

## Conclusion of Stephen's Testimony and Stephen's Martyrdom

### Acts 7:44-60

Acts 7:44-60: *"Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen,<sup>45</sup> which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David,<sup>46</sup> who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.<sup>47</sup> But Solomon built Him a house.<sup>48</sup> "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:<sup>49</sup> 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. 'What house will you build for Me?,' says the Lord, 'or what is the place of My rest?'<sup>50</sup> Has My hand not made all these things?"*

<sup>51</sup> *"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.<sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers,<sup>53</sup> who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."*

<sup>54</sup> *When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.<sup>55</sup> But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,<sup>56</sup> and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"*

<sup>57</sup> *Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;<sup>58</sup> and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.<sup>59</sup> And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."<sup>60</sup> Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep."*

### Background Notes

In Acts 6 records Stephen's outstanding and effective public reaching, and that he performed great signs and wonders before the people. Many people were becoming believers, including a great number of Jewish priests. As a result, some of the Jews became upset and jealous, and they had Stephen arrested on false accusations. He was brought before the Sanhedrin, the official governing body of the Jews, under the Roman government. The high priest was in charge of the Sanhedrin. At this time Caiaphas was high priest. (Remember, he was the high priest at the time of our Lord's trial.)

Acts 6:11-14: *“Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”*

Their real purpose for bringing Stephen before the Sanhedrin was to put a stop to the spread of Christianity, even if it meant removing its leaders by force. The Sanhedrin had managed to get Jesus crucified, and they weren't about to change their tactics in dealing with the His followers. It seems that the majority of the Sanhedrin did not follow the counsel of Gamaliel, a leading Rabbi, who had advised the council to take a more calm approach to this new movement of Christ-followers (Acts 5). He predicted that the movement would die out, if it were not of God. But they didn't listen to him.

Stephen used his arrest and questioning before the Sanhedrin as an opportunity to witness to the truth of Christianity, and to pronounce God's judgment on the nation of Israel for rejecting their Messiah. Stephen's sermon is the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts. Notice how he concluded his testimony: *“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it” (v51-53).*

The false witnesses had accused Stephen of speaking against God's Law. Acts 6:11-14: *“Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”*

In chapter 7 Stephen turned the tables on the false witnesses in his testimony. He showed that it was the *nation* that had spoken against God's Law, by not keeping it.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Stephen's sermon was God's final testimony to Israel.

In Peter's sermon in Acts 3, an extension of grace was offered to the nation of Israel. Acts 3:19-20: *“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before.”* Peter indicated that if Israel would even then repent

from her sin of rejecting the Messiah, the Lord Jesus would return and set up His kingdom - right then! But Israel did not repent. They continued to reject the King and His Kingdom. The stoning of Stephen seems to have been the last straw. Now it was only a matter of time before God would allow the Roman armies to sweep in, conquer Jerusalem, destroy the

Temple, and drive the Jewish people from their Land. So Stephen's sermon was God's final testimony to Israel.

In the first part of his sermon, Stephen drew a parallel between Israel's rejection of Joseph and Moses, and Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ. In the last part of his sermon he showed how Israel's continued focus on the Law and the Temple was not in line with God's program. Israel had the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and then the Temple that David wanted to build, and the Temple that Solomon built – but these “buildings” were not the last word from God. God's presence is not confined to a building on earth.

Stephen quoted from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 66:1-2: *“Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,’ says the Lord.”* These verses were a reminder of what Solomon said at the dedication of the Temple: *“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!”* (1 Kings 8:27).

Stephen then drove home his point. **All** of those Old Testament things - including the messages of the prophets - pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, the Righteous One. The time of the Law and the Temple is over, he proclaimed. God's program is now moving on!

But just as Israel had always rejected God, they had now rejected their Messiah. They had betrayed and murdered Him, and they will be held accountable before God. This was now final. Stephen's sermon was God's final testimony to Israel.

## **2. Stephen's stoning was Israel's final rejection of Christ.**

The Sanhedrin's response to Stephen's sermon was violent. Stephen had shown conclusively that they were guilty before God - that the Old Testament Law as a way of life was temporary, and that the Temple would be removed. Israel would be set aside for a time, while Jesus the Messiah and His Church would be the focus of God's program for the future.

Nothing more needed to be said. The Sanhedrin was furious. Just as the Jews had picked up stones to execute our Lord in John 8 & 10, so the members of the highest Jewish court picked up stones to execute Stephen for his witness of Christ. This time the Jews were successful with their stones. They murdered Stephen. This was illegal under Roman law, but Rome overlooked this travesty of justice, probably for the sake of maintaining peace.

A young man named Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen: *“And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul”* (v58). Acts 8:1 says that Saul was in full agreement with the stoning of Stephen. Saul consented to his death.

What a change would take place in this young man’s life, before God was done with him! Listen to his testimony about this event when Saul, now named Paul, was arrested in Jerusalem many years later. Acts 22:19-20: *“So I said, ‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’”*

The stoning of Stephen proved that the nation of Israel, even if given a second chance, would still have rejected and executed their Messiah. The stoning of Stephen was Israel’s final rejection of Christ.

## **Practical Application**

### **Expect a great welcome in Heaven!**

Stephen’s death as a martyr is a model for all believers. Notice that he followed the example of our Lord in His death. He commended his spirit to the Lord (v59), and he prayed for forgiveness for the Jews who were killing him (v60).

Before Stephen died, he looked toward Heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God: *“Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”* (v56). “Son of Man” was our Lord’s favorite expression for Himself. Daniel 7 reveals that “Son of Man” is a name that emphasizes our Lord’s deity, so that’s why the Jews covered their ears, thinking that this statement was blasphemy.

Why did Stephen see the Lord as “standing” rather than “seated” at the right hand of God? Hebrews 10:22 says that, in reference to our Lord’s finished work of redemption at the cross, He is now *seated* at the right hand of God. But I believe that one of the reasons Stephen saw our Lord standing was that Jesus Christ stood to welcome Stephen home to Heaven!

If you’re a true believer, do you think you’re going to be left standing on the doorstep when you get to Heaven? No way! The Lord Jesus will be there to welcome you! Expect a great welcome in Heaven.