's own saying, 'Tarry ye… till ye be clothed with power from on high'? Does not that mean complete investiture of our nakedness with that heavenly-woven robe? Do not all these emblems declare to us the possibility of a human spirit being charged to the limits of its capacity with a divine influence?

We do not here discuss questions which separate good Christian people from one another in regard of this matter. My object now is not to lay down theological propositions, but to urge upon Christian men the acquirement of an experience which is possible for them. And so, without caring to enter by argument on controversial matters, I desire simply to lay emphasis upon the plain implication of that word, '*filled* with the Holy Ghost.' Does it mean less than the complete subjugation of a man's spirit by the influence of God's Spirit brooding upon him, as the prophet laid himself on the dead child, lip to lip, face to face, beating heart to still heart, limb to limb, and so diffused a supernatural life into the dead? That is an emblem of what all you Christian people may have if you like, and if you will adopt the discipline and observe the conditions which God has plainly laid down.

That fulness will be a growing fulness, for our spirits are capable, if not of infinite, at any rate of indefinite, expansion, and there is no limit known to us, and no limit, I suppose, which will ever be reached, so that we can go no further—to the possible growth of a created spirit that is in touch with God, and is having itself enlarged and elevated and ennobled by that contact. The vessel is elastic, the walls of the cup of our spirit, into which the new wine of the divine Spirit is poured, widen out as the draught is poured into them. The more a man possesses and uses of the life of God, the more is he capable of possessing and the more he will receive. So a continuous expansion in capacity, and a continuous increase in the amount of the divine life possessed, are held out as the happy prerogative and possibility of a Christian soul.

This Stephen had but a very small amount of the clear Christian knowledge that you and I have, but he was leagues ahead of most Christian people in regard to this, that he was 'filled with the Holy Spirit.' Brethren, you can have as much of that Spirit as you want. It is my own fault if my Christian life is not what the Christian lives of some of us, I doubt not, are. 'Filled with the Holy Spirit'! rather a little drop in the bottom of the cup, and all the rest gaping emptiness; rather the fire died down, Pentecostal fire though it be, until there is scarcely anything but a heap of black cinders and grey ashes in your grate, and a little sandwich of flickering flame in one corner; rather the rushing mighty wind died down into all but a dead calm, like that which afflicts sailing-ships in the equatorial regions, when the thick air is deadly still, and the empty sails have not strength even to flap upon the masts; rather the 'river of the water of life' that pours 'out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb,' dried up into a driblet.

That is the condition of many Christian people. I say not of which of us. Let each man settle for himself how that may be. At all events here is the possibility, which may be realised with increasing completeness all through a Christian man's life. We may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

II. If we are 'full of faith' we shall be filled with the Spirit.

That is the condition as suggested by one of our texts—'a man full of faith,' and therefore 'of the Holy Ghost.' Now, of course, I believe, as I suppose all people who have made any experience of their own hearts must believe, that before a soul exercises confidence in Jesus Christ, and passes into the household of faith, there have been playing upon it the influences of that divine Comforter whose first mission is to 'convince the world of sin.' But between such operations as these, which I believe are universally diffused, wheresoever the Word of God and the message of salvation are proclaimed—between such operations as these, and those to which I now refer, whereby the divine Spirit not only operates upon, but dwells in, a man's heart, and not only brings conviction to the world of sin, there is a wide gulf fixed; and for all the hallowing, sanctifying, illuminating and strength-giving operations of that divine Spirit, the pre-requisite condition is our trust. Jesus Christ taught us so, in more than one utterance, and His Apostle, in commenting on one of the most remarkable of His sayings on this subject, says, 'This spake He concerning the Holy Spirit which *they that believed* in Him were to receive.' Faith is the condition of receiving that divine influence. But what kind of faith? Well, let us put away theological words. If you do not believe that there is any such influence to be got, you will not get it. If you do not want it, you will not get it. If you do not expect it, you will not get it. If professing to believe it, and to wish it, and to look for it, you are behaving yourself in such a way as to show that you do not really desire it, you will never get it. It is all very well to talk about faith as the condition of receiving that divine Spirit. Do not let us lose ourselves in the word, but try to translate the somewhat threadbare expression, which by reason of its familiarity produces little effect upon some of us, and to turn it into non-theological English. It just comes to this,—if we are simply trusting ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord, and if in that trust we do believe in the possibility of even *our* being filled with the divine Spirit, and if that possibility lights up a leaping flame of desire in our hearts which aspires towards the possession of such a gift, and if belief that our reception of that gift is possible because we trust ourselves to Jesus Christ, and longing that we may receive it, combine to produce the confident expectation that we shall, and if all of these combine to produce conduct which neither quenches nor grieves that divine Guest, then, and only then, shall we indeed be filled with the Spirit.

I know of no other way by which a man can receive God into his heart than by opening his heart for God to come in. I know of no other way by which a man can woo—if I may so say—the Divine Lover to enter into his spirit than by longing that He would come, waiting for His coming, expecting it, and being supremely blessed in the thought that such a union is possible. Faith, that is trust, with its appropriate and necessary sequels of desire and expectation and obedience, is the completing of the electric circuit, and after it the spark is sure to come. It is the opening of the windows, after which sunshine cannot but flood the chamber. It is the stretching out of the hand, and no man that ever, with love and longing, lifted an empty hand to God, dropped it still empty. And no man who, with penitence for his own act, and trust in the divine act, lifted blood-stained and foul hands to God, ever held them up there without the gory patches melting away, and becoming white as snow. Not 'all the perfumes of Araby' can sweeten those bloody hands. Lift them up to God, and they become pure. Whosoever wishes that he may, and believes that he shall, receive from Christ the fulness of the Spirit, will not be disappointed. Brethren, 'Ye have not because ye ask not.' 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,' shall not 'your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?'

III. Lastly, if we are filled with the Spirit we shall be 'full of wisdom, grace, and power.'

The Apostles seemed to think that it was a very important business to look after a handful of poor widows, and see that they had their fair share in the dispensing of the modest charity of the half-pauper Jerusalem church, when they said that for such a purely secular thing as that a man would need to be 'full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.' Surely, something a little less august might have served their turn to qualify men for such a task! 'Wisdom' here, I suppose, means practical sagacity, common sense, the power of picking out an impostor when she came whining for a dole. Very commonplace virtues!—but the Apostles evidently thought that such everyday operations of the understanding as these were not too secular and commonplace to owe their origin to the communication to men of the fulness of the Holy Spirit.

May we not take a lesson from that, that God's great influences, when they come into a man, do not concern themselves only with great intellectual problems and the like, but that they will operate to make him more fit to do the most secular and the most trivial things that can be put into his hand to do? The Holy Ghost had to fill Stephen before he could hand out loaves and money to the widows in Jerusalem.

And do you not think that your day's work, and your business perplexities, come under the same category? Perhaps the best way to secure understanding of what we ought to do, in regard to very small and secular matters, is to keep ourselves very near to God, with the windows of our hearts opened towards Jerusalem, that all the guidance and light that can come from Him may come into us. Depend upon it, unless we have God's guidance in the trivialities of life, ninety per cent., ay! and more, of our lives will be without God's guidance; because trivialities make up life. And unless my Father in heaven can guide me about what we, very mistakenly, call 'secular' things, and what we very vulgarly call trivial things, His guidance is not worth much. The Holy Ghost will give you wisdom for to-morrow, and all its little cares, as well as for the higher things, of which I am not going to speak now, because they do not come within my text.

'Full of grace,'—that is a wide word, as I take it. If, by our faith, we have brought into our hearts that divine influence, the Spirit of God does not come empty-handed, but He communicates to us whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, whatsoever things are fair and honourable, whatsoever things in the eyes of men are worthy to be praised, and by the tongues of men have been called virtue. These things will all be given to us step by step, not without our own diligent co-operation, by that divine Giver. Effort without faith, and faith without effort, are equally incomplete, and the co-operation of the two is that which is blessed by God.

Then the things which are 'gracious,' that is to say, given by His love, and also gracious in the sense of partaking of the celestial beauty which belongs to all virtue, and to all likeness in character to God, these things will give us a strange, supernatural *power* amongst men. The word is employed in my third text, I presume, in its narrow sense of miracle-working power, but we may fairly widen it to something much more than that. Our Lord once said, when He was speaking about the gift of the Holy Spirit, that there were two stages in its operation. In the first, it availed for the refreshment and the satisfying of the desires of the individual; in the second it became, by the ministration of that individual, a source of blessing to others. He said, 'If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink,' and then, immediately, 'He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.' That is to say, whoever lives in touch with God, having that divine Spirit in his heart, will walk amongst men the wielder of an unmistakable power, and will be able to bear witness to God, and move men's hearts, and draw them to goodness and truth. The only power for Christian service is the power that comes from being clothed with God's Spirit. The only power for self-government is the power that comes from being clothed with God's Spirit. The only power which will keep us in the way that leads to life, and will bring us at last to the rest and the reward, is the power that comes from being clothed with God's Spirit.

I am charged to all who hear me now with this message. Here is a gift offered to you. You cannot pare and batter at your own characters so as to make them what will satisfy your own consciences, still less what will satisfy the just judgment of God; but you can put yourself under the moulding influences of Christ's love. Dear brethren, the one hope for dead humanity, the bones very many and very dry, is that from the four winds there should come the breath of God, and breathe in them, and they shall live, 'an exceeding great army.' Forget all else that I have been saying now, if you like, but take these two sentences to your hearts, and do not rest till they express your own personal experience; If I am to be good I must have God's Spirit within me. If I am to have God's Spirit within me, I must be 'full of faith.'

### STEPHEN'S VISION

'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God'—ACTS vii. 56.

I. The vision of the Son of Man, or the abiding manhood of Jesus.

Stephen's Greek name, and his belonging to the Hellenistic part of the Church, make it probable that he had never seen Jesus during His earthly life. If so, how beautiful that he should thus see and recognise Him! How significant, in any case, is it he should instinctively have taken on his lips that name, 'the Son of Man,' to designate Him whom he saw, through the opened heavens, standing on the right hand of God! We remember that in the same Council-chamber and before the same court, Jesus had lashed the rulers into a paroxysm of fury by declaring, 'Hereafter ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power,' and now here is one of His followers, almost, as it were, flinging in their teeth the words which they had called 'blasphemy,' and witnessing that he, at all events, saw their partial fulfilment. They saw only the roof of the chamber, or, if the Council met in the open court of the Temple, the quivering blue of the Syrian sky; but to him the blue was parted, and a brighter light than that of its lustre was flashed upon his inward eye. His words roused them to an even wilder outburst than those of Jesus had set loose, and with yells of fury, and stopping their ears that they might not hear the blasphemy, they flung themselves on him, unresisting, and dragged him to his doom. Their passion is a measure of the preciousness to the Christian consciousness of that which Stephen saw, and said that he saw.

Whatever more the great designation, 'Son of Man,' means, it unmistakably means the embodiment of perfect manhood. Stephen's vision swept into his soul, as on a mighty wave, the fact, overwhelming if it had not been so transcendently strengthening to the sorely bestead prisoner, that the Jesus whom he had trusted unseen, was still the same Jesus that He had been 'in the days of His flesh,' and, with whatever changes, still was 'found in fashion as a man.' He still 'bent on earth a brother's eye.' Whatever He had dropped from Him as He ascended, His manhood had not fallen away, and, whatever changes had taken place in His body so as to fit it for its enthronement in the heavens, all that had knit Him to His humble friends on earth was still His. The bonds that united Him and them had not been snapped by being stretched to span the distance between the Council-chamber and the right hand of God. His sympathy still continued. All that had won their hearts was still in Him, and every tender remembrance of His love and leading was transformed into the assurance of a present possession. He was still the Son of Man.

We are all too apt to feel as if the manhood of Jesus was now but a memory, and, though our creed affirms the contrary, yet our faith has difficulty in realising the full force and blessedness of its affirmations. For the Resurrection and Ascension seem to remove Him from close contact with us, and sometimes we feel as if we stretch out groping fingers into the dark and find no warm human hand to grasp. His exaltation seems to withdraw Him from our brotherhood, and the cloud, though it is a cloud of glory, sometimes seems to hide Him from our sight. The thickening veil of increasing centuries becomes more and more difficult for faith to pierce. What Stephen saw was not for him only but for us all, and its significance becomes more and more precious as we drift further and further away in time from the days of the life of Jesus on earth. More and more do we need to make very visible to ourselves this vision, and to lay on our hearts the strong consolation of gazing steadfastly into heaven and seeing there the Son of Man. So we shall feel that He is all to us that He was to those who companied with Him here. So shall we be more ready to believe that 'this same Jesus shall so come in like manner as He went,' and that till He come, He is knit to us and we to Him, by the bonds of a common manhood.

II. The vision of the Son of Man at the right hand of God, or the glory of the Man Jesus.

We will not discuss curious questions which may be asked in connection with Stephen's vision, such as whether the glorified humanity of Jesus implies His special presence in a locality; but will rather try to grasp its bearings on topics more directly related to more important matters than dim speculations on points concerning which confident affirmations are sure to be wrong. Whether the representation implies locality or not, it is clear that the deepest meaning of the expression 'the right hand of God,' is the energy of His unlimited power, and that, therefore, the deepest meaning of the expression 'to be at His right hand,' is wielding the might of the divine Omnipotence. The vision is but the visible confirmation of Jesus' words, 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth.'

It is to be taken into account that Scripture usually represents the Christ as seated at the right hand of God, and that posture, taken in conjunction with that place, indicates the completion of His work, the majestic calm of His repose, like that creative rest, which did not follow the creative work because the Worker was weary, but because He had fulfilled His ideal. God rested because His work was finished, and was 'very good.' So Jesus sits, because He, too, has finished His work on earth. 'When,' and because 'He had by Himself purged our sins, He sat down on the right hand of God.'

Further, that place at the right hand of God certifies that He is the  
Judge.

Further, it is a blessed vision for His children, as being the sure pledge of their glory.

It is a glorious revelation of the capabilities of sinless human nature.

It makes heaven habitable for us.

'I go to prepare a place for you.' An emigrant does not feel a stranger in new country, if his elder brother has gone before him, and waits to meet him when he lands. The presence of Jesus makes that dim, heavenly state, which is so hard to imagine, and from which we often feel that even its glories repel, or, at least, do not attract, home to those who love Him. To be where He is, and to be as He is—that is heaven.

III. The vision of the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, or the ever-ready help of the glorified Jesus.

The divergence of the vision from the usual representation of the attitude of Jesus is not the least precious of its elements. Stephen saw Him 'standing,' as if He had risen to His feet to see His servant's need and was preparing to come to his help.

What a rush of new strength for victorious endurance would flood Stephen's soul as he beheld his Lord thus, as it were, starting to His feet in eagerness to watch and to succour! He looks down from amid the glory, and His calm repose does not involve passive indifference to His servant's sufferings. Into it comes full knowledge of all that they bear for Him, and His rest is not the negation of activity on their behalf, but its intensest energy. Just as one of the Gospels ends with a twofold picture, which at first sight seems to draw a sad distinction between the Lord 'received up into heaven and set down at the right hand of God,' and His servants left below, who 'went everywhere, preaching the word,' but of which the two halves are fused together by the next words, 'the Lord also working with them,' so Stephen's vision brought together the glorified Lord and His servant, and filled the martyr's soul with the fact that He not only 'worked,' but suffered with those who suffered for His sake.

That vision is a transient revelation of an eternal fact. Jesus knows and shares in all that affects His servants. He stands in the attitude to help, and He wields the power of God. He is, as the prophet puts it, 'the Arm of the Lord,' and the cry, 'Awake, O Arm of the Lord!' is never unanswered. He helps His servants by actually directing the course of Providence for their sakes. He helps by wielding the forces of nature on their behalf. He 'rebukes kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.' He helps by breathing His own life and strength into them. He helps by disclosing to them the vision of Himself. He helps even when, like Stephen, they are apparently left to the murderous hate of their enemies, for what better help could any of His followers get from Him than that He should, as Stephen prayed that He would, receive their spirit, and 'so give His beloved sleep'? Blessed they whose lives are lighted by that Vision, and whose deaths are such a falling on sleep!

THE YOUNG SAUL AND THE AGED PAUL [Footnote: To the young.]

'…the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.'—ACTS vii. 58.

'…Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.'—PHILEMON 9.

A far greater difference than that which was measured by years separated the young Saul from the aged Paul. By years, indeed, the difference was, perhaps, not so great as the words might suggest, for Jewish usage extended the term of youth farther than we do, and began age sooner. No doubt, too, Paul's life had aged him fast, and probably there were not thirty years between the two periods. But the difference between him and himself at the beginning and the end of his career was a gulf; and his life was not evolution, but revolution.

At the beginning you see a brilliant young Pharisee, Gamaliel's promising pupil, advanced above many who were his equals in his own religion, as he says himself; living after its straitest sect, and eager to have the smallest part in what seemed to him the righteous slaying of one of the followers of the blaspheming Nazarene. At the end he was himself one of these followers. He had cast off, as folly, the wisdom which took him so much pains to acquire. He had turned his back upon all the brilliant prospects of distinction which were opening to him. He had broken with countrymen and kindred. And what had he made of it? He had been persecuted, hunted, assailed by every weapon that his old companions could fashion or wield; he is a solitary man, laden with many cares, and accustomed to look perils and death in the face; he is a prisoner, and in a year or two more he will be a martyr. If he were an apostate and a renegade, it was not for what he could get by it.

What made the change? The vision of Jesus Christ. If we think of the transformation on Saul, its causes and its outcome, we shall get lessons which I would fain press upon your hearts now. Do you wonder that I would urge on you just such a life as that of this man as your highest good?

I. I would note, then, first, that faith in Jesus Christ will transform and ennoble any life.

It has been customary of late years, amongst people who do not like miracles, and do not believe in sudden changes of character, to allege that Paul's conversion was but the appearance, on the surface, of an underground process that had been going on ever since he kept the witnesses' clothes. Modern critics know a great deal more about the history of Paul's conversion than Paul did. For to him there was no consciousness of undermining, but the change was instantaneous. He left Jerusalem a bitter persecutor, exceeding mad against the followers of the Nazarene, thinking that Jesus was a blasphemer and an impostor, and His disciples pestilent vermin, to be harried off the face of the earth. He entered Damascus a lowly disciple of that Christ. His conversion was not an underground process that had been silently sapping the foundations of his life; it was an explosion. And what caused it? What was it that came on that day on the Damascus road, amid the blinding sunshine of an Eastern noontide? The vision of Jesus Christ. An overwhelming conviction flooded his soul that He whom he had taken to be an impostor, richly deserving the Cross that He endured, was living in glory, and was revealing Himself to Saul then and there. That truth crumbled his whole past into nothing; and he stood there trembling and astonished, like a man the ruins of whose house have fallen about his ears. He bowed himself to the vision. He surrendered at discretion without a struggle. 'Immediately,' says he, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,' and when he said 'Lord, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' he flung open the gates of the fortress for the Conqueror to come in. The vision of Christ reversed his judgments, transformed his character, revolutionised his life.

That initial impulse operated through all the rest of his career. Hearken to him: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. To me to live is Christ. Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Living or dying, we are the Lord's.' 'We labour that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him.' The transforming agency was the vision of Christ, and the bowing of the man's whole nature before the seen Saviour.

Need I recall to you how noble a life issued from that fountain? I am sure that I need do no more than mention in a word or two the wondrous activity, flashing like a flame of fire from East to West, and everywhere kindling answering flames, the noble self-oblivion, the continual communion with God and the Unseen, and all the other great virtues and nobleness which came from such sources as these. I need only, I am sure, remind you of them, and draw this lesson, that the secret of a transforming and noble life is to be found in faith in Jesus Christ. The vision that changed Paul is as available for you and me. For it is all a mistake to suppose that the essence of it is the miraculous appearance that flashed upon the Apostle's eyes. He speaks of it himself, in one of his letters, in other language, when he says, 'It pleased God to reveal His Son *in* me.' And that revelation in all its fulness, in all its sweetness, in all its transforming and ennobling power, is offered to every one of us. For the eye of faith is no less gifted with the power of direct and certain vision—yea! is even more gifted with this—than is the eye of sense. 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.' Christ is revealed to each one of us as really, as veritably, and the revelation may become as strong an impulse and motive in our lives as ever it was to the Apostle on the Damascus road. What is wanted is not revelation, but the bowed will—not the heavenly vision, but obedience to the vision. I suppose that most of you think that you believe all that about Jesus Christ, which transformed Gamaliel's pupil into Christ's disciple. And what has it done for you? In many cases, nothing. Be sure of this, dear young friends, that the shortest way to a life adorned with all grace, with all nobility, fragrant with all goodness, and permanent as that life which does the will of God must clearly be, is this, to bow before the seen Christ, seen in His word, and speaking to your hearts, and to take His yoke and carry His burden. Then you will build upon what will stand, and make your days noble and your lives stable. If you build on anything else, the structure will come down with a crash some day, and bury you in its ruins. Surely it is better to learn the worthlessness of a non-Christian life, in the light of His merciful face, when there is yet time to change our course, than to see it by the fierce light of the great White Throne set for judgment. We must each of us learn it here or there.

II. Faith in Christ will make a joyful life, whatever its circumstances.

I have said that, judged by the standard of the Exchange, or by any of the standards which men usually apply to success in life, this life of the Apostle was a failure. We know, without my dwelling more largely upon it, what he gave up. We know what, to outward appearance, he gained by his Christianity. You remember, perhaps, how he himself speaks about the external aspects of his life in one place, where he says 'Even unto this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place, and labour, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, and as the offscouring of all things unto this day.'

That was one side of it. Was that all? This man had that within him which enabled him to triumph over all trials. There is nothing more remarkable about him than the undaunted courage, the unimpaired elasticity of spirit, the buoyancy of gladness, which bore him high upon the waves of the troubled sea in which he had to swim. If ever there was a man that had a bright light burning within him, in the deepest darkness, it was that little weather-beaten Jew, whose 'bodily presence was weak, and his speech contemptible.' And what was it that made him master of circumstances, and enabled him to keep sunshine in his heart when winter bound all the world around him? What made this bird sing in a darkened cage? One thing—the continual presence, consciously with Him by faith, of that Christ who had revolutionised his life, and who continued to bless and to gladden it. I have quoted his description of his external condition. Let me quote two or three words that indicate how he took all that sea of troubles and of sorrows that poured its waves and its billows over him. 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.' 'As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation aboundeth also by Christ.' 'For which cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.' 'Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' 'I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content.' 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things.'

There is the secret of blessedness, my friends; there is the fountain of perpetual joy. Cling to Christ, set His will on the throne of your hearts, give the reins of your life and of your character into His keeping, and nothing 'that is at enmity with joy' can either 'abolish or destroy' the calm blessedness of your spirits.

You will have much to suffer; you will have something to give up. Your life may look, to men whose tastes have been vulgarised by the glaring brightnesses of this vulgar world, but grey and sombre, but it will have in it the calm abiding blessedness which is more than joy, and is diviner and more precious than the tumultuous transports of gratified sense or successful ambition. Christ is peace, and He gives His peace to us; and then He gives a joy which does not break but enhances peace. We are all tempted to look for our gladness in creatures, each of which satisfies but a part of our desire. But no man can be truly blessed who has to find many contributories to make up his blessedness. That which makes us rich must be, not a multitude of precious stones, howsoever precious they may be, but one Pearl of great price; the one Christ who is our only joy. And He says to us that He gives us Himself, if we behold Him and bow to Him, that His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full, while all other gladnesses are partial and transitory. Faith in Christ makes life blessed. The writer of Ecclesiastes asked the question which the world has been asking ever since: 'Who knoweth what is good for a man in this life, all the days of this vain life which he passeth as a shadow?' You young people are asking, 'Who will show us any good?' Here is the answer—Faith in Christ and obedience to Him; that is the good part which no man taketh from us. Dear young friend, have you made it yours?

III. Faith in Christ produces a life which bears being looked back upon.

In a later Epistle than that from which my second text is taken, we get one of the most lovely pictures that was ever drawn, albeit it is unconsciously drawn, of a calm old age, very near the gate of death; and looking back with a quiet heart over all the path of life. I am not going to preach to you, dear friends, in the flush of your early youth, a gospel which is only to be recommended because it is good to die by, but it will do even you, at the beginning, no harm to realise for a moment that the end will come, and that retrospect will take the place in your lives which hope and anticipation fill now. And I ask you what you expect to feel and say then?

What did Paul say? 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.' He was not self-righteous; but it is possible to have lived a life which, as the world begins to fade, vindicates itself as having been absolutely right in its main trend, and to feel that the dawning light of Eternity confirms the choice that we made. And I pray you to ask yourselves, 'Is my life of that sort?' How much of it would bear the scrutiny which will have to come, and which in Paul's case was so quiet and calm? He had had a stormy day, many a thundercloud had darkened the sky, many a tempest had swept across the plain; but now, as the evening draws on, the whole West is filled with a calm amber light, and all across the plain, right away to the grey East, he sees that he has been led by, and has been willing to walk in, the right way to the 'City of habitation.' Would that be your experience if the last moment came now?

There will be, for the best of us, much sense of failure and shortcoming when we look back on our lives. But whilst some of us will have to say, 'I have played the fool and erred exceedingly,' it is possible for each of us to lay himself down in peace and sleep, awaiting a glorious rising again and a crown of righteousness.

Dear young friends, it is for you to choose whether your past, when you summon it up before you, will look like a wasted wilderness, or like a garden of the Lord. And though, as I have said, there will always be much sense of failure and shortcoming, yet that need not disturb the calm retrospect; for whilst memory sees the sins, faith can grasp the Saviour, and quietly take leave of life, saying, 'I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day.'

So I press upon you all this one truth, that faith in Jesus Christ will transform, will ennoble, will make joyous your lives whilst you live, and will give you a quiet heart in the retrospect when you come to die. Begin right, dear young friends. You will never find it so easy to take any decisive step, and most of all this chiefest step, as you do to-day. You will get lean and less flexible as you get older. You will get set in your ways. Habits will twine their tendrils round you, and hinder your free movement. The truth of the Gospel will become commonplace by familiarity. Associations and companions will have more and more power over you; and you will be stiffened as an old tree-trunk is stiffened. You cannot count on to-morrow; be wise to-day. Begin this year aright. Why should you not now see the Christ and welcome Him? I pray that every one of us may behold Him and fall before Him with the cry, 'Lord! what wilt Thou have me to do?'

### THE DEATH OF THE MASTER AND THE DEATH OF THE SERVANT

'And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And, when he had said this, he fell asleep.'—ACTS vii. 59, 60.

This is the only narrative in the New Testament of a Christian martyrdom or death. As a rule, Scripture is supremely indifferent to what becomes of the people with whom it is for a time concerned. As long as the man is the organ of the divine Spirit he is somewhat; as soon as that ceases to speak through him he drops into insignificance. So this same Acts of the Apostles—if I may so say—kills off James the brother of John in a parenthesis; and his is the only other martyrdom that it concerns itself even so much as to mention.

Why, then, this exceptional detail about the martyrdom of Stephen? For two reasons: because it is the first of a series, and the Acts of the Apostles always dilates upon the first of each set of things which it describes, and condenses about the others. But more especially, I think, because if we come to look at the story, it is not so much an account of Stephen's death as of Christ's power in Stephen's death. And the theme of this book is not the acts of the Apostles, but the acts of the risen Lord, in and for His Church.

There is no doubt but that this narrative is modelled upon the story of our Lord's Crucifixion, and the two incidents, in their similarities and in their differences, throw a flood of light upon one another.

I shall therefore look at our subject now with constant reference to that other greater death upon which it is based. It is to be observed that the two sayings on the lips of the proto-martyr Stephen are recorded for us in their original form on the lips of Christ, in *Luke's* Gospel, which makes a still further link of connection between the two narratives.

So, then, my purpose now is merely to take this incident as it lies before us, to trace in it the analogies and the differences between the death of the Master and the death of the servant, and to draw from it some thoughts as to what it is possible for a Christian's death to become, when Christ's presence is felt in it.

I. Consider, in general terms, this death as the last act of imitation to Christ.

The resemblance between our Lord's last moments and Stephen's has been thought to have been the work of the narrator, and, consequently, to cast some suspicion upon the veracity of the narrative. I accept the correspondence, I believe it was intentional, but I shift the intention from the writer to the actor, and I ask why it should not have been that the dying martyr should consciously, and of set purpose, have made his death conformable to his Master's death? Why should not the dying martyr have sought to put himself (as the legend tells one of the other Apostles in outward form sought to do) in Christ's attitude, and to die as He died?

Remember, that in all probability Stephen died on Calvary. It was the ordinary place of execution, and, as many of you may know, recent investigations have led many to conclude that a little rounded knoll outside the city wall—not a 'green hill,' but still 'outside a city wall,' and which still bears a lingering tradition of connection with Him—was probably the site of that stupendous event. It was the place of stoning, or of public execution, and there in all probability, on the very ground where Christ's Cross was fixed, His first martyr saw 'the heavens opened and Christ standing on the right hand of God.' If these were the associations of the place, what more natural, and even if they were not, what more natural, than that the martyr's death should be shaped after his Lord's?

Is it not one of the great blessings, in some sense the greatest of the blessings, which we owe to the Gospel, that in that awful solitude where no other example is of any use to us, His pattern may still gleam before us? Is it not something to feel that as life reaches its highest, most poignant and exquisite delight and beauty in the measure in which it is made an imitation of Jesus, so for each of us death may lose its most poignant and exquisite sting and sorrow, and become something almost sweet, if it be shaped after the pattern and by the power of His? We travel over a lonely waste at last. All clasped hands are unclasped; and we set out on the solitary, though it be 'the common, road into the great darkness.' But, blessed be His Name! 'the Breaker is gone up before us,' and across the waste there are footprints that we

'Seeing, may take heart again.'

The very climax and apex of the Christian imitation of Christ may be that we shall bear the image of His death, and be like Him then.

Is it not a strange thing that generations of martyrs have gone to the stake with their hearts calm and their spirits made constant by the remembrance of that Calvary where Jesus died with more of trembling reluctance, shrinking, and apparent bewildered unmanning than many of the weakest of His followers? Is it not a strange thing that the death which has thus been the source of composure, and strength, and heroism to thousands, and has lost none of its power of being so to-day, was the death of a Man who shrank from the bitter cup, and that cried in that mysterious darkness, 'My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

Dear brethren, unless with one explanation of the reason for His shrinking and agony, Christ's death is less heroic than that of some other martyrs, who yet drew all their courage from Him.

How come there to be in Him, at one moment, calmness unmoved, and heroic self-oblivion, and at the next, agony, and all but despair? I know only one explanation, 'The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' And when He died, shrinking and trembling, and feeling bewildered and forsaken, it was your sins and mine that weighed Him down. The servant whose death was conformed to his Master's had none of these experiences because he was only a martyr.

The Lord had them, because He was the Sacrifice for the whole world.

II. We have here, next, a Christian's death as being the voluntary entrusting of the spirit to Christ.

'They stoned Stephen.' Now, our ordinary English idea of the manner of the Jewish punishment of stoning, is a very inadequate and mistaken one. It did not consist merely in a miscellaneous rabble throwing stones at the criminal, but there was a solemn and appointed method of execution which is preserved for us in detail in the Rabbinical books. And from it we gather that the *modus operandi* was this. The blasphemer was taken to a certain precipitous rock, the height of which was prescribed as being equal to that of two men. The witnesses by whose testimony he had been condemned had to cast him over, and if he survived the fall it was their task to roll upon him a great stone, of which the weight is prescribed in the Talmud as being as much as two men could lift. If he lived after that, then others took part in the punishment.

Now, at some point in that ghastly tragedy, probably, we may suppose as they were hurling him over the rock, the martyr lifts his voice in this prayer of our text.

As they were stoning him he 'called upon'—not *God*, as our Authorised Version has supplied the wanting word, but, as is obvious from the context and from the remembrance of the vision, and from the language of the following supplication, 'called upon *Jesus*, saying, Lord Jesus! receive my spirit.'

I do not dwell at any length upon the fact that here we have a distinct instance of prayer to Jesus Christ, a distinct recognition, in the early days of His Church, of the highest conceptions of His person and nature, so as that a dying man turns to Him, and commits his soul into His hands. Passing this by, I ask you to think of the resemblance, and the difference, between this intrusting of the spirit by Stephen to his Lord, and the committing of His spirit to the Father by His dying Son. Christ on the Cross speaks to God; Stephen, on Calvary, speaks, as I suppose, to Jesus Christ. Christ, on the Cross, says, 'I commit.' Stephen says, 'Receive,' or rather, 'Take.' The one phrase carries in it something of the notion that our Lord died not because He must, but because He would; that He was active in His death; that He chose to summon death to do its work upon Him; that He 'yielded up His spirit,' as one of the Evangelists has it, pregnantly and significantly. But Stephen says, 'Take!' as knowing that it must be his Lord's power that should draw his spirit out of the coil of horror around him. So the one dying word has strangely compacted in it authority and submission; and the other dying word is the word of a simple waiting servant. The Christ says, 'I commit.' 'I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again.' Stephen says, 'Take my spirit,' as longing to be away from the weariness and the sorrow and the pain and all the hell of hatred that was seething and boiling round about him, but yet knowing that he had to wait the Master's will.

So from the language I gather large truths, truths which unquestionably were not present to the mind of the dying man, but are all the more conspicuous because they were unconsciously expressed by him, as to the resemblance and the difference between the death of the martyr, done to death by cruel hands, and the death of the atoning Sacrifice who gave Himself up to die for our sins.

Here we have, in this dying cry, the recognition of Christ as the Lord of life and death. Here we have the voluntary and submissive surrender of the spirit to Him. So, in a very real sense, the martyr's death becomes a sacrifice, and he too dies not merely because he must, but he accepts the necessity, and finds blessedness in it. We need not be passive in death; we need not, when it comes to our turn to die, cling desperately to the last vanishing skirts of life. We may yield up our being, and pour it out as a libation; as the Apostle has it, 'If I be offered as a drink-offering upon the sacrifice of your faith, I joy and rejoice.' Oh! brethren, to die *like* Christ, to die yielding oneself to Him!

And then in these words there is further contained the thought coming gleaming out like a flash of light into some murky landscape—of passing into perennial union with Him. 'Take my spirit,' says the dying man; 'that is all I want. I see Thee standing at the right hand. For what hast Thou started to Thy feet, from the eternal repose of Thy session at the right hand of God the Father Almighty? To help and succour me. And dost Thou succour me when Thou dost let these cruel hands cast me from the rock and bruise me with heavy stones? Yes, Thou dost. For the highest form of Thy help is to take my spirit, and to let me be with Thee.'

Christ delivers His servant from death when He leads the servant into and through death. Brothers, can you look forward thus, and trust yourselves, living or dying, to that Master who is near us amidst the coil of human troubles and sorrows, and sweetly draws our spirits, as a mother her child to her bosom, into His own arms when He sends us death? Is that what it will be to you?

III. Then, still further, there are other words here which remind us of the final triumph of an all-forbearing charity.

Stephen had been cast from the rock, had been struck with the heavy stone. Bruised and wounded by it, he strangely survives, strangely somehow or other struggles to his knees even though desperately wounded, and, gathering all his powers together at the impulse of an undying love, prays his last words and cries, 'Lord Jesus! Lay not this sin to their charge!'

It is an echo, as I have been saying, of other words, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' An echo, and yet an independent tone! The one cries 'Father!' the other invokes the 'Lord.' The one says, 'They know not what they do'; the other never thinks of reading men's motives, of apportioning their criminality, of discovering the secrets of their hearts. It was fitting that the Christ, before whom all these blind instruments of a mighty design stood patent and naked to their deepest depths, should say, 'They know not what they do.' It would have been unfitting that the servant, who knew no more of his fellows' heart than could be guessed from their actions, should have offered such a plea in his prayer for their forgiveness.

In the very humiliation of the Cross, Christ speaks as knowing the hidden depths of men's souls, and therefore fitted to be their Judge, and now His servant's prayer is addressed to Him as actually being so.

Somehow or other, within a very few years of the time when our Lord dies, the Church has come to the distinctest recognition of *His* Divinity to whom the martyr prays; to the distinctest recognition of *Him* as the Lord of life and death whom the martyr asks to take his spirit, and to the clearest perception of the fact that He is the Judge of the whole earth by whose acquittal men shall be acquitted, and by whose condemnation they shall be condemned.

Stephen knew that Christ was the Judge. He knew that in two minutes he would be standing at Christ's judgment bar. His prayer was not, 'Lay not my sins to my charge,' but 'Lay not this sin to their charge.' Why did he not ask forgiveness for himself? Why was he not thinking about the judgment that he was going to meet so soon? He had done all that long ago. He had no fear about that judgment for himself, and so when the last hour struck, he was at leisure of heart and mind to pray for his persecutors, and to think of his Judge without a tremor. Are you? If you were as near the edge as Stephen was, would it be wise for you to be interceding for other people's forgiveness? The answer to that question is the answer to this other one,—have you sought your pardon already, and got it at the hands of Jesus Christ?

IV. One word is all that I need say about the last point of analogy and contrast here—the serene passage into rest: 'When he had said this he fell asleep.'

The New Testament scarcely ever speaks of a Christian's death as death but as sleep, and with other similar phrases. But that expression, familiar and all but universal as it is in the Epistles, in reference to the death of believers, is never in a single instance employed in reference to the death of Jesus Christ. He did die that you and I may live. His death was death indeed—He endured not merely the physical fact, but that which is its sting, the consciousness of sin. And He died that the sting might be blunted, and all its poison exhausted upon Him. So the ugly thing is sleeked and smoothed; and the foul form changes into the sweet semblance of a sleep-bringing angel. Death is gone. The physical fact remains, but all the misery of it, the essential bitterness and the poison of it is all sucked out of it, and it is turned into 'he fell asleep,' as a tired child on its mother's lap, as a weary man after long toil.

  'Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
  Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.'

Death is but sleep now, because Christ has died, and that sleep is restful, conscious, perfect life.

Look at these two pictures, the agony of the one, the calm triumph of the other, and see that the martyr's falling asleep was possible because the Christ had died before. And do you commit the keeping of your souls to Him now, by true faith; and then, living you may have Him with you, and, dying, a vision of His presence bending down to succour and to save, and when you are dead, a life of rest conjoined with intensest activity. To sleep in Jesus is to awake in His likeness, and to be satisfied.

### SEED SCATTERED AND TAKING ROOT

'And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. 3. As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. 4. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. 5. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. 6. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. 8. And there was great joy in that city, 9. But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: 10. To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. 11. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. 12. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13. Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done. 14. Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: 15. Who, when they were come down prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: 16 (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) 17. Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.'—ACTS viii. 1-17.

The note of time in verse 1 is probably to be rendered as in the Revised Version, 'on that day.' The appetite for blood roused by Stephen's martyrdom at once sought for further victims. Thus far the persecutors had been the rulers, and the persecuted the Church's leaders; but now the populace are the hunters, and the whole Church the prey. The change marks an epoch. Luke does not care to make much of the persecution, which is important to him chiefly for its bearing on the spread of the Church's message. It helped to diffuse the Gospel, and that is why he tells of it. But before proceeding to narrate how it did so, he gives us a picture of things as they stood at the beginning of the assault.

Three points are noted: the flight of the Church except the Apostles, the funeral of Stephen, and Saul's eager search for the disciples. We need not press 'all,' as if it were to be taken with mathematical accuracy. Some others besides the Apostles may have remained, but the community was broken up. They fled, as Christ had bid them do, if persecuted in one city. Brave faithfulness goes with prudent self-preservation, and a valuable 'part of valour is discretion.' But the disciples who fled were not necessarily less courageous than the Apostles who remained, nor were the latter less prudent than the brethren who fled. For *noblesse oblige*; high position demands high virtues, and the officers should be the last to leave a wreck. The Apostles, no doubt, felt it right to hold together, and preserve a centre to which the others might return when the storm had blown itself out.

In remarkable contrast with the scattering Church are the 'devout men' who reverently buried the martyr. They were not disciples, but probably Hellenistic Jews (Acts ii. 5); perhaps from the synagogue whose members had disputed with Stephen and had dragged him to the council. His words or death may have touched them, as many a time the martyr's fire has lighted others to the martyr's faith. Stephen was like Jesus in his burial by non-disciples, as he had been in his death.

The eager zeal of the young Pharisee brought new severity into the persecution, in his hunting out his victims in their homes, and in his including women among his prisoners. There is nothing so cruel as so-called religious zeal. So Luke lifts the curtain for a moment, and in that glimpse of the whirling tumult of the city we see the three classes, of the brave and prudent disciples, ready to flee or to stand and suffer as duty called; the good men who shrunk from complicity with a bloodthirsty mob, and were stirred to sympathy with his victims; and the zealot, who with headlong rage hated his brother for the love of God. But the curtain drops, and Luke turns to his true theme. He picks up the threads again in verse 4, telling of the dispersal of the disciples, with the significant addition of their occupation when scattered,—'preaching the word.'

The violent hand of the persecutor acted as the scattering hand of the sower. It flung the seeds broadcast, and wherever they fell they sprouted. These fugitives were not officials, nor were they commissioned by the Apostles to preach. Without any special command or position, they followed the instincts of believing hearts, and, as they carried their faith with them, they spoke of it wherever they found themselves. A Christian will be impelled to speak of Christ if his personal hold of Him is vital. He should need no ecclesiastical authorisation for that. It is riot every believer's duty to get into a pulpit, but it *is* his duty to 'preach Christ.' The scattering of the disciples was meant by men to put out the fire, but, by Christ, to spread it. A volcanic explosion flings burning matter over a wide area.

Luke takes up one of the lines of expansion, in his narrative of Philip's doings in Samaria, which he puts first because Jesus had indicated Samaria first among the regions beyond Judaea (i. 8). Philip's name comes second in the list of deacons (vi. 5), probably in anticipation of his work in Samaria. How unlike the forecast by the Apostles was the actual course of things! They had destined the seven for purely 'secular' work, and regarded preaching the word as their own special engagement. But Stephen saw and proclaimed more clearly than they did the passing away of Temple and ritual; and Philip, on his own initiative, and apparently quite unconscious of the great stride forward that he was taking, was the first to carry the gospel torch into the regions beyond. The Church made Philip a 'deacon,' but Christ made him an 'evangelist'; and an evangelist he continued, long after he had ceased to be a deacon in Jerusalem (xxi. 8).

Observe, too, that, as soon as Stephen is taken away, Philip rises up to take his place. The noble army of witnesses never wants recruits. Its Captain sends men to the front in unbroken succession, and they are willing to occupy posts of danger because He bids them. Probably Philip fled to Samaria for convenience' sake, but, being there, he probably recalled Christ's instructions in chapter i. 8, repealing His prohibition in Matthew x. 5. What a different world it would be, if it was true of Christians now that they 'went down into the city of So-and-So and proclaimed Christ'! Many run to and fro, but some of them leave their Christianity at home, or lock it up safely in their travelling trunks.

Jerusalem had just expelled the disciples, and would fain have crushed the Gospel; despised Samaria received it with joy. 'A foolish nation' was setting Israel an example (Deut. xxxii. 21; Rom. x. 19). The Samaritan woman had a more spiritual conception of the Messiah than the run of Jews had, and her countrymen seem to have been ready to receive the word. Is not the faith of our mission converts often a rebuke to us?

But the Gospel met new foes as well as new friends on the new soil. Simon the sorcerer, probably a Jew or a Samaritan, would have been impossible on Jewish ground, but was a characteristic product of that age in the other parts of the Roman empire. Just as, to-day, people who are weary of Christianity are playing with Buddhism, it was fashionable in that day of unrest to trifle with Eastern magic-mongers; and, of course, demand created supply, and where there was a crowd of willing dupes, there soon came to be a crop of profit-seeking deceivers. Very characteristically, the dupes claimed more for the deceiver than he did for himself. He probably could perform some simple chemical experiments and conjuring tricks, and had a store of what sounded to ignorant people profound teaching about deep mysteries, and gave forth enigmatical utterances about his own greatness. An accomplished charlatan will leave much to be inferred from nods and hints, and his admirers will generally spin even more out of them than he meant. So the Samaritans bettered Simon's 'some great one' into 'that power of God which is called great,' and saw in him some kind of emanation of divinity.

The quack is great till the true teacher comes, and then he dwindles. Simon had a bitter pill to swallow when he saw this new man stealing his audience, and doing things which he, with his sorceries, knew that he only pretended to do. Luke points very clearly to the likeness and difference between Simon and Philip by using the same word ('gave heed') in regard to the Samaritan's attitude to both, while in reference to Philip it was 'the things spoken by' him, and in reference to Simon it was himself to which they attended. The one preached Christ, the other himself; the one 'amazed' with 'sorceries,' the other brought good tidings and hid himself, and his message called, not for stupid, open-mouthed astonishment, but for belief and obedience to the name of Jesus. The whole difference between the religion of Jesus and the superstitions which the world calls religions, is involved in the significant contrast, so inartificially drawn.

'Simon also himself believed.' Probably there was in his action a good deal of swimming with the stream, in the hope of being able to divert it; but, also, he may have been all the more struck by Philip's miracles, because he knew a real one, by reason of his experience of sham ones. At any rate, neither Philip nor Luke drew a distinction between his belief and that of the Samaritans; and, as in their cases, his baptism followed on his profession of belief. But he seems not to have got beyond the point of wondering at the miracles, as it is emphatically said that he did even after his baptism. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but was more interested in studying Philip to find out how he did the miracles than in listening to his teaching. Such an imperfect belief had no transforming power, and left him the same man as before, as was soon miserably manifest.

The news of Philip's great step forward reached the Apostles by some unrecorded means. It is not stated that Philip reported his action, as if to superiors whose authorisation was necessary. More probably the information filtered through other channels. At all events, sending a deputation was natural, and needs not to be regarded as either a sign of suspicion or an act necessary in order to supplement imperfections inherent in the fact that Philip was not an Apostle. The latter meaning has been read—not to say forced—into the incident; but Luke's language does not support it. It was not because they thought that the Samaritans were not admissible to the full privileges of Christians without Apostolic acts, but because they 'heard that Samaria had received the word,' that the Apostles sent Peter and John.

The Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Ghost—that is, the special gifts, such as those of Pentecost. That fact proves that baptism is not necessarily and inseparably connected with the gift of the Spirit; and chapter x. 44, 47, proves that the Spirit may be given before baptism. As little does this incident prove that the imposition of Apostolic hands was necessary in order to the impartation of the Spirit. Luke, at any rate, did not think so; for he tells how Ananias' hand laid on the blind Saul conveyed the gift to him. The laying on of hands is a natural, eloquent symbol, but it was no prerogative of the Apostles (Acts x. 17; 1 Tim. iv. 14).

The Apostles came down to Samaria to rejoice in the work which their Lord had commanded, and which had been begun without their help, to welcome the new brethren, to give them further instruction, and to knit closely the bonds of unity between the new converts and the earlier ones. But that they came to bestow spiritual gifts which, without them, could not have been imparted, is imported into, not deduced from, the simple narrative of Luke.

# 12. The First Martyr -or- Taking God for Granite (Acts 7:1-60)

*I confess that this is a play on words, but it is one that represents an important truth. The law of Moses was written on stone. The temple, too, was made of stone. In one sense, the Jews had made the law of Moses (as they interpreted it) and the temple an idol. Their “god” was a god of their making, rather than the One who made all things (*[*Acts 4:24*](javascript:%7b%7d)*). They made stone (granite?) their “god.” Thus, they took God for granite, or perhaps we should say they took granite for their god.*

### Introduction[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P11_692)

In [1 Kings 21:1-24](javascript:%7b%7d), we read how Ahab, prompted by his wife Jezebel, wrongly acquired a vineyard that belonged to Naboth. This vineyard was adjacent to Ahab’s palace in Jezreel, and so Ahab wanted it for a garden. Ahab offered a fair price. He was willing to pay cash or to trade for another piece of land. The problem was that the law forbade Naboth to sell his property, because the law required that possession must remain within his family. This way the land would remain evenly distributed among God’s people. Naboth was committed to obey the law, and thus he declined what otherwise would have been a generous offer.

Ahab was greatly depressed because he couldn’t have his garden. But Jezebel had a plan. If the law prohibited Ahab from having this property, she would twist the law in order to acquire it. In Ahab’s name, she privately instructed the elders and leaders of Naboth’s city to proclaim a fast and to set Naboth at the head of the people. The fast would give the appearance that something was wrong, and that the leaders were seeking God’s guidance to make it right. Following Jezebel’s orders, they seated two men by Naboth who would bear false testimony against him, accusing him of blasphemy against God and the king. Naboth, it would appear, was the source of Israel’s troubles, so they took him out and executed him. The murder of Naboth and the seizure of his property was carried out in the guise of upholding righteousness. What a horrible evil.

The prophet Elijah confronted Ahab and pronounced God’s judgment on him for this great evil. At the end of this account, we are given God’s assessment of Ahab and Jezebel:

25 (There had never been anyone like Ahab, who was firmly committed to doing evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. 26 He was so wicked he worshiped the disgusting idols, just like the Amorites whom the Lord had driven out from before the Israelites.) ([1 Kings 21:25-26](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine)[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P16_3248)

These were some of Israel’s darkest days. Ahab and Jezebel hated Elijah the prophet and considered him their enemy. They sought to put him to death. It is easy to see why God’s judgment was not only deserved, but imminent.

Now consider the text before us in the New Testament Book of Acts – [Acts 7:1-60](javascript:%7b%7d). We are studying the trial of Stephen, his “sermon,” and his consequent execution by stoning. Stephen was a spiritual and highly respected man in the church at Jerusalem. He had just been chosen as a deacon, and the standard he met was unusually high:

3 But carefully select from among you, brothers, **seven men who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom**, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 The proposal pleased the entire group, **so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit**, with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch ([Acts 6:3-5](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

As we noted in our previous lesson, God’s hand was upon Stephen in a very special way so that he, like the twelve apostles, was performing many great works. In addition, his preaching was so powerful that no one was able to successfully refute it:

8 Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9 But some men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, as well as some from Cilicia and the province of Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. 10 Yet they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke ([Acts 6:8-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, and thus his ministry appears to have been primarily in the Greek-speaking synagogues. Since no one could successfully oppose him, his adversaries (better, the adversaries of the gospel) gave up their debate and took a different approach:

11 Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 They incited the people, the elders, and the experts in the law; then they approached Stephen, seized him, and brought him before the council. 13 They brought forward false witnesses who said, “This man does not stop saying things against this holy place and the law. 14 For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us” ([Acts 6:11-14](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

I could not help but see the parallels between the death of Stephen in our text and the death of Naboth in [1 Kings 21](javascript:%7b%7d). Both Stephen and Naboth were godly men who were determined to live according to God’s Word. Since no lawful means could be found to sway them, their adversaries stooped to accusing both of blasphemy. In both cases, false witnesses were employed, and the leaders were incited to execute the righteous, as though they were wicked.

The difference between these two events is also significant. The incident with Ahab, Jezebel, and Naboth took place in the northern kingdom of Israel. We are not surprised to read of such evil in Israel. But now, in our text in the Book of Acts, we are in Judah; more significantly, we are in Jerusalem. And those who orchestrate false testimony and the resulting execution of Stephen would appear to be devout Jews who are “defending the faith.” The incident in [1 Kings 21](javascript:%7b%7d) describes one of the lowest points in Israel’s history. The incident in our text would indicate that things have never been worse in Jerusalem. No wonder judgment is imminent. It is this very judgment of which Jesus had spoken.[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P26_7821) And now He continues to speak of this judgment through Stephen.

This is one of the most powerful sermons in all of the Bible. It not only speaks to the Jews of Stephen’s day, but to each one of us as well. Let us listen well to these words, and ask the Spirit of God to illuminate our hearts and minds so that we may learn why they have been preserved for us.

### The Charges

In the beginning, it was charged that Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against Moses and also against God ([Acts 6:11](javascript:%7b%7d)). This developed into the more specific accusation that he never ceased to speak against “**this holy place and the law**” ([Acts 6:13](javascript:%7b%7d)). This is further explained as teaching that “**Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us**” ([Acts 6:14](javascript:%7b%7d)). In other words, Stephen is accused of teaching what Jesus taught. And what Jesus taught, so far as Stephen’s accusers claimed, was that He would destroy the temple (with Jerusalem) and the customs which the Jews attributed to Moses (even though they were man-made traditions that violated the law of Moses).[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P30_8959)

As we noted in our previous lesson, there was an element of truth in these accusations. Jesus did teach that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and the temple along with it:

41 Now when Jesus approached and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, “If you had only known on this day, even you, the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and surround you and close in on you from every side. 44 They will demolish you – you and your children within your walls – and they will not leave within you one stone on top of another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” ([Luke 19:41-44](javascript:%7b%7d); see also [Luke 13:34-35](javascript:%7b%7d); [Matthew 23:37](javascript:%7b%7d)—24:2; [John 2:19-22](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The misrepresentation here is that Jesus posed an imminent threat to the well-being of Jerusalem and the temple. In His first earthly appearance, Jesus had not come to judge but to save. Jesus came as the promised Messiah, to bear the sins of His people, and thus to spare them from divine judgment, and to institute times of blessing. As Peter put it,

19 “Therefore repent and turn back so that your sins may be wiped out, 20 so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and so that he may send the Messiah appointed for you – that is, Jesus. 21 This one heaven must receive until the time all things are restored, which God declared from times long ago through his holy prophets” ([Acts 3:19-21](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Jesus came to turn people from their sins and thus to spare them from the horror of divine judgment. Judgment came upon Jerusalem because God’s people rejected their King (see [Luke 19:41-44](javascript:%7b%7d) and [Acts 3:19-21](javascript:%7b%7d) above). God would bring judgment upon His people because of their sin, because they would not receive the One who came to bear their judgment.

The second accusation against Stephen was that he continued to preach, as Jesus did, that the customs Moses gave them were to be set aside. It was true that “their customs,” which were wrongly attributed to Moses, would be set aside. But Jesus made it clear that His coming was to fulfill, not to abolish:

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish these things but to fulfill them. 18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place. 19 So anyone who breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever obeys them and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” ([Matthew 5:17-19](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The Old Covenant was to be set aside and replaced by the New Covenant, but this was what God had already revealed through the Old Testament prophets (see [Jeremiah 31:31-34](javascript:%7b%7d); [Ezekiel 36:22-29](javascript:%7b%7d)). Nevertheless, Stephen’s opponents succeeded in convincing many of the Jewish people and their leaders that Stephen was a traitor, who needed to die. The Sanhedrin is summoned for the third trial thus far in Acts, and when it convened, the high priest asked Stephen, “**Are these things true?**” ([Acts 7:1](javascript:%7b%7d))

### Stephen’s “Defense”

As one can quickly sense, Stephen’s sermon is hardly a defense as we know it. Stephen is not seeking to prove his innocence, but rather he is strongly indicting his accusers for their guilt. Stephen is the prosecutor, so to speak, and is not acting as an attorney for his own defense. Stephen dies because he proves his case.

#### The Abrahamic Covenant [Acts 7:2-8](javascript:%7b%7d)

2 So he replied, “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our forefather Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran, 3 and said to him, ‘Go out from your country and from your relatives, and come to the land I will show you.’ 4 Then he went out from the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God made him move to this country where you now live. 5 He did not give any of it to him for an inheritance, not even a foot of ground, yet God promised to give it to him as his possession, and to his descendants after him, even though Abraham as yet had no child. 6 But God spoke as follows: ‘Your descendants will be foreigners in a foreign country, whose citizens will enslave them and mistreat them for four hundred years. 7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ said God, ‘and after these things they will come out of there and worship me in this place.’ 8 Then God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision, and so he became the father of Isaac and circumcised him when he was eight days old, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs” ([Acts 7:2-8](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Initially, I looked at Stephen’s sermon as merely chronological in its structure. Thus, I was not surprised that he began with the call of Abram. After all, God’s purposes for Israel begin in the Book of Genesis with the call of Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant. This is followed by Israel’s bondage in Egypt, the exodus, their time in the wilderness, and eventually their possession of the Promised Land. Now, as I look more carefully and seek to follow Stephen’s argument, I see that there is much more to this first paragraph which deals with Abraham, but more about this later in our message.

Here, as elsewhere in this sermon, Stephen does more than recite history, precisely as recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures. In some cases, Stephen actually adds information to what we find in the Old Testament. Let me illustrate this. From the account of the call of Abraham in the Book of Genesis, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that this call occurred while Abram was in Haran:

31 Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot (the son of Haran), and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and with them he set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. **When they came to Haran, they settled there**. 32 The lifetime of Terah was 205 years, and **he died in Haran. 1 Now the Lord said****[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P46_15034) to Abram, “Go out from your country, your relatives, and your father’s household to the land that I will show you.** 2 Then I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, so that you will exemplify divine blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, but the one who treats you lightly I must curse, and all the families of the earth will bless one another by your name.” 4 So Abram left, just as the Lord had told him to do, and Lot went with him. (Now Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.) 5 **And Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they left for the land of Canaan**. They entered the land of Canaan ([Genesis 11:31](javascript:%7b%7d)—12:5, emphasis mine).

I somehow had the impression from the Genesis account that Abram’s father, Terah, took the initiative in leaving Mesopotamia and settling in Haran. And yet Stephen tells us that **“the God of glory appeared to . . . . Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran”** ([Acts 7:2](javascript:%7b%7d)). I do not doubt that there may have been more than one call, one in Mesopotamia and another in Haran. But it is a different, an additional, piece of information, and Stephen makes something of it here.

The Jews of Stephen’s day seem to have concluded that the temple in Jerusalem was the only dwelling place of God. To speak against “**this holy place**,” then, was to blaspheme. It was as though God would no longer be present with men if Jerusalem and the temple were to be destroyed. Stephen will destroy this myth by reminding his accusers that God, the God of glory, appeared to His people at a number of other places besides “this holy place.” To begin with, He appeared to Abram in Mesopotamia. Next, as Genesis informs us, God spoke to Abram at Haran. Once again God instructed Abram to leave his family and his homeland and to journey to a land not yet revealed. The inference is clear here – and is clearly stated in [Genesis 12:1-3](javascript:%7b%7d) – that God would bless him in this place to which He would lead him. The point is that God’s presence and His power are not limited to, and dare not be restricted to, one place.

When Abram arrived in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, he did not own so much as a foot of it, but God promised that He would give it to him as his possession, and to his descendants after him. Think of it. When God made this promise with Abram he had **no son** and **no soil** ([Acts 7:5](javascript:%7b%7d)). Stephen then turns to a subsequent promise of God to Abram, a promise recorded in [Genesis 15](javascript:%7b%7d) (after Abram had believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness – [Genesis 15:6](javascript:%7b%7d)). God informed Abram that his descendants would live in an unidentified foreign country, where they would be mistreated for 400 years, and after this He would bring them out to worship “**in this place**” ([Acts 7:6-7](javascript:%7b%7d)). We know, as Stephen did, that this place of bondage was Egypt. We would have to conclude that God continued to care for His people, even during the days of their captivity. God’s purposes and promises were not limited to the borders of the Promised Land.[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P50_18384)

I have come to see verse 8 as the key verse in this paragraph:

Then God gave Abraham **the covenant of circumcision**, and so he became the father of Isaac and **circumcised him** when he was eight days old, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs ([Acts 7:8](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

We need to remember how much the Jews of Jesus’ day made of Moses, the law, and circumcision. This remains a problem in the Book of Acts[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P54_19443) and elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in the Book of Galatians. The Mosaic Covenant was uppermost in their minds, and thus we see their emphasis on law-keeping and on preserving the customs of Moses. Stephen is not nearly as interested in the Mosaic Covenant as he is the Abrahamic Covenant. That is because the Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled in the New Covenant, not in the Mosaic Covenant.[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P55_19883)

Circumcision, which was so important to the Jews, was linked more to the Mosaic Covenant than to the Abrahamic Covenant.[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P57_20209) But Stephen is quite clear in our text, linking the “Covenant of Circumcision” to the Abrahamic Covenant. It is thus the Abrahamic Covenant which is dominant in the remainder of Stephen’s sermon. That is because this covenant promises God’s blessings by faith, and not by works, and it promises God’s blessings to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

If Stephen were to have stopped here, we would have the core of his argument. His opponents are upset because Stephen, like Jesus, emphasized the Abrahamic Covenant over the Mosaic Covenant. This is because salvation comes through the Abrahamic Covenant, not through the Mosaic Covenant.[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P59_20883) It all began with Abraham, Stephen is saying, and the covenant God made with Abraham. Circumcision is intertwined with that covenant. This is the primary covenant, and it is the basis for Israel’s hope, and that of the Gentiles as well. Obsession over the Mosaic Covenant misses the point, forgetting how it all began with the Abrahamic Covenant.

By the way, Stephen’s argument in these verses differs very little from what we read in the Book of Hebrews:

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, and he went out without understanding where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as a foreigner in the promised land as though it were a foreign country, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were fellow heirs of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was too old, he received the ability to procreate, because he regarded the one who had given the promise to be trustworthy. 12 So in fact children were fathered by one man – and this one as good as dead – like the number of stars in the sky and like the innumerable grains of sand on the seashore. 13 These all died in faith without receiving the things promised, but they saw them in the distance and welcomed them and acknowledged that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. 14 For those who speak in such a way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 In fact, if they had been thinking of the land that they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they aspire to a better land, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them ([Hebrews 11:8-16](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Wherever Abraham was (in Mesopotamia, Haran, Canaan, Egypt, or Gerar), God was with him. Even when Abraham lived in the Promised Land, it was as a stranger and a pilgrim. Only hundreds of years after Abraham’s death did his descendants possess the land. Abraham’s blessings never came in his lifetime, but it didn’t matter because “**the city**” he looked for was a heavenly city, not an earthly one. Abraham was saved and blessed by faith, not by works, on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant, and not on the basis of the Mosaic Covenant. Stephen’s opponents are jealously seeking to preserve a covenant that has been superseded. As Stephen’s argument unfolds, watch how this core argument is expanded.

#### God’s People in Egypt [Acts 7:9-15](javascript:%7b%7d)

9 The patriarchs, because they were jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his troubles, and granted him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. 11 Then a famine occurred throughout Egypt and Canaan, causing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. 12 So when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there the first time. 13 On their second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers again, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. 14 So Joseph sent a message and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come, seventy-five people in all. 15 So Jacob went down to Egypt and died there, along with our ancestors, 16 and their bones were later moved to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a certain sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem ([Acts 7:9-15](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Israel’s sojourn in Egypt comes as no surprise to us since God had already informed Abraham of this ([Genesis 15:12-21](javascript:%7b%7d); [Acts 7:6-7](javascript:%7b%7d)). But now Stephen calls attention to how this came to pass. On the surface, it may appear to be “the luck of the draw” (accidental), but in reality it is the work of the sovereign hand of God. Note how Stephen expressed it: The patriarchs were jealous of Joseph and thus they sold him into Egypt – **But God was with him**. His point is that God was with Joseph ***in Egypt***. He did not have to be in Canaan to be blessed or cared for by God. He not only survived in Egypt, he thrived there, being elevated to the second highest position in the land. Then a famine occurred (an “act of God”?), which providentially brought all of Joseph’s family to Egypt, where they were divinely preserved. While they were persecuted later on, they nevertheless prospered, becoming a great nation. When he died, Jacob’s bones were buried in Canaan, in the plot of land Abraham had purchased. They were yet to possess the land God had promised.

#### Home at Last, Hearts Still in Egypt [Acts 7:17-43](javascript:%7b%7d)

17 “But as the time drew near for God to fulfill the promise he had declared to Abraham, the people increased greatly in number in Egypt, 18 until another king who did not know about Joseph ruled over Egypt. 19 This was the one who exploited our people and was cruel to our ancestors, forcing them to abandon their infants so they would die. 20 At that time Moses was born, and he was beautiful to God. For three months he was brought up in his father’s house, 21 and when he had been abandoned, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. 22 So Moses was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds. 23 But when he was about forty years old, it entered his mind to visit his fellow countrymen the Israelites. 24 When he saw one of them being hurt unfairly, Moses came to his defense and avenged the person who was mistreated by striking down the Egyptian. 25 He thought his own people would understand that God was delivering them through him, but they did not understand. 26 The next day Moses saw two men fighting, and tried to make peace between them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why are you hurting one another?’ 27 But the man who was unfairly hurting his neighbor pushed Moses aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us? 28 You don’t want to kill me the way you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?’ 29 When the man said this, Moses fled and became a foreigner in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. 30 “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the desert of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. 31 When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and when he approached to investigate, there came the voice of the Lord, 32 ‘I am the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look more closely. 33 But the Lord said to him, ‘Take the sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 34 I have certainly seen the suffering of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Now come, I will send you to Egypt.’ 35 This same Moses they had rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge?’ God sent as both ruler and deliverer through the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36 This man led them out, performing wonders and miraculous signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers.’ 38 This is the man who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors, and he received living oracles to give to you. 39 Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him, but pushed him aside and turned back to Egypt in their hearts, 40 saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go in front of us, for this Moses, who led us out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him!’ 41 At that time they made an idol in the form of a calf, brought a sacrifice to the idol, and began rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘It was not to me that you offered slain animals and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, house of Israel? 43 But you took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rephan, the images you made to worship, but I will deport you beyond Babylon’” ([Acts 7:17-43](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We will certainly not be able to deal extensively with this text, but remember that this is what the Sanhedrin heard, and they certainly got the point. In other words, the text speaks for itself and doesn’t need a lot of explaining.

Notice how this section begins with another reference to the Abrahamic Covenant, which Stephen first mentioned ([Acts 7:2-8](javascript:%7b%7d)) as the foundation for his sermon:

“But as the **time drew near for God to fulfill the promise he had declared to Abraham**, the people increased greatly in number in Egypt” ([Acts 7:17](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

The events described in this section are introduced as being a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. The exodus of Israel out of Egypt is viewed by Stephen in the light of the Abrahamic Covenant more than in terms of the Mosaic Covenant.

It was during the time when the Israelites were being mistreated that Moses was born. He was a child who was “**beautiful to God**” ([Acts 7:20](javascript:%7b%7d)). Now every child is beautiful to his or her parents, but this child was beautiful to God – God took pleasure in Moses. For three months, the life of Moses was spared, in disobedience to the command of Pharaoh:

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “All sons that are born you must throw into the river, but all daughters you may let live” ([Exodus 1:22](javascript:%7b%7d)).

At this age, it would seem that Moses’ parents could no longer keep his existence a secret, and so they “put him out to die” ([Acts 7:21](javascript:%7b%7d)).[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P75_30597) I think Stephen wants his audience to know that Moses was rejected by his own people on more than one occasion. First, he is rejected by his family, just as Jesus was initially rejected by his siblings.[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P76_31489)

Next, Moses was rejected by those whom he sought to save ([Acts 7:23-29](javascript:%7b%7d)). Moses grew up in the household of Pharaoh, and he learned the ways and the wisdom of the Egyptians. He learned so well that Stephen tells us he was “**powerful in his words and deeds**.”[13](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P78_31767) When he slew an Egyptian to rescue an Israelite, this became known to others. The next day Moses sought to intercede between two Israelites, but the guilty Israelite rebuffed him, saying, “**Who made you a ruler and judge over us?**” ([Acts 7:27](javascript:%7b%7d))

Knowing that his crime was now public knowledge, Moses fled to Midian, where he lived as a foreigner. He married and had two sons there. After 40 years, the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush in the desert of Mount Sinai. Moses was curious at the sight of the burning bush and drew closer. It was then that God spoke to him:

32 ‘**I am the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**.’ Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look more closely. 33 But the Lord said to him, ‘Take the sandals off your feet, for **the place where you are standing is holy ground**” ([Acts 7:32-33](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

Several things are significant about these words. First, God is speaking to Moses while he is in the desert of Mount Sinai. Far from Jerusalem, God is there, and He is speaking with Moses. Second, this is not “the holy land,” or, as the Jews of Stephen’s day would say, “**this holy place**,” and yet God informs Moses that the ground on which he is standing is “**holy ground**.” This is *a* holy place, even if not in *the* Holy Land. Third, God identifies Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, God identifies Himself to Moses in relation to the Abrahamic Covenant, before the Mosaic Covenant has even come into being.

When Moses first sought to be a deliverer for his people, he was rudely rejected (“**Who made you a ruler and judge over us?**”). Now it is God Himself who declares Moses to be the deliverer. He became both the ruler and the deliverer of this people through the hand of God, which became evident by the signs and wonders he performed in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness ([Acts 7:35-36](javascript:%7b%7d)).

This Moses, who was initially rejected but who God raised up as ruler and deliverer, spoke of the One who would come after him:

“This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers’” ([Acts 7:37](javascript:%7b%7d)).[14](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P85_34246)

These words should sound familiar to the reader of Acts, for Peter has cited them in chapter 3:

“Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers. You must obey him in everything he tells you’” ([Acts 3:22](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Peter then followed up with this statement in chapter 5:

30 “The God of our forefathers raised up Jesus, whom you seized and killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him to his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” ([Acts 5:30-31](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Stephen was accused of speaking against Moses and against God ([Acts 6:11](javascript:%7b%7d)), and yet Stephen spoke of Jesus, of whom Moses also spoke. How was Jesus “**a prophet like Moses**”? In the context of Stephen’s sermon, he was rejected by his people, and yet he was raised to the position of ruler and deliverer by God. When it came to Moses, the people were wrong about him, and God exalted him, overruling their rejection of him. When it came to Jesus (Stephen would surely have us infer), the Israelites rejected Him, but God raised Him up as Leader and Savior, once again overruling the rejection of the people.

The problem was not with the leader (Moses or Jesus of Nazareth), but with the people. That is what Stephen now calls to the attention of his accusers:

38 “This is the man who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors, and he received living oracles to give to you. 39 Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him, but pushed him aside and turned back to Egypt in their hearts, 40 saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go in front of us, for this Moses, who led us out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him!’ 41 At that time they made an idol in the form of a calf, brought a sacrifice to the idol, and began rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 But God turned away from them and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘It was not to me that you offered slain animals and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, house of Israel? 43 But you took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rephan, the images you made to worship, but I will deport you beyond Babylon’” ([Acts 7:38-43](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Think of who Moses was. God has spared his life as a child. God was with him in Egypt and then in the land of Midian. But God spoke with Moses at the burning bush, and He spoke to him on Mount Sinai. He performed signs and wonders and led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the wilderness, on the way to Canaan. In spite of all the indications that God was with Moses, the people rejected him. In spite of the fact that they drew near to the Promised Land, their hearts were still in Egypt.

In the end, they were just idolaters. When Moses was out of sight (he was on the mountain, getting the law written on stone tablets), the people decided they wanted a “**god**” they could see and touch, so they instructed Aaron to fashion a golden calf for them, which they would worship. And this was but one example, for God gave the Israelites over to their desires. Throughout their years in the wilderness, in spite of the many evidences of God’s care for His people, the Israelites worshipped the idols they (or their forefathers) had served in the past.

I should point out that in this portion of his sermon, Stephen has not only given us a review of Israel’s history from the call of Abraham to their journeys in the wilderness, he has also cited the Old Testament prophet Amos ([Amos 5:25-27](javascript:%7b%7d) in [Acts 7:42-43](javascript:%7b%7d)). The law and the prophets bore witness to the coming of Jesus, the Christ, as they also testified to the sin and rebellion of God’s people, Israel.

Moses has been a prominent personality in our text, but little is made of the Mosaic Covenant. Instead, much has been made of the Abrahamic Covenant. As popular as Moses would appear to be among the Jews of Stephen’s day, the fact is that Moses was rejected by the Israelites of his own day. What people really wanted was a “**god**” that was the creation of their own hands, a “**god**” they could take with them, a “**god**” that would do their bidding.

As prominent as Jerusalem and the temple were in the thinking of Stephen’s opponents, most of Israel’s history (that Stephen cites) takes place outside the land. This, in fact, is where the hearts of the Israelites were. Their hearts were in Egypt ([Acts 7:39](javascript:%7b%7d)), and their gods were foreign deities ([Acts 7:42-43](javascript:%7b%7d)). And this Moses, whom they so greatly revered, never set foot in “the Holy Land.” He only saw it from a distance, at the time of his death. Somebody is missing the point. What was so important to Stephen’s accusers was not important to the writers of the Old Testament.

One last observation from verse 43:

“But you took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rephan, the images you made to worship, but **I will deport you beyond Babylon**’” ([Acts 7:43](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

The prophet Amos wrote to those living in the northern kingdom, warning them of God’s coming judgment because of their idolatry, idolatry like that of their forefathers in the wilderness. It was due to their sin that God would deport them beyond Babylon. They would be thrust out of the land, and it would be because of their sin and their resistance to the Word of God spoken through the prophets. The temple was Israel’s idol. They assumed that so long as the temple was with them, God was with them. No wonder they thought of speaking of the destruction of the temple as blasphemy. The temple would be destroyed, along with Jerusalem, because the true temple (Jesus) had come to Jerusalem, and they had sought to destroy Him.

#### Stephen’s Summary on “This Holy Place” [Acts 7:44-50](javascript:%7b%7d)

44 “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as God who spoke to Moses ordered him to make it according to the design he had seen. 45 Our ancestors received possession of it and brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors, until the time of David. 46 He found favor with God and asked that he could find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. 47 But Solomon built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says, 49 ‘Heaven is my throne, and earth is the footstool for my feet. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is my resting place? 50 Did my hand not make all these things?’” ([Acts 7:44-50](javascript:%7b%7d))

Unbelieving Jews could not stand to hear anything about the coming destruction of the temple. As the Law of Moses (or rather the traditions the Jews had made up themselves and attributed to Moses) had become an idol to the Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jews who opposed Stephen, so had the temple. They assumed that to have the temple was to have the assurance of God’s presence among them and His blessings.[15](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P104_41326)

Stephen’s adversaries greatly revered the temple, but Israel’s history does not bear out their disproportionate sense of adoration. When God manifested His presence among His people, He chose to do so by means of the tabernacle. God gave the plans to Moses while Israel was in the wilderness, and the tabernacle was constructed in exacting compliance to these plans. They brought the tabernacle with them into the Promised Land. It was with them when Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan and possessed the land. This was the case until the time of David. It was David’s idea, not God’s, to build a temple, and God granted his request, with the exception that Solomon would be the one to build it.

“Well enough,” Stephen would seem to say, “David purposed to build a temple, but one must be careful not to give the temple undue reverence and devotion.”[16](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P107_42329) Stephen now cites the prophet Isaiah:

49 ‘Heaven is my throne,   
and earth is the footstool for my feet.   
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,   
or what is my resting place?   
50 Did my hand not make all these things?’”  
([Acts 7:49-50](javascript:%7b%7d), citing [Isaiah 66:1-2](javascript:%7b%7d))

God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The whole earth is His footstool. How, then, can anyone suppose that any temple made with human hands can do Him justice? How can anyone assume that it can contain God? The temple was a beautiful work of the hands of man, and it had great spiritual significance, but God no long dwelled in it. As our Lord Jesus told the woman at the well, worship is not a matter of finding the right place, but of finding the right person ([John 4:20-26](javascript:%7b%7d)). They have an exaggerated view of the importance of the temple.

#### Stephen’s Summary on Revering Moses and the Law [Acts 7:51-53](javascript:%7b%7d)

51 “You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, like your ancestors did! 52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold long ago the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become! 53 You received the law by decrees given by angels, but you did not obey it.”

Stephen is certainly not pleading for his life here. He is pressing charges against his accusers, for it is they who have blasphemed God. It is they (and their ancestors) who have rebelled against Moses and the prophets. They are a stubborn people, just as God had often said of them before:

6 Understand, therefore, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is about to give you this good land as a possession, for you are a stubborn people! 7 Remember – don’t ever forget – how you provoked the Lord your God in the desert; from the time you left the land of Egypt until you came to this place you were constantly rebelling against him. 8 At Horeb you provoked him and he was angry enough with you to destroy you. 9 When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord made with you, I remained there forty days and nights, eating and drinking nothing. 10 The Lord gave me the two stone tablets, written by the very finger of God, and on them was everything he said to you at the mountain from the midst of the fire at the time of that assembly. 11 Now at the end of the forty days and nights the Lord presented me with the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant. 12 And he said to me, “Get up, go down at once from here because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have sinned! They have quickly turned from the way I commanded them and have made for themselves a cast metal image.” 13 Moreover, he said to me, “I have taken note of these people; they are a stubborn lot! ([Deuteronomy 9:6-13](javascript:%7b%7d); see also [Exodus 32:9; 33:3](javascript:%7b%7d))

How painful it must have been for those who made so much of their circumcision to hear Stephen accuse them of being uncircumcised in their hearts and ears ([Acts 7:51](javascript:%7b%7d)). When they heard Stephen’s words, they covered their ears ([Acts 7:57](javascript:%7b%7d)). The Spirit of God had been in Israel’s midst in the past, but He was even more dramatically present in Jesus, and now in His apostles. To resist Jesus and the apostles was thus to resist the Holy Spirit, and thus to identify themselves with their rebellious ancestors. Their ancestors persecuted the prophets of old, who foretold the coming of the Righteous One ([Acts 7:52](javascript:%7b%7d)). Now that He, the Righteous One, has come, Stephen’s adversaries have betrayed and murdered Him. Those who talk so proudly about keeping the law, given by angels, have been shown to be disobedient to it. They murdered the only One who ever met the demands of the Law. It is not Stephen who is guilty; it is his accusers! The only thing you can say for them is that they are consistent – consistently disobedient to God.

#### The Outcome: Stephen’s Death [Acts 7:54-60](javascript:%7b%7d)

54 When they heard these things, they became furious and ground their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look!” he said. “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” 57 But they covered their ears, shouting out with a loud voice, and rushed at him with one intent. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They continued to stone Stephen while he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” 60 Then he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” When he had said this, he died ([Acts 7:54-60](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Can you imagine what this must have looked like from Stephen’s vantage point? Over the past 30 years, I have looked into the faces of many as I have preached. Occasionally, there will be someone whose head nods (or worse). I can understand that. Some will be listening intently, and others may be distracted. Stephen’s audience was the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court in the land. These men were the religious and political giants of the land. No doubt they were all about maintaining appearances (compare [Matthew 23:5-7](javascript:%7b%7d)), so they would probably dress in a very distinguished manner and sit with great dignity and composure. This may have been the way things happened on other days, but not today! This audience must have been looking straight at Stephen. His message was not subtle; it was clear, condemning, and, worse yet, irrefutable (see [Acts 6:10](javascript:%7b%7d)). There was no way to engage in debate. These men gave way to savage and primitive impulses. They were “**cut to the quick**.”[17](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P118_48269) They gnashed their teeth at Stephen.[18](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P119_48511) Talk about “body language.” It didn’t take great insight to discern that this crowd wanted blood, Stephen’s blood.

### Dying Grace

Stephen had to know what lay ahead for him. Luke tells us what enabled Stephen to continue to stand fast, dying in a way that underscored the truth of his faith and of his sermon. Full of the Spirit, Stephen looked into heaven, which opened for him, showing him what lay ahead. He beheld the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.[19](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P122_49144)

Because of modern technology, we have been confronted by the horrible images of hostages, pleading for their lives as they face death at the hands of hooded terrorists. No doubt this is precisely the picture the terrorists wanted us to see. The Sanhedrin would have no such pleasure; indeed it would be quite the opposite. Stephen told his executioners what he saw as he looked up into heaven: “Look!” he said. “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ([Luke 7:56](javascript:%7b%7d))

This was more than they could take. Stephen beholds the Son of Man – Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified – standing at God’s right hand, in heaven. The One they rejected and killed is alive, and God the Father has made Him both “**ruler and deliverer**” ([Acts 7:35](javascript:%7b%7d)). Stephen, whom they accused of blaspheming God, is beholding God, who awaits his entrance into his eternal reward. Stephen does not cower in fear, or plead for his life. He will die beholding the face of God. I have to believe that his face was still glowing (see [Acts 6:15](javascript:%7b%7d)), like that of Moses (see [Exodus 34:29-35](javascript:%7b%7d)). What a powerful way to underscore the truth of Stephen’s sermon.

This was the last straw for the Sanhedrin. They could stand it no more. They covered their ears and rushed at him, at one heart and mind with all the others, whose intent was to silence Stephen as quickly as possible. After driving him out of the city, they stoned him.

Here, Luke chooses to introduce us to Paul (or, more precisely, Saul). No doubt he was among those who debated with Stephen ([Acts 6:9](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.). He might even have led the opposition to Stephen. He was probably among those who heard Stephen’s sermon preached to the Sanhedrin. He was certainly present at Stephen’s execution (or should we say his “murder”). Saul watched the cloaks of those who laid them aside to stone Stephen ([Acts 7:58](javascript:%7b%7d)). I can imagine that this scene, along with Stephen’s sermon, was permanently embedded in Saul’s mind, never to be forgotten.

Luke gives Stephen the last word. One cannot miss the similarities between Stephen’s words at his death and those of our Lord at the time of His death:

Jesus: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” ([Luke 23:46](javascript:%7b%7d))

Stephen: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ([Acts 7:59](javascript:%7b%7d))

Jesus: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” ([Luke 23:34](javascript:%7b%7d)).[20](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P131_52031)

Stephen: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” ([Acts 7:60](javascript:%7b%7d))

I love Luke’s final words, describing what had to be a horrible, violent death: “**And when he had said this, he fell asleep**” ([Acts 7:60](javascript:%7b%7d)). I am of the persuasion that the external (visible) aspects of one’s death are not entirely synonymous with the spiritual realities of one’s departure from this life. I base this upon texts such as [2 Kings 2:11](javascript:%7b%7d); [2 Kings 13:14](javascript:%7b%7d); and [Luke 16:22](javascript:%7b%7d). In [Luke 16](javascript:%7b%7d), for example, Lazarus seems to die a miserable death. His last days were filled with misery. After his death, his body may even have been unceremoniously cast into the garbage dump, without being properly buried. The rich man is given all the comforts his money can provide.[21](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P134_52865) But something more is going on, beyond human view. Lazarus is transported to Abraham’s bosom by angels, but the rich man finds himself in torment. When Stephen died, I believe that God provided an exit worthy of a courageous martyr, and thus we are told he simply fell asleep. What a way to go, proclaiming Jesus to his very last breath.

Reading his final words, I could not help but conclude that Stephen’s death was much like that of our Lord. Both were executed for things they did not do, convicted on the basis of false charges. Both committed their spirit to God. Both asked God’s forgiveness for those who executed them. Aside from the fact that Jesus alone died as a sinless substitute, bearing the guilt and punishment for our sins, there is another great difference. Stephen died while looking into heaven, beholding heaven’s approval. When Jesus died, He was at that moment forsaken by God, because He bore our sin and guilt. No wonder we read,

At about three o’clock Jesus shouted with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ([Matthew 27:46](javascript:%7b%7d))

What a horrid death that would have been. No wonder our Lord shed great drops of blood as He agonized in the garden of Gethsemane ([Luke 22:44](javascript:%7b%7d)). That is the death that each of us deserves for our sin, a death that Jesus endured in our place.

### Conclusion

As we conclude this lesson, consider some of the ways that this text speaks to us.

*First, when Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, it is as though our Lord were on trial a second time.* One of my favorite commentators on the Book of Acts observed that Stephen’s sermon in our text was quite different from the earlier sermons of Peter in Acts. Specifically, he observed that Stephen hardly mentioned Jesus, while Peter spoke plainly of Him. The more I have thought about this text, the more I am inclined to differ with this assessment. I believe that the reason we hardly find Jesus mentioned is that while Peter spoke *of* Jesus, Stephen spoke *for* Jesus. The last two verses of chapter 7 make this point clearly enough to convince me at least. Stephen was being accused of teaching what Jesus taught, and by and large, I believe this to be correct.

I think this overlapping of Jesus’ and Stephen’s teaching may be significant. Let me try to explain why. I believe that Joseph’s dealings with his brothers in [Genesis 42-45](javascript:%7b%7d) help us understand the concept of repentance. To make a long story short, Joseph virtually reconstructed the circumstances of his own betrayal by his brothers. Now, rather than having the opportunity to make Joseph a slave, his brothers had the opportunity to make Benjamin a slave. At the beginning of Joseph’s dealings with his brothers,[22](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P142_55627) it was obvious that they regretted their cruelty to Joseph ([Genesis 42:21-22](javascript:%7b%7d)). But regret is not the same as repentance. It was only after Joseph’s brothers faced the same temptation (to forsake their youngest brother and thus make him a slave) and responded differently[23](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P143_56019) that Joseph recognized true repentance in his brothers, and thereafter disclosed his identity to his brothers.

From the story of Joseph, we may derive this simple definition of repentance:

TRUE REPENTANCE IS DOING IT DIFFERENTLY WHEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO RELIVE THE SITUATION.

I am suggesting that in Stephen, God offers the Sanhedrin a second chance. When he stands on trial before the Sanhedrin, he is being accused of the very things which were the *real* reasons for Jesus’ rejection and execution by the Jewish religious leaders. This was their golden opportunity to confess their sin with regard to Jesus, and to acknowledge Him as Israel’s Messiah. Instead, they even more strongly rejected the gospel. They turned into primitive savages, becoming like a pack of wolves. And in so doing, they reaffirmed their sin and their guilt in rejecting and crucifying Jesus. This was a dark day indeed for Israel’s religious leaders. The irony of all this is that because they rejected Jesus once again (so to speak), they not only confirmed their guilt; they brought on the very destruction they opposed in the preaching of Jesus and the apostles.

In the early verses of chapter 8, we read that the death of Stephen triggered a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. I have always looked at this in a positive light. The death of Stephen brought about the persecution of the church. The persecution of the church brought about the scattering of the church to “**all Judea and Samaria**” ([Acts 8:1](javascript:%7b%7d)). Thus, God was fulfilling the Great Commission as the gospel was being spread abroad. This is a very positive message.

But there is a dark side to this that I had previously overlooked. The church is scattered, leaving Jerusalem with a mere handful of believers. Only the apostles remain behind ([Acts 8:1](javascript:%7b%7d)). Never again will we read encouraging reports about a large number of conversions in Jerusalem and of phenomenal growth in the church. When the church fled from Jerusalem, it was something like Noah and his family entering the ark, or like Lot and his family fleeing from Sodom and Gomorrah – it closed the door to repentance and salvation and opened the door for God’s judgment to fall upon this wicked city. What a tragedy for the great city of Jerusalem to be forsaken by God’s people. Jerusalem’s Day of Judgment was surely drawing near, even as they killed Stephen for warning them about it.

*Second, I believe that the death of Stephen had a profound impact on Saul (Paul), one that served to prepare him for his day of salvation, and more.* We know that Stephen’s preaching was so powerful and persuasive that no one could successfully refute it – even Saul (who I believe engaged in the debate with Stephen).[24](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P150_58985) I believe that Stephen’s sermon haunted Saul, until the day of his conversion.

I am even tempted to speculate further that Stephen’s sermon provided the rough outline for Paul’s later theology, after his conversion. As I was reading in F. F. Bruce’s commentary on the Book of Acts,[25](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P152_59455) I noticed he suggested that there are some strong similarities between the teaching and theology of the Book of Hebrews and Stephen’s sermon. Stephen’s sermon suggests that his thinking was ahead of its time – farther, for example, than Peter’s theology at this point in time.[26](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P153_59840) If Paul were the author of the Book of Hebrews (as I am tempted to think), then it would not be surprising to find Stephen’s theology (as found in his sermon) played out in greater detail in Hebrews. I cannot help but think of Paul as Stephen’s successor. Paul finished what Stephen started.

One more thing occurred to me regarding the relationship between Stephen and Saul/Paul. The next person (in Acts) to stand before the Sanhedrin is Paul. How different his trial turned out:

1 Paul looked directly at the council and said, “Brothers, I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God to this day.” 2 At that the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit there judging me according to the law, and in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” 4 Those standing near him said, “Do you dare insult God’s high priest?” 5 Paul replied, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You must not speak evil about a ruler of your people.’” 6 Then when Paul noticed that part of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, he shouted out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead!” 7 When he said this, an argument began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) 9 There was a great commotion, and some experts in the law from the party of the Pharisees stood up and protested strongly, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” 10 When the argument became so great the commanding officer feared that they would tear Paul to pieces, he ordered the detachment to go down, take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks ([Acts 23:1-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, no doubt knowing that they wanted blood. He did not hold back; instead he delivered a blistering indictment against his accusers, which led to his death. Paul likewise later stood before the Sanhedrin. He recognized that he would not receive a fair trial either (like Stephen). He may even have discerned that they fully intended to execute him, as they had killed Stephen. Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee and causes the members of the Sanhedrin to turn on one another, like a pack of angry dogs. This turns out to be Paul’s deliverance, for the trial is aborted by the violence Paul’s words triggered.

I am not faulting Paul at all. I believe that Stephen sensed that his mission was accomplished, and that he would most glorify God by speaking plainly and by dying well. That he did. I believe that Paul realized his mission (as described in [Acts 9:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)) was not yet fulfilled. Thus, he responded in a way that gave him additional days to fulfill his calling. He, too, would die a martyr’s death, but later. This leads me to my next point, the sovereignty of God.

*Third, we are once again reminded that God is sovereign in this world and over His church.* God sovereignly purposes the death of Stephen, while He will spare Paul when he stands before the Sanhedrin (see above). Some of the Greek-speaking Jews seek to silence the gospel by stoning Stephen, but the end result is that the gospel is proclaimed before the Sanhedrin, and now by the scattering of the church, it is proclaimed world-wide. Greek-speaking Jews oppose the gospel, yet their opposition only serves to spread the gospel abroad to Greek-speaking people. The very thing these enemies of the gospel oppose, they end up inadvertently promoting. God uses those who obey Him to advance His gospel – men like Peter and Barnabas and Stephen. Likewise, God uses those who oppose Him to advance His gospel – men like Pharaoh of old, like Judas, and like these Greek-speaking Jews. The Book of Acts is the record of God’s sovereign work through His church, and through those who oppose His church. As our Lord will later say to Saul, “**It is futile to kick against the goads**” ([Acts 26:14](javascript:%7b%7d)).

*Fourth, we should learn from Stephen’s knowledge and use of the Old Testament Scriptures.*We should learn from Stephen the value of history and its lessons for later generations. The Bible frequently takes us back to “ancient history” to teach us important lessons ([Romans 15:4](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Corinthians 9:8-10](javascript:%7b%7d)). From Noah’s flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we learn of man’s sin and of God’s judgment on sinners (see, for example, [2 Peter 2:1-9](javascript:%7b%7d)). [Nehemiah 9](javascript:%7b%7d) and [Daniel 9](javascript:%7b%7d) review Israel’s history as a reminder of this nation’s sins. [Psalm 78](javascript:%7b%7d) is a review of history to recall the sinfulness of man and the faithfulness of God. Paul turns to Old Testament history to instruct the Corinthian saints about the dangers of self-indulgence ([1 Corinthians 10:1-13](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We live in a day when history is not merely disdained; it is rewritten to justify crooked thinking and rotten living. We should learn from history so that we do not perpetuate the sins of the past. Let us learn from Stephen the value of history.

Beyond this, we learn from Stephen the difference between “camels” and “gnats.” Few people today preach the way Stephen did, using large portions of Scripture and drawing from them the overall, dominant themes. As a preacher I knew used to say of many other preachers, “They go down deeper and stay down longer than anyone I know.” Details are important at times, but we sometimes tend to focus on the minute details of biblical texts, rather than on the broad, sweeping themes of Scripture. How many of us can take a theme and trace it through the Scriptures as Stephen has done? Our devotional books dwell on a verse of Scripture, and sometimes less. Our daily Bible readings (even systematic Bible reading) are scattered across the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms, and a New Testament text. Why not read larger doses of Scripture, and seek to discern the broader themes of the Scriptures? Why not work at tracing themes and doctrines through the Scriptures? We need the “Vitamin C” approach to the Scriptures – we need massive doses, not a dab here and a dab there.[27](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P162_66440)

*Fifth, our text encourages missions.* You may wonder how a passage that ends in the murder of a Christian can encourage anyone to consider missions as a calling. It really does, however. The principle which Stephen was seeking to demonstrate from Old Testament history is that God is not restricted to a particular place. Stephen reminded his listeners that God was with Abram in Mesopotamia, in Haran, in Egypt, and in Canaan. God was with Moses in Egypt, in Midian, and in the wilderness. Thus, Abram was able to leave his homeland and family and depart for an unnamed destination. Wherever a believer may be, God is with him:

7 Where can I go to escape your spirit?   
Where can I flee to escape your presence?   
8 If I were to ascend to heaven, you would be there.   
If I were to sprawl out in Sheol, there you would be.   
9 If I were to fly away on the wings of the dawn,   
and settle down on the other side of the sea,   
10 even there your hand would guide me,   
your right hand would grab hold of me ([Psalm 139:7-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Men and women, we can be assured of God’s presence, power, and protection wherever His will takes us. Parents, we can release our children to serve God wherever He may lead, knowing that God is with them. God’s presence is not limited to any one place; He is with His people wherever they may be. Now here is a truth that inspires those who would seek to serve God in distant or remote places. This leads to our next point.

*Sixth, our text informs us that martyrdom can glorify God, build up the church, and can be a blessing and a privilege to those who die well for the Lord Jesus.*Tertullian once said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Luke would surely agree with this statement. Stephen’s martyrdom launched an ever expanding missionary movement. The gospel spread from Jerusalem to “**all Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.**” To follow up on our last point, God is not only with us wherever we are on earth. He will also be with us in death, to take us to heaven:

4 Even when I must walk through the darkest valley,   
I fear no danger, for you are with me;   
your rod and your staff reassure me.   
5 You prepare a feast before me in plain sight of my enemies.   
You refresh my head with oil;   
my cup is completely full.   
6 Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days,   
and I will live in the Lord’s house for the rest of my life ([Psalm 23:4-6](javascript:%7b%7d)).   
23 Nevertheless I am continually with You;   
You hold me by my right hand.   
24 You will guide me with Your counsel,   
And afterward receive me to glory.   
25 Whom have I in heaven but You?   
And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.   
26 My flesh and my heart fail;   
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever ([Psalm 73:23-26](javascript:%7b%7d), NKJV).

Not long ago we prayed for missionaries who were returning to a dangerous part of the world. As we were preparing to pray, I called attention to these verses in [Philippians 1](javascript:%7b%7d):

19 For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 20 My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, **Christ will be exalted in my body, whether I live or die**. 21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain ([Philippians 1:19-21](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

I don’t think that Paul is asking the Philippians to pray for his safety or for a life free from suffering and persecution. Paul’s desire is to glorify God by advancing the gospel, whether this is by his life, or by his death. Paul does not dread death; he dreads living – or dying – in a way that would dishonor the Savior. Seeing Stephen’s entrance into heaven, looking into the face of His Lord, who could wish some other fate upon Stephen?

I was at a lunch some time ago with a man who is in charge of a ministry where missionaries are in grave danger. Someone suggested that there might be ways to proclaim the gospel that would minimize the risk of martyrdom. This man hesitated, and then replied that he had just told those serving under him that what the cause of Christ might need is a few more martyrs.

I don’t remember exactly when or where he said it, but I recall John Piper saying, “There is no closed country to those who are willing to die for the sake of the gospel.” Once one is committed to die (if need be) for the cause of Christ, there is nothing that can hold him (or her) back. In some parts of the world where I have ministered, missionaries seem to be the first to leave when the going gets tough. “Safety first!” seems to be the motto. That was not Stephen’s motto. He faithfully proclaimed the truth of God’s Word, knowing it would likely lead to his death. But what a triumphant death it was, even as our Lord’s death was triumphant. The same faith that enabled Abram to leave his homeland and his relatives and go to an unknown country, the same faith that enabled Abraham to offer up his only son (if need be), is the faith that enables us to live dangerously for the sake of our Lord, whose death ended once and for all the fear of death for those who trust in Him:

14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise shared in their humanity, so that through death he could destroy the one who holds the power of death (that is, the devil), 15 and set free those who were held in slavery all their lives by their fear of death ([Hebrews 2:14-15](javascript:%7b%7d)).

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we encounter death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord ([Romans 8:35-39](javascript:%7b%7d)).

55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! 58 So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord ([1 Corinthians 15:55-58](javascript:%7b%7d)).

6 Therefore we are always full of courage, and we know that as long as we are alive here on earth we are absent from the Lord – 7 for we live by faith, not by sight. 8 Thus we are full of courage and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So then whether we are alive or away, we make it our ambition to please him ([2 Corinthians 5:6-9](javascript:%7b%7d)).

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[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P16_3249) Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P26_7822) See, for example, [Luke 13:34-35; 19:41-44](javascript:%7b%7d).

[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P30_8960) See [Matthew 15:1-9](javascript:%7b%7d).

[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P46_15035) Interestingly, the KJV, NKJV, NIV and others render it something like this: “**Now the Lord had said . . . .**” In this way, they have made the reading conform to what Stephen said in [Acts 7](javascript:%7b%7d).

[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P50_18385) Even Abram foolishly reasoned this way, supposing that God’s protection was only good within the borders of the land He had promised. When Abraham sojourned in Gerar, he once again misrepresented his wife Sarah as his sister. When Abimelech took Sarah, God revealed to him that Sarah was Abraham’s wife. Abraham excused his actions by claiming that he didn’t feel safe in that place. He said he thought there was “**no fear of God**” in that place ([Genesis 20:11](javascript:%7b%7d), NASB), which is just another way of saying he thought God would not protect him there. And yet God protected Abraham and Sarah, both in Egypt and in Gerar.

[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P54_19444) We will get to this in [Acts 15](javascript:%7b%7d).

[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P55_19884) Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant as well ([Matthew 5:17-19](javascript:%7b%7d)), but only so that He could establish the New Covenant, which was far superior. The Book of Hebrews takes up this matter in much greater detail.

[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P57_20210) See, for example, [Acts 15:1](javascript:%7b%7d).

[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P59_20884) See [Galatians 3](javascript:%7b%7d).

[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P75_30598) Here is another of Stephen’s insights into the Old Testament account of Moses, which is not clearly stated in [Exodus 1](javascript:%7b%7d) and 2. We know that Pharaoh ordered the Israelites to kill their boy babies by casting them into the Nile ([Exodus 1:22](javascript:%7b%7d); [Acts 7:19](javascript:%7b%7d)). Moses’ parents delayed as long as they could, and finally complied with Pharaoh’s orders – except that they cast Moses into the Nile in a waterproof basket. Nevertheless, Stephen makes it clear that the normal consequence of this would be the child’s death. It is not so clear in the Exodus account ([Exodus 2:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)). If his parents had not cast him into the Nile, an Egyptian most certainly would have, but God had other plans.

[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P76_31490) See [John 7:1-5](javascript:%7b%7d).

[13](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P78_31768) This additional information helps to put Moses’ self-deprecating remarks ([Exodus 3](javascript:%7b%7d) and 4) in perspective. He was not as poor in speech as he indicated, unless he is saying something like: “Look, I haven’t been to Egypt or spoken Egyptian for 40 years, and my Egyptian has gotten pretty rusty.”

[14](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P85_34247) Take note that Peter made a similar reference to this statement of Moses ([Deuteronomy 18:15](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[15](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P104_41327) This is nothing new. The same thing happened with the brazen serpent ([2 Kings 18:4](javascript:%7b%7d)) and also with the ark of the Covenant ([1 Samuel 4:1-6](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[16](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P107_42330) One must keep in mind the fact that Solomon’s temple was destroyed ([2 Kings 25:8-17](javascript:%7b%7d)). This is really Herod’s temple (see [John 2:20](javascript:%7b%7d)), which makes it a lot less glorious.

[17](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P118_48270) I prefer this rendering by the NASB (“**cut to the heart**,” KJV). It is the same expression that we find in [Acts 5:33](javascript:%7b%7d), except no one (like Gamaliel) attempts to curb the rage of the Sanhedrin this time.

[18](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P119_48512) A. T. Robertson likens this to a pack of wolves. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (electronic edition via BibleWorks 6), en loc.

[19](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P122_49145) Much has been made of the fact that Stephen saw the Lord Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God. Normally, when reference is made to Jesus being at the Father’s *right hand,* He is sitting. This is the only place where Jesus is specifically said to be standing at the Father’s right hand. Perhaps Jesus is standing because He is ready to take action, either welcoming Stephen or judging those who will kill him. Some think it is a way of honoring Stephen and his courageous entrance into heaven. We can only speculate.

[20](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P131_52032) The NET Bible indicates that some manuscripts omit this statement. My inclination is to accept it.

[21](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P134_52866) See [Psalm 73:4-5](javascript:%7b%7d).

[22](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P142_55628) You will recall that Joseph disguised himself so that they did not recognize him, though he surely recognized them.

[23](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P143_56020) Earlier, in [Genesis 37:24-27](javascript:%7b%7d), it was Judah who proposed to his brothers that they sell Joseph into slavery. Now, in [Genesis 44:18-34](javascript:%7b%7d), it is Judah who pleads with Joseph for Benjamin’s release, offering himself instead.

[24](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P150_58986) In [Acts 6:9](javascript:%7b%7d), we are told that some from . . . Cilicia . . . opposed Stephen. Tarsus was a city of Cilicia ([Acts 21:39](javascript:%7b%7d)), and we know Paul was present at Stephen’s death ([Acts 8:1-3](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[25](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P152_59456) F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 132.

[26](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P153_59841) Remember that Peter was a native Hebraic Jew while Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew. Also, Peter had some hard lessons yet to learn, as we see in [Acts 10](javascript:%7b%7d) and 11. Stephen’s thinking seems to be more advanced than Peter’s, especially when it came to the expansion of the church to Gentiles.

[27](https://bible.org/seriespage/first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60" \l "P162_66441) When I preached this message, I wrongly referred to the “Burma Shave approach: A little dab ‘ll do ya.” I was quickly corrected after the message. This was a Brillcream slogan, not a Burma Shave slogan. Regardless, little dabs of Scripture will not do us as well as large doses.

HOPE FOR THE CITY: THE GOSPEL, HOPE, AND THE WORLD

[ DR. TIMOTHY KELLER | Sermon transcript, 15 November 2009]

Acts 8:1–8 —   
*And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.*

*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deep­ly for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.*

*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.*

Redeemer’s vision, or mission, can be summarized in three words: gospel, city, movement. The gospel changes everything; serving in the city is the very best way to minister the gospel; and we don’t want to be just a church, just an institution, but a movement—a dynamic movement of many churches and ministries throughout the city.

Therefore, this passage is fitting and apt because Acts 8—this case study of Philip the evangelist going into the city of Samaria and doing ministry there—shows us all three things. It shows us what it means to be a movement, what it means to effectively minister in a city, and how to do that by living out the pattern of the gospel in our lives.

A MOVEMENT

We see what it means to be a movement in verses 1 to 4. Verse 1 says, “Saul was there, giving approval to his death.” This is the very end of the story in chapter 7, where we learn about Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr. Stephen was executed, stoned to death, for preaching the gospel. In verse 1 we see that Saul (Saint Paul—later on he would be converted) was there. Perhaps there was something about what he saw in Stephen, that though he was there passively approving, though he didn’t throw any stones, he saw something in Stephen that terrified him, radicalized him, and alarmed him. In any case, we read in verse 3 that after this event Saul began to be the active leader of a persecution. He was trying to destroy the church.

And, as a result, even though verse 1 says the apostles stayed in Jerusalem (they sort of went underground), everyone else—all the lay people—had to flee for their lives, and they were scattered. But the effect of the persecution was actually to strengthen the church—to spread the church, and to spread the gospel—because verse 4 says, “Those who had been scattered [all lay people] preached the word wherever they went.” The word “preached” is not the word you and I think of—we think of somebody publicly speaking to a group. But this word is actually the word “evangelize,” and what we are told is everybody evangelized.

Here is what happened. At the church in Jerusalem there was great preaching, and it probably grew because people brought their friends to hear the great preaching. But then the persecution happened, and they were pushed out. We are told that they took what they had learned from their teachers and preachers and they

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began to gossip the gospel, share the gospel, and counsel their friends with the gospel. They began to evangelize. Everybody did. They took what they had and they began to do it themselves.

The church is not supposed to be a body of people with a small number of providers—me, other ministers— and everybody else just coming and being customers. God used the persecution to turn the church into an entire community of providers so everybody was in mission together—absolutely everybody. Everybody was evangelizing—everybody was embodying the gospel, sharing the gospel, teaching the gospel, gossiping the gospel from person to person.

You see this all through the Bible. In Genesis 12, God comes to Abraham and says, “Abraham, I want to bless you. I want to come near to you. I want to bring you in close to me. I want to be intimate with you. I want to give you my love.” Wow! That’s what we want! But then he says in the same sentence, “I want to bless you, that you may be a blessing.”

God never calls you radically in without sending you radically out. He never calls you in and blesses you and fills your heart with love except to make you to be a blessing, to send you out to others (cf. Psalm 67:1–7). That is the reason why he says to Abraham, “I am going to really bless you. Now get out!” Take a look at Genesis 12. God says, “I am going to bless you. I am going to love you—now get out! Get out of Ur. Get out of your country. Get out of your culture. Get out of your comfort zone.” That’s the paradigm.

I want you to see something else. This is what one commentator on the book of Acts says about God using the persecution to send out the people so that everyone became a person in mission: It was not because of some mission plan that was approved and put into action by the leaders of the church that this great expan­sion happened. It was ordinary believers taking the opportunity to share the message wherever they went. The apostles became “the stabilizing, verifying, and unifying element in a mission that moves to new areas and groups without their planning or control.”1

Now that is a movement. In a bureaucracy, people at the top completely control everything. But in a movement, where everybody owns the mission, everybody is participating, even though you still need leaders. The apostles were “stabilizing, verifying, and unifying”—and yet there was a spontaneity about the church. All kinds of new initiatives bubbled up all over the place. The apostles didn’t send Philip to Samaria—he went. What happened is God used the persecution to turn his church into a movement, a movement in which everybody is in mission. Everybody is initiating.

That is actually a big part of what God is calling our church to be. By the way, I would say that most of the time—and we are going to talk about this as we go on here—for most churches and Christian communities that get renewed and turned from a kind of fat and happy institution into a dynamic movement in which everybody owns the vision, it usually happens through trouble, through persecution, or through something very bad. It is rare for a community to voluntarily seek it. And this voluntary venture is what we are trying to do at Redeemer over the next ten years. So, first of all, we learn here about being a movement.

MINISTERING IN THE CITY

The second thing we learn here is about the importance and the nature of city ministry (or urban ministry).

THE IMPORTANCE OF URBAN MINISTRY

Notice that everybody is scattered: verse 1, they were scattered; verse 4, they were scattered. That is significant in the Bible, because when the people of God are scattered, or when they are dispersed, urban ministry becomes very important.

1. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation,* First Paperback Ed. Vol. 2. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 2:102.redeemercitytocity.com | The Gospel, Hope, and the World—Hope for the City 3

In the Old Testament, when the Babylonians conquered Judah, what we see is similar to what we have here in Acts 8. The Jews were scattered away from Jerusalem, and they come to a pagan city, Babylon, which was just as filled with people they didn’t like as Samaria was. (We will get to why the Jews and the Samaritans didn’t get along.) But the Jews—you can read about this in Jeremiah 29—were exiled away from Jerusalem, and they were put into a big, pagan city, Babylon. And then God told them, counterintuitively, to seek the joy of the city. He told the Jews, “I want you to seek the peace and prosperity and shalom of Babylon. Pray for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7). Your community will prosper if you pour yourself out in deeds of service and seek the prosperity and the peace of the city where you are.

It’s actually common sense. God is saying to us the same thing he said to the Jews: “If you love the city—if you pour yourself out for the city, if you seek the good of the city—how much of a better witness could there be to show the city that your god is God? If you want your community and your faith to grow, then care about the city.”

Urban ministry was crucial when the Jews were exiled, and in the New Testament it becomes crucial to the Christians being scattered. In fact, the whole book of Acts is all about Christians in cities. Do you know that almost everything that happens in the book of Acts happens in a city? The entire early church’s history unfolds in cities. Virtually every Christian you meet in the New Testament is a city dweller, and when Paul wanted to reach a province or a nation, he went to the biggest city in that nation and started churches there. Do you know why?

First of all, the best way to reach the nations is to reach the city. Some years ago I heard a lecturer say that if Paul really wanted to reach the nations, he could have gone into a particular nation and learned their language and learned their culture (and it is very hard to learn a new language and new culture) and minister there for ten years. And then he could have gone to another nation and learned the culture there and the language there, and ministered for another ten years. And that might have killed him, but if he was still alive, he could have tried it a third time, and learned a third language and a third culture and ministered to a third nation. And by that time, he would be dead.

Or, he could go to a city—go to Antioch, go to Rome—and in every city there are dozens and dozens of ethnic groups and nationalities and people groups, and they are all working in the lingua franca of the city. And then all Paul had to do—and this is what he did—was go to the cities and minister to the cities, and automatically the gospel got into the lifeblood of dozens and dozens of national groups, and it spread to the nations. You go to the city to reach the nations.

Secondly, you go to the city to reach the culture. If you go to a village, you might win a lawyer or you might win an artist—but if you go to the city, that is how you have an impact on the art world, and that is how you have an impact on the legal profession. And because Christians were inordinately focused on cities all during the first two or three centuries of their history, by the year 300 A.D. over half the populations of the Greco-Roman cities were Christian, but the countryside was pagan.

In fact, do you know where that word pagan comes from? It is a Greek word that means a “man of the country” or a “farmer.” See, the farmers, the people in the country, were pagans, and the people in the cities were Christians. But as the city goes—whatever has captured the city—that is where the culture is going. That is the reason the brutal, old pagan culture was displaced by Christianity, because people went to the cities. Do you see the importance of city ministry?

Let me say this very clearly. The Bible says—Jesus says—to take the gospel to every creature. That means you have to have Christians everywhere there are people. You have to have churches everywhere there are people. Jesus is saying you need Christians in every place, and there is no warrant for saying all Christians have to live in a city.

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But I want you to keep something in mind. Over at least the next 150 years, massive numbers of people will be moving into the great cities. For example, 150 years ago in Europe, the rural areas got to their “carrying capac­ity.” A family had six or seven children or so, and there was no more land, and since only one or two kids could get the farm, people began streaming into the cities to get jobs. As a result, the first great megacities of the world were the European cities. They became huge.

The same thing is happening now in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. What is happening now is the cities of most of the world are growing in size enormously. Somebody has said that basically there is a new Bangkok, as it were, formed every three months. That means eight or nine million people are moving into cities just about every three months.2 Over the next 150 years, millions of people are going to be moving into cities, which means in most of the world, the cities are growing in size. And in all of the world, because of tech-nologies, cities are growing in influence.

Therefore, for at least the next 100, 150, 200 years, most human beings are going to be living in cities, and the church does not know much about ministering in cities. What does that mean? It means we have got to be there. We have got to go there. It means we have got to be good at urban ministry. It is incredibly important.

THE NATURE OF URBAN MINISTRY

We also see in verses 5 to 8 what we need to be effective at urban ministry. There are three marks. Do you know what they are? The three marks of effective ministry are word, deed, and racial reconciliation.

**Word ministry**

Look at verse 5: “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.” That is word ministry. The word “proclaim” is what you think of; it is the word for “preach.” It is the word for public proclamation, public teaching of the Bible.

Except notice it says that he preached the Christ. He knew what the Bible is about. The Bible is not just about various principles and things you have to believe or do in order to be blessed by God. Oh no! The Bible is about Jesus. It is about Jesus Christ, and how he came to earth to rescue us and to save us by his grace. We see that Philip did not just show up in town and do good deeds. He preached the Word. He called people to repentance. He showed people the life-transforming message of the gospel.

**Deed ministry**

But the second thing is deed. Verse 7 says, “Evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed.” Look at that. People were delivered spiritually from interior evil, but, on the other hand, it says paralytics and cripples were healed, which means people were getting help for their physical needs. Don’t be distracted by the fact that this is miraculous, because it is not the only way to give people help for their physical needs. In fact, in Acts 4:32–35, you see a place where it says that the early Christian community shared everything they had, so there was no poor person among them.

All of Jerusalem saw the Christians taking care of people in need, helping them with their physical needs, and then it says, as a result, the apostles’ preaching was received with great power. It makes perfect sense. It even says so in verse 6: “When the crowds…saw the…signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.” Or, in short, people will listen to our words if they see our deeds. If they see us loving the city—if they see us meeting people’s needs, if they see us caring about the city—they are going to listen to the word. It has got to be word and it has got to be deed.

**Racial reconciliation**

The third mark of dynamic, effective urban ministry is racial reconciliation. You say, “Where does it say anything about racial reconciliation?” That is one of the things that is so remarkable about the entire chapter.

2. See “The Brown Revolution,” *The Economist*, May 9, 2002.redeemercitytocity.com | The Gospel, Hope, and the World—Hope for the City 5

The Samaritans and the Jews utterly hated each other. There was tremendous racial animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. One of the most amazing passages in the Bible is verse 5, because Philip is so unlike Jonah. Jonah? Yes, Jonah.

The book of Jonah is about God calling a Jewish prophet to go and preach to Nineveh, to the Assyrians. There was great racial animosity between the Jews and the Assyrians. They were mortal enemies. God says to Jonah, “I want you to go and preach to your mortal enemies. I want you to call them to repentance.” (See Jonah 1:1–2.) You probably remember one thing about the book of Jonah, but there were actually two things that happened. One thing was Jonah tried to run away. And God had to send a storm, and Jonah is eaten by a fish and regurgitated—the only regurgitated prophet we have! You have probably heard that part of the story, but the part you probably haven’t heard about is Jonah then goes to Nineveh and he preaches to these people that he hates, and unfortunately for him, they repent. He is furious because he wanted to see God “nuke” them. The book ends with him still furious.

Listen, whatever culture you grew up in, whatever people group you grew up in, your people group has taught you to look down on some other people group and say, “Oh those people.” God is trying to overcome the Jewish prophet’s antipathy to this other racial group, and at the very end of the book, he is still trying. It just hasn’t worked.

But here is Philip in Acts 8, and he just goes. He is a Jewish evangelist, a Jewish Christian, and he goes to Samaria. No fish. He is not swallowed or regurgitated—he just goes. Why? Do you realize how amazing this is?

The gospel works on the pride of our heart and the inferiority of our heart. My experience of tension between racial groups is there is a combination of superiority and inferiority going on. Until the gospel changes our hearts, we all struggle with inferiority, so what we do is we try to say our culture is superior. Our people are superior, not those people over there. We laugh at those people over there, and that creates this tension.

But what the gospel does is it works on both your superiority and your inferiority. It says you are a sinner, absolutely lost, and you can only be saved by sheer grace. There is nothing you can do about it. That destroys your superiority. But it also says the Son of God loved you so much that he was willing to come and give himself for you. That destroys your inferiority. And when your superiority is knocked down, and your inferiority is filled in and lifted up, you can reach out.

It is astounding but crucial for the Christian church, especially in cities where there is so much multi-ethnicity, to show the rest of the world how the gospel does destroy your superiority and your inferiority, and therefore brings people together who outside in the rest of the world would not be able to be together. The gospel makes people friends who out in the rest of the world would never be friends.

Do you know how it begins? It begins very simply. You have to use the gospel on your heart. You have to look at your own superiority and inferiority, work on it, and then when you come into the church, be aware of the fact that you tend to gravitate to people like yourself. Our default mode is to be just like the world told us to be: “Go after people like you. Hang out with people like you.” You have to catch yourself, and you have to start to reach across the barrier and use the gospel and make friends with a brother or sister who is not like you. That is how it starts. And unless we are able to show the world people getting along in here that can’t get along out there, then we really haven’t applied the gospel to ourselves.

Therefore, the marks of effective urban ministry are word, deed, and racial reconciliation, which change the world because they change the city.

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THE PATTERN OF THE GOSPEL IN OUR LIVES

Lastly, the text shows us how to be a movement and how to minister in the city by living out of a pattern of the gospel.

Do you know where the pattern of the gospel is? It is the whole chapter. It is something I only realized recently. Look at all this life and joy in Samaria—urban Samaria. It is amazing. Where did the life and joy come from? The life and the joy of verses 5 to 8 follow the death and the misery of verses 1 to 4.

Look at all the misery in verses 1 to 4. There is death. There is destruction. Verse 2 says, “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him,” and the word there means “agonizing grief.” There is death, destruction, and agonizing grief, and then in verses 5 to 8, there is life and joy. Misery and death—joy and life. But here is what I want you to see. The joy and life don’t come in spite of the misery and death—they come through it. The joy and the life come because of the misery and the death. The death has caused resurrection.

How does this work? The pattern here is a gospel pattern. Here is the irony: Saul sought the destruction of the church, and what did it lead to? The expansion of the church. Saul sought to scatter the church, but all it did was to lead to more gathering. He tried to kill it—it led to more life. If you try to put the church to death, it leads to resurrection.

If you go to back to chapter 7 and read about Stephen, you see how it happened. When Stephen was put up in front of a kangaroo court, on trial for his life, was he scared? Maybe. But was he angry? Did he lash out at them? Did he call them names? No. We are told that his face was like the face of an angel. He had joy. He had radiance. As they were killing him, he said, “Lord, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing” (v. 60).

And because he died like that, it electrified the church. In other words, he accepted his suffering; he accepted his death and died nobly. He died faithful to God and faithful to his friends. And, as a result, that particular kind of death led to resurrection. It led to more life. He died that others might live. The Samaritans found new life because he died. Do you see a pattern there?

This pattern has happened constantly in the history of the church—that greater persecution and violence toward Christians and greater oppression and trampling does not ever lead to violence in return. It leads to greater love. It leads to greater joy.

The best example of Acts 8 that we have today is actually what happened in China in the twentieth century. After World War II, when the Communist government took over, they threw all the Western missionaries out and they killed a lot of the Chinese pastors. They threw out the Western missionaries and said that was the end of Christianity in China. But do you know what happened? Ironically, it is the very same thing that happened here in Acts 8, because the Chinese church had become too dependent on the Western missionaries. They were the providers, and the churches were the customers; the missionaries brought in the money, and they had their fingers on the controls. But when the Communist government expelled the Western missionaries and began to persecute the church, it turned them all into people of mission. It turned them all into providers. It turned them into people that preached the Word and evangelized everywhere they went. It made the church indigenous, and the church just exploded in growth.

In fact, you see it over and over again. You try to kill the church—you try to persecute the church; you try to stamp it out—but if you use violence on the church, it only makes it grow. And the response is not growth in violence; the church doesn’t grow like that. It grows in love.

The persecuted Chinese church today (after having grown at least 50-fold over the fifty years after the expulsion of the Western missionaries) is only 5–7% of the population, but when the great earthquakes hit

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the Sichuan Province of China in 2008 and 68,000 people died, one million Chinese people volunteered and came and did relief work. And even though the Christians were only 5–7% of the population, probably up to half of all of the volunteers were believers—Christians. Because the more you kill Christians, the more you oppress them—as Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is seed”—the better the church gets. The livelier the church gets. The more death, the more resurrection. The more destruction, the more expansion. The more scattering, the more gathering.

This has been true for two thousand years. Why would that be? How could it be? You know, there are an awful lot of people, groups, and associations that when you start to oppress them, they fight back. They get guns. They shoot you. Why are Christians different?

It is because of the gospel. What is the gospel? The gospel is Jesus. Why was Stephen able to take the condemnation of a kangaroo court with radiance? Why was Stephen able to give his life so that Samaria would live? The answer is because he was literally looking at someone. Just before he died, he says, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56) He was looking at someone, who also when he died said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) He was looking at someone who didn’t just get the wrath of a kangaroo court, but the wrath of cosmic justice on all human evil.

Jesus Christ took all of our punishment for our sins. And Jesus didn’t just die so that Samaria would live—he died that the world would live. And because Stephen was looking at Jesus doing that, he was able to take his suffering with poise. He was able to take it with faithfulness. He was able to take it with joy, and his death led to resurrection.

By the way, Jesus’ death changed Stephen so that he was able to die in order that others may live. That can happen to you, too. Now, I am not suggesting, though it might happen, that you be martyrs. Here is what I am suggesting. It is the principle of the thing.

If you give your finances with radical, promiscuous generosity for the needs of the city—if you give like crazy out of your finances—that is a kind of death. Do you know why? You are dying to all kinds of stuff you could have afforded, all kinds of fun things you could have done if you hadn’t given to others. But if you die—if you experience that death, the death of radical financial generosity—there will be joy in the city. Death will lead to resurrection.

Or, what if you just stick your neck out and say, “I want to identify as a Christian in New York City.” I don’t mean be obnoxious about it. I just mean be willing to let people know you are a Christian. If you do that, there will be some death, oh yes—some people will walk away. Some people might avoid you. You might miss out on a job or get passed over for a promotion. You are experiencing a death, but if you are willing to open up to other people about your faith, that death will lead to life for others. It will lead to resurrection.

If you pour yourself out for others, the way Jesus literally poured his life out for you, it will lead to joy in the city. That is the principle. That is the pattern of the gospel.

His death leads to your life. His death has led to your eternal life, and now, seeing what he has done for you, it will enable you to pour your life out for others, and there will be joy in the city. And if there is joy in the city because you are living out of the pattern of the gospel in your life, it will change the world. Let’s be that kind of movement.

Let’s pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have given us this vision. You have given us this model. You have given us this pattern and this power. And now we ask that we would realize that, here, as a church. Lord, we ask this not just for Redeemer, but for all the churches of the city, and not just for the churches of New York City but the churches of the cities of the world. Help us to become a movement, to minister effectively in cities out of the gospel—its power and its pattern. We ask this in the name of the one who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. It is in his name we pray, Amen.

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**Dogma Drives the Christian Life**

by [*Carl R. Trueman*](https://www.firstthings.com/featured-author/carl-r-trueman) 8 . 5 . 21

For most Americans, Christianity is moving rapidly to the margins of life. As I contemplate the future shape of American Christianity, it seems to me that there is both bad news and good news. The bad news, in light of Christianity’s marginalization, is that we have no idea what “after Christendom” might actually look like. Indeed, it is possible that it will look like nothing in particular, given the state of constant flux in which we now seem to live. The rise of the therapeutic self has created a world driven by subjective emotions. Technology has given us the cult of the “expert” and the notion that we can solve all problems if only we exert our wills with sufficient power. Meanwhile, the disappearance of the distinction between public and private continues to disrupt Western society, and its long-term effects are largely unpredictable.

Then there is what Hartmut Rosa has identified as “social acceleration”—the way societal developments, particularly in technology, happen at such a rate that we are unable to adapt to one wave of changes before another one arrives. The Reformation, for instance, was in part a technological revolution whereby society reconfigured itself thanks to the printing press; that reconfiguration involved 150 years of bloody conflict before western Europe achieved some level of political and social stability again. When we compare the printing press revolution to the arrival of information technology in our age—the Internet, social media, 5G, Big Tech, etc., all of which have created a far greater informational explosion than Gutenberg’s moving type faces ever did—it is hard to look at the future without some degree of trepidation. The vertigo that many of us feel as we assess the cultural landscape is entirely understandable. What will our brave new world look like? Who could possibly predict the shape of society after the next few years, let alone the next few decades?

One thing, though, is certain: The days when Christians could be both respected by their society and faithful to their beliefs are drawing rapidly to a close. The terms of membership in civic society and in the church are becoming increasingly antithetical. It will not matter how much you talk about racial justice, for example, if you do not toe the line on sexual and gender justice. And public repetition of the trendy liturgies of Christian self-loathing on any number of social issues will not save you. Progressive ideology has one thing in common with the law of God: As James 2:10 says of the latter, he who fails in one part is guilty of failing in all parts. Selective wokeness will not gain you immunity from the social justice wrath to come.

So much for the bad news. The good news is that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever, and that fact is not contingent upon the shape of the earthly city. And so the Christian task remains the same. We are to be a people characterized by hospitality, by love, and by hope. TikTok, Instagram, Pride Month, and the alternative models of late modernity offered by Russia and China do not change those fundamental tasks.

And yet there is a danger here. Hospitality, love, and hope are good things, but there is always a possibility, in our age of sentimentality and aesthetic moral codes, that these things may become contentless—or at least, that what we mean by these things may cease to be distinctively Christian. Is there a more debased and meaningless word in modern society than “love”? And “hope” has become a synonym for a naïve Pollyannaish belief that bad things do not really happen to good people.

This brings me to the most important point in this moment: Christianity is a dogmatic religion. On that much the greatest theologians across the Christian spectrum agree, from Martin Luther to John Henry Newman. There is a famous saying of Dorothy L. Sayers with which I begin my class on the Doctrine of God at Grove City College each year: “The dogma is the drama.” That statement captures the nature of the Christian message, and points to a further fact: the dogmatic drives the Christian life. Indeed, the dogmatic is precisely what makes the Christian life distinctively *Christian*.

The tendency today is to subordinate the dogmatic to the pre-dogmatic: to set up putative power relations and concepts such as oppressor and victim as the framework for interpreting dogmatic statements. Dogma thereby loses its priority and becomes a tool for manipulation. We should eschew such approaches. Read 2 Corinthians, the most personal of Paul’s letters, and then read 1 Corinthians, taking note of how Paul’s experience of ministry is shaped by his understanding of the cross of Christ. His is a dogmatic testimony, whereby his suffering (and victimhood) does not provide the framework for understanding the dogmatic content of the faith. Quite the reverse: For Paul, the faith is the framework for understanding his experience.

Dogma is foundational and provides the lens by which everything else is to be understood. And it gives content to things such as hospitality, love, and hope. We are hospitable because God is hospitable (Deut. 10:17-19). We understand love as constituted by sacrificial action because that is what God has revealed his love to be (John 3:16). And we hope because Christ is raised and therefore our suffering—and even death itself—is transformed (2 Cor. 4:16-18; 2 Tim. 1:8-11). Christian hospitality, love, and hope all rest on truth claims, not sentiments.

If this is the case, if the dogma is the drama and if the dogmatic drives the dramatic, then what should American Christianity after Christendom look like? It should involve the practices that communicate Christianity’s dogmatic content: preaching the whole counsel of God, for faith comes by hearing the word; catechizing people in the faith; and worshipping in a manner true to that faith, connecting God’s truths to our experience. In short, American Christianity after Christendom looks like people, individually and as congregations, taking the truths of the gospel seriously and living them out faithfully in their local contexts.

*This essay is adapted from an address at the 2021 Napa Institute Conference.*

*Carl Trueman is a professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College and a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.*