

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL
THE CHURCH ON MISSION
THE SPIRIT WHO EMPOWERS
A Spirit Empowered Testimony Unto Death

There is a modern song that goes like this: “Anybody here want to live forever? Say I do. Anybody here want to walk on golden streets? Say I do.” Of course, we all would say ‘I do’ to something that wonderful! But, today’s question is much different: “Does anybody here want to be a martyr? Do we really dare to say ‘I do’ to that? The word martyr is the transliteration of a Greek word meaning ‘witness.’ Because the early Christians frequently suffered for their faith, the word ‘martyr’ soon came to refer to people who suffered or died because of their witness for Christ. Having our witness for Christ to end in martyrdom is a scary thought. Yet, most likely all Christians have wondered at one time or the other, ‘Would I be strong enough to stand up to the test of persecution and possible death?’ It is not something we could do in our own strength.

Today’s lesson is about Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen was able to witness boldly and stand firm in his faith because of the power of the Holy Spirit who dwelt within him! In fact when we hear Stephen’s story, we realize that he became very much like his Savior!

In the period following Pentecost, the church was growing so steadily that the church appointed several men to handle the work of providing aid to needy Christians. Stephen was one of the first seven worthy men chosen to do this work. Although these seven men were not specifically called deacons, the work they did paralleled the work of deacons in our church today.

Stephen’s labor for the Lord was not limited to the serving of tables. He began witnessing to the lost and winning souls for Christ and he even had the privilege of performing miracles. Up to this point, it was only the Apostles who had performed the miracles like Jesus had done. God gave this power to Stephen for the purpose of his witness to the men of Israel. That witness would lead to Stephen’s death. At first glance, we might think that Stephen’s ultimate sacrifice was useless since the Jewish leaders responded so cruelly and as a body did not believe. However, Stephen’s testimony turned out to be the catalyst that set in motion events that would cause the gospel to be taken to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth!

Stephen gave testimony to Jesus in the face of false accusations.

Read Acts 6:8-15 (ESV) ⁸ *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.* ⁹ *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.* ¹⁰ *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.* ¹¹ *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”* ¹² *And they*

stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Jews from many nations resided in Jerusalem and some of these ethnic groups had their own synagogues. The freedmen were the descendants of Jews who had previously been in bondage but had won their freedom from Rome. Wiersbe speculates that since Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia, it is possible that he heard Stephen in the synagogue and may have debated with him. However, nobody could match or resist Stephen's Holy Spirit filled wisdom and power. And those who disputed with him did not like it.

Notice how their treatment of Stephen parallels the way the Jewish leaders had treated Jesus. First, they hired false witnesses to testify against him. Then, they stirred up the people who made false accusations.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. How could Stephen's countenance look like the face of an angel when he was under such tremendous personal stress? He was a man of godly character! A study of Stephen's life reveals that: (1) He was full of the Holy Spirit. (2) He was full of wisdom. (3) He was full of faith. (4) He was full of grace. (5) He was full of power.

The accusers leveled four charges against Stephen saying that he had blasphemed God, Moses, the law and the temple. If these accusations were true, they would have been terrible offenses but they were not true.

Stephen gave testimony to Jesus as fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Read Acts 7:44-53 (ESV)⁴⁴ *“Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen.⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David,⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him.⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,⁴⁹ “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?’⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*

Stephen's sermon covers most of **Acts 7**. We have read only a small portion of it. Stephen did not try to defend himself. But, we can be sure what he said was God-ordained and Spirit-filled. It is a lengthy recital of Old Testament history and ended in a bitter attack on the speaker's hearers. What was Stephen trying to do? Get

himself killed? It is clear that Stephen was not concerned about what man thought! *Psalm 56:11 (ESV)*¹¹ *in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?*

Throughout their history God had raised up men to act as deliverers and prophets to his people, but the Jews repeatedly rejected them and disobeyed the law given by God. Stephen began with Abraham to show what the Jews called blaspheme as actually being a description of the changes that God was bringing to Israel through Jesus, the Righteous One.

After speaking of Abraham, Stephen moved on to Joseph, who was rejected by his brothers but rescued by God. Next, he spoke of Moses, who came to deliver the people but was rejected by them on more than one occasion.

Stephen spoke of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple built by Solomon. The people fell into idolatry and made the mistake of thinking that God actually dwelt in the temple. Even Solomon recognized the truth that God did not live in buildings. *1 Kings 8:27 (ESV)*²⁷ *“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Over the years, the worship at the temple degenerated into mere religious formality, and eventually idols were placed in the temple.*

The Old Testament prophets had fearlessly spoken the Word of the LORD. Had the nation heeded their own prophets, they would have escaped the horrors of the Babylonian siege and the destruction of their city and temple. Stephen was not just talking off the top of his head. He was quoting scripture. For example, it was the prophet Isaiah who said: *Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool...*

Then, Stephen began to get ‘personal’ as he called them stiff-necked people using the same imagery that God had used after the people’s sin with the golden calf. *Exodus 33:3 (ESV)*³ *Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”* Stephen brought up circumcision which was understood metaphorically as the cutting away of pride and sinfulness from the heart. Jeremiah had spoken of the people’s uncircumcised ears in how they refused to listen to God. (**Jer. 6:10**) Isaiah had spoken of how the people in the Old Testament had resisted the Holy Spirit. *Isaiah 63:10 (ESV)*¹⁰ *But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.*

There was a well-established tradition in Judaism that the Jewish people had been responsible for the deaths of the prophets. Jesus had said concerning the prophets in *Luke 13:34 (ESV)*³⁴ *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

Stephen made his accusation against the Jews killing the prophets more specific. They had murdered their Prophet, their Priest, their King – they murdered Jesus!

Stephen gave testimony to Jesus in a Christ-like death.

Read Acts 7:54-60 (ESV) ⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen had been tried by the Sanhedrin, but the Jewish rulers had no power to put anybody to death. (**John 18:31**) Because of Jesus’ popularity among the people, the Jews sought the support of Rome when they plotted to have Him killed. The stoning of Stephen by the Jews was technically illegal, but since Stephen was relatively unknown, they were not so worried about their actions concerning him. Stoning was not a Roman form of execution. But, according to Jewish law, it was the chosen method of death for a blasphemer.

Scripture relates that they were grinding or gnashing one’s teeth which was a sign of rage. Possibly, the stoning was a spontaneous act of mob violence because they became enraged when Stephen exclaimed: *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man **standing** at the right hand of God.*”

Don’t you just love the glimpses into heaven that God’s Word occasionally gives us! Possibly Jesus was standing because He was serving as an advocate to plead Stephen’s cause before God and to welcome him into God’s presence. Some would argue that the Son of Man was standing to condemn Stephen’s opponents, and to mark the point at which the proclamation of the good news passes from the Jews to the Gentiles. Others think that what Stephen’s vision of Jesus is what every believer sees at the moment of death.

Stephen in his message to the Sanhedrin had denounced their sin and disobedience to God for the purpose of leading them to repentance. Yet, notice how he still loved them even while they were stoning him. Stephen’s last words ring down through the ages: *Lord, do not hold this sin against them* – reminding us of how much like Jesus he had become! From the cross Jesus had said of those who crucified Him in **Luke 23:34 (ESV)** ³⁴ ... *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*...

Let’s end with a word of hope. A man named Saul was present at the cruel stoning. He would never forget Stephen’s testimony and death. No doubt those terrible events were working for good to prepare Saul’s heart for his own meeting with the Lord. God never wastes the blood of His saints. Saul also called Paul would soon see the same Son of God that Stephen saw leading Saul to become one of the greatest messengers for the kingdom of God that this world has ever known! He is the one who leaves with the word of hope today. **Romans 8:28 (ESV)** ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*