

# ***“He’s Peopling Eternity”***

Acts 7:1-60

April 26, 2015

**VIDEO:** “Defining Moments”

**Intro:** So if today were *your* last day to live...  
which defining moments would you recall?

QUOTE:

***"I seek not a long life, but a full one,  
like You, Lord Jesus."*** - Jim Elliot, (martyr)

Tell me your desires & I’ll describe your defining moments! - JDP

**T/S:** Today we’re going to learn more about a defining moment in  
the life of a particular Christian & the empowered Church...

Acts 7 = the longest sermon in the book of Acts!

In my opinion... the greatest Christian example after Jesus!

**BIG IDEA:** Here we go again... AGAIN! Christianity 101.

## **PREVIEW:**

- I. Confrontation**
- II. Clarification**
- III. Contextualization**
- IV. Communication**
- V. Crystallization**
- VI. Coronation**

## **1. CONFRONTATION**

<sup>1</sup> *The high priest said, "Are these things so?"*

- A. Context:** (review ch.6)
  - Stephen the “man” = FULL of all God’s best!
  - Stephen the “minister” = selfless doulous
  - Stephen the “missionary” = example of Acts 1:8  
under attack!
  
- B. Patterns:**
  - Prophets proclaimed & were persecuted
  - Prince of Peace proclaimed & was persecuted
  - People empowered proclaim & are persecuted!

## **2. CLARIFICATION:**

<sup>1</sup> *The high priest said, "Are these things so?"*

**A. Specific charges against Stephen:**

- Blasphemy against Moses & God
- Speaking against the Temple & the Law

**B. Scripture tells us ALL the charges were intentional lies!**

**3. CONTEXTUALIZATION: (v.2a)**

<sup>2</sup> *And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers!"*

**A. Principle of Contextualization**

- Speaking the native “heart/culture language” is best
- Understanding under-girds application – JDP

**B. Perverted Contextualization**

- Caution: Beware of “syncretism”
- Compromised contextualization = syncretism! – JDP

## 4. COMMUNICATION: (vv. 2 - 50)

### A. Take note of (5) things throughout the passage:

- God with People
- God in Places
- God revealing Patterns
- God making Points
- God's ultimate Purpose

### B. NOTE: This is NOT a message about a martyr... This is a message about our Messiah!

<sup>2</sup> And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia,  
before he lived in Haran,

<sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.'

<sup>4</sup> "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, *God* had him move to this country in which you are now living.

<sup>5</sup> "But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and *yet*, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM.

<sup>6</sup> "But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.

<sup>7</sup> " 'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND

AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN  
THIS PLACE.'

<sup>8</sup> "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so *Abraham* became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac *became the father of Jacob*, and Jacob *of the twelve patriarchs*.

**NOTE:**

- **People** = Abe
- **Place** = Mesopotamia
- **Pattern** =
  - God goes to sinful man
  - God's grace is received by faith
  - God's call leads to radical change(s)
  - Faithful followers follow faithfully! - JDP
- **Point** = God empowers His people & plan
- **Purpose** = God sets His own standard(s)

<sup>9</sup> "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,

<sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

<sup>11</sup> "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction *with it*, and our fathers could find no food.

<sup>12</sup> "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers *there* the first time.

<sup>13</sup> "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his

brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.

<sup>14</sup> "Then Joseph sent *word* and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons *in all*.

<sup>15</sup> "And Jacob went down to Egypt and *there* he and our fathers died.

**NOTE:**

- **People** = Joseph & his brothers (good/bad guys)
- **Place** = Egypt
- **Pattern** = resist vs. rescue & 1<sup>st</sup> vs. 2<sup>nd</sup> encounter
- **Point** = revealing humanity's sin nature
- **Purpose** = God's boundless blessings revealed

<sup>16</sup> "*From there* they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

<sup>17</sup> "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,

<sup>18</sup> until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH.

<sup>19</sup> "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.

**NOTE: the people of God are perpetually persecuted!**

<sup>20</sup> "It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his

father's home.

- <sup>21</sup> "And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.
- <sup>22</sup> "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.
- <sup>23</sup> "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.
- <sup>24</sup> "And when he saw one *of them* being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.
- <sup>25</sup> "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.
- <sup>26</sup> "On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?'
- <sup>27</sup> "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER & JUDGE OVER US?'
- <sup>28</sup> 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?'

**NOTE:**            "the '*people of God*' developed a pattern of rejecting the true Person(s) of God"

<sup>29</sup> "At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

<sup>30</sup> "After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE

FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH.

<sup>31</sup> "When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look *more* closely, there came the voice of the Lord:

<sup>32</sup> 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.

<sup>33</sup> "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.

<sup>34</sup> 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND **I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT!**

**QUOTE:** (see Acts 1:8; Isaiah 6:8; Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:14-17)

**I think a major reason for the scandalous record within the church (today) is that Christians often want to be comfortable; thus, they resist change. Christianity, however, can never coexist with comfort. Human thoughts are too far from God's, and the world is in so much trouble that the nearer we get to God's way of thinking, the more uncomfortable we will become. Evangelicals often call themselves**

conservatives because they are faithful to *the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3)*. Yet the conservative mentality is often associated with an unwillingness to change and accept the mistakes one has made. Biblical Christians must always be open to change because they know how far they are from the ideals of God. We must be open to self-criticism and remember that this self-criticism will often come through people who have discovered something from the Word that the rest of us had neglected. May we welcome such prophets, rather than persecute them. And may we humbly open ourselves to correction.

<sup>35</sup> "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom **God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer** with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.

<sup>36</sup> "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

<sup>37</sup> "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL

RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR  
BRETHREN.'

<sup>38</sup> "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and *who was* with our fathers; and **he received living oracles to pass on to you.**

<sup>39</sup> "**Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt,**  
<sup>40</sup> SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT — WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.'

<sup>41</sup> "At that time **they made a calf** and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were **rejoicing in the works of their hands.**

<sup>42</sup> "**But God turned away** and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? (Amos 5)

<sup>43</sup> 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

<sup>44</sup> "Our fathers had **the tabernacle** of testimony **in the wilderness**, just as **He who spoke to Moses directed him** to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.

NOTE:

- **People** = Moses & Israelites (good/bad guys)
- **Place** =

- Egypt
- Mount Sinai
- Burning Bush
- Wilderness
- Tabernacle
- **Pattern** =
  - God rescues... BUT the God-less resist!
  - “God’s people” reject God’s person...
  - Godless people “take” BUT turn from God!
- **Point** = not all of Israel is Israel...
- **Purpose** = God continues to show contrasts!

<sup>45</sup> "And having received it (the Tabernacle) in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom **God drove out** before our fathers, until the time of David.

<sup>46</sup> "*David* found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

<sup>47</sup> "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.

<sup>48</sup> "However, **the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands**; as the prophet says:

<sup>49</sup> 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?

<sup>50</sup> 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

## **NOTE:**

- **People** = Joshua, David, Solomon
- **Place** =
  - Tabernacle (in the wilderness & conquests)
  - (Tabernacle in) Promised Land
  - Temple (eventually built in Jerusalem)
- **Pattern** =
  - God rescues... the God-less resist & fight!
  - God's presence moves with His people...
- **Point** =
  - God's plans cannot be thwarted!
  - God's presence cannot be contained!
  - God's people will always be challenged...  
No matter what!
  
- **Purpose** =
  - God's sovereign power is always on display!
  - God is sending a shot over the bow...
  - **God warns to wake up worshippers.** - JDP

## **SUMMARY of Communication:**

- A. God's compassionate communication is corrective!
- B. God's presence/power are not limited geographically
- C. God's people have a pattern of rejecting God's person
- D. God's point: "It's NOT about YOU - it's about Jesus!"
- E. God's purpose: Confront & Convict, so as to Convert

## 5. Crystallization: (vv. 51-53)

\*\*\* Once again, Christ-following comes down to...

### Worship & Warfare

*QUOTE: Christians get used to ways of worshiping God and communicating the gospel. But some of the ways we are "comfortable with" may be hopelessly irrelevant if we want to reach the lost around us. True Christian love drives us to do things with which we are uncomfortable so that we can reach our contemporaries (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Others who see these new ways of communication may become upset and oppose them.*

<sup>51</sup> "You men who are *stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.*

<sup>52</sup> "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose *betrayers and murderers you have now become;*

<sup>53</sup> *you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."*

**NOTE:** Stephen is being very Christ-like here!

*Christ-likeness confronts those who will not submit  
to the Lord AND/OR His leaders. - JDP*

**The religious always “RESIST vs. REPENT”**

**They’d rather “GRUMBLE than HUMBLE themselves!**

It is important to note that Stephen's radicalism had the Scriptures as its source and authority.... though what he was saying was revolutionary, it was not new.

**Remember:** Stephen had the face of an angel and expressed God's wrath against sin.

**QUOTE:**

*Failure at times to get angry over wrong  
is a reflection of fallenness  
rather than godliness.*

**6. CORONATION:** (vv. 54 – 60) his name means “**achieved crown**”

<sup>54</sup> *Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick,  
and they began **gnashing their teeth at him**.*

<sup>55</sup> *But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into  
heaven and saw the glory of God, and **Jesus standing** at  
the right hand of God;*

<sup>56</sup> *and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and  
**the Son of Man standing** at the right hand of God."*

NOTE: **Why is Jesus “standing” vs. sitting?**

ANSWER: He is getting up to receive His servant!

<sup>57</sup> *But they cried out with a loud voice, and **covered their  
ears** and rushed at him with one impulse.*

<sup>58</sup> *When they had driven him out of the city, they began  
**stoning him**; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at  
the feet of a young man named Saul.*

<sup>59</sup> *They went on stoning Stephen as **he called on the Lord**  
and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"*

## Contrasts between Stephen's attitude & that of his accusers

1. **When false accusations were made against him, "his face was like the face of an angel" (6:15).**
2. **When the people were gnashing their teeth at him in fury (7:54), he was filled with the Holy Spirit and had a clear vision of Christ (7:55).**
3. **While they stoned him fiercely, he prayed to God asking that their sin be excused (7:60).**

*"My grace is sufficient for you,  
for my power is made perfect in weakness"  
(2 Cor. 12:9).*

*<sup>60</sup> Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.*

**We need to have less therapy & more  
theology for suffering!**

Paul speaks of desiring: "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings [and] becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10).

Christ is a suffering Savior, and if we are to be truly one with him, we too must suffer. There is a depth of union with Christ that comes to us only through suffering.

*Suffering and evangelism:* God uses persecution and suffering to advance the gospel.

What we suffer increases our credibility in ministry. Paul can tell the Galatians, "Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17).

**Tertullian =** *"Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to the dust... The more you mow us down the more we grow!"*

Today, for us, the question to ask is *not*,  
"Why are we being persecuted?"

*but,*

"Why are we not being persecuted?"

QUOTE:

*God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but He does call us to be "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1-2). In some respects, it may be harder to live for Christ than to die for Him; but if we are living for Him, we will be prepared to die for Him if that is what God calls us to do.*

*Obviously, all the above things can be easily avoided.*

*"I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those whom I would have kept on earth till they were older. God is peopling Eternity,*

*and I must not restrict Him  
to old men and women."*

- Jim Elliot

*"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a  
crown of life"*

**(Rev. 2:10)**.

*"He is no fool who gives away what he  
cannot keep... to gain what he cannot lose."*

- Jim Elliot  
(in the spirit of Stephen)

**CLOSE:**

*Stephen's address opens with "the God of glory"  
and closes with the glory of God (Acts 7:55);  
and all the time he spoke, his face radiated that  
same glory!*

**Let's Pray!**

**STEPHEN'S FAMOUS SPEECH** has been called his "defense," but, as Bruce points out, "it is not a speech for the defense in the forensic sense of the term." That is, **it is not "calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin." Rather, it is "a defense of pure Christianity as God's appointed way of worship."** It uses Scripture as a base, which is also the source of authority of Stephen's audience. It is, as we will see, a case of true biblical contextualization.

### *Stephen's key themes.*

We might be tempted to neglect the three themes of Stephen's speech since we no longer need to be freed from the confines of Judaism. But they contain important and helpful aspects of Christian theology. The issue of God's activity not being confined to the geographical land of Israel has, to my knowledge, not been a problem in the church since Stephen's time. However, the idea of Christendom that has influenced much of the thinking on the relationship between state and church in Europe a few centuries ago can be seen, at least in spirit, as contradicting Stephen's emphasis (see below).

The other two issues have had more direct application to the church through the centuries. While no Christians claim that true worship can only be done at the Jewish temple, we have at different times come up with our own "Jerusalem temples." There has been an almost magical veneration of some places as holy ground. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also pursued this theme. He emphasized that while in the era of the old covenant the high priest was needed and regular sacrifices had to be made in the temple, now the eternal sacrifice of Jesus has made those unnecessary ([Heb. 9-10](#)). Christ opened the door to a new and living way, where we can approach the throne of God with confidence ([10:19-20](#); see [4:16](#)). We therefore do not need a temple anymore. Paul later

wrote that we are the temple of God, in whom God himself dwells ([1 Cor. 3:16-17](#); [6:19](#)).

*Stephen's third point (that the Jews have always rejected God's representatives) contains a warning for all of us who claim to be God's chosen people. We too can end up opposing God's chosen vessels; indeed, the history of the church shows that Christians have been as bad at this as the Jews of old were.*

Stephen argues his points from Israel's history as recorded in the Jewish Scriptures. He stresses **three major themes**.

**1. The activity of God is not confined to the geographical land of Israel.** God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia ([7:2-3](#)) and Haran ([7:4](#)). He blessed Joseph in Egypt ([7:9-16](#)). He spoke to Moses in the desert near Sinai during the incident of the burning bush ([7:30-34](#)). He performed wonders and signs in Egypt, the Red Sea, and the desert ([7:36](#)), and he also gave his people the law at Mount Sinai ([7:38](#)).

**2. Worship acceptable to God is not confined to the Jerusalem temple.** The burning bush was holy ground, and Moses had to remove his sandals there ([7:33](#)). Moses encountered God in Mount Sinai and was given living words ([7:38](#)). The traveling tabernacle was a suitable place of worship for the people of Israel ([7:44-46](#)). Stephen concludes that "everything necessary for pure worship was available to the people in the wilderness, before they ever entered the Holy land." The Jewish Scriptures testify that God does not dwell in houses made by human beings ([7:48-50](#)). Actually, as Bruce says, "Solomon's action [of building the temple] is deprecated" (see [7:47-50](#)). As "the Most High does not live in houses made by men"

(7:48), Stephen is implying that "to announce the suppression or destruction of the temple was not to commit blasphemy or sacrilege against God, because God was independent of any temple."

### 3. The Jews have constantly rejected God's

representatives. Joseph was rejected by the patriarchs (7:9). Moses was rejected when he tried to intervene in a quarrel between two Jews (7:26-29), and yet this Moses was sent as Israel's deliverer (7:35). The message of Moses they rejected and instead erected a golden calf (7:39-43). Stephen climaxes his message in vigorous language by claiming that Israelite history is a history of rejection (7:51-53). It is possible that Stephen has to end his talk abruptly at this point because his audience has become so restive.

There is little about Jesus and a lot about Moses in this speech. This is understandable since the charge against Stephen is about his rejecting Moses' teachings (6:11, 14). Stephen points to one significant thing that Moses said to the Israelites about Jesus: "God will send you a prophet like me from your own people" (7:37). The other two references to Jesus are both in verse 52: The Jews "even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One," and they "betrayed and murdered him."

Stephen's final words of accusation (7:51-53) may make us wonder what has happened to his angelic face. After all, when we think of an angel, we think of a sweet, gentle person who has no place for wrath and judgment. This idea, however, does not come from Scripture, for some of the angels in the Bible are agents of judgment. Stephen is like Christ here. Though Jesus radiated the love of God as no one did, he also expressed God's wrath against hypocrisy and sham, especially in his denunciation of the Pharisees (Matt. 23:13-23).

**The ministry of Stephen helped blaze new trails for the gospel,** which has earned him the title "radical." **He opened the door theologically for the world mission of the church.** We do not know whether he himself realized this, but **he freed Christianity from the temple and therefore from Judaism.** A short time later the church concluded that one does not have to be Jewish first in order to be Christian. **Though Stephen ended his life an apparent failure, though he did not live to see the fruit of his theologizing, God revealed later that his ministry had borne great fruit. The trail he blazed was later followed by Paul**—the one who approved of his death (8:1) and kept the clothes of those who stoned him (7:58), but who later became the apostle to the Gentiles. The link between Stephen and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has also been discussed much. **Stephen is also considered the precursor of the later Christian apologists, especially those who defended Christianity against Judaism.**

### ***Biblical radicalism.***

As **God used Stephen to lead the church along a radically new path,** Stephen's life and ministry will help us see the qualities required of those whom God calls to blaze new trails for him. His radicalism not only led him to fearlessly proclaim truths that were unpalatable to his audience, it also led him to thunder accusations against them. Consequently, his opponents severely opposed him and even gnashed their teeth at him (7:54). But in the midst of it all Stephen expressed the graciousness of God (6:8).

We can **note a series of contrasts between Stephen's attitude and that of his accusers.**

4. **When false accusations were made against him, "his face was like the face of an angel" (6:15).**

5. **When the people were gnashing their teeth at him in fury (7:54), he was filled with the Holy Spirit and had a clear vision of Christ (7:55).**
6. **While they stoned him fiercely, he prayed to God asking that their sin be excused (7:60).**

**The gospel is by nature so radical that all serious Christians will sooner or later find themselves challenging people in the way they think and act.** Stephen shows us that when we face opposition in such situations, we should remain winsome.

**It is important to note that Stephen's radicalism had the Scriptures as its source and authority.** What he said sprang from the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. In that sense, **though what he was saying was revolutionary, it was not new.**

**He did not create new truth; he discovered truth already taught explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures and the teachings of Christ.** If we approach **the Bible** with an open mind, we will find that it **will make us also into radicals**, for **God's truth always has something radical to say to this fallen world.** Given our limitations, we will always fall short of fully apprehending the truth of the Bible. Thus, **we will constantly discover fresh truth if we are open to learning from Scripture.**

**But the world, and even the church, will oppose what we discover and communicate.** Yet even the prospect of death did not deter Stephen from communicating his radical scriptural message.

**Radicals often express their message in anger to an obstinate people.** This was true of Stephen, but he exemplified the unusual combination of an angelic face and angry accusation of the Jews for rejecting God's ways. If our hearts burn too with the things that are close to the heart of God, we will become angry at people's disdain

**for the ways of God. But at such times we must reflect both the holiness and the love of God.**

### ***Biblical contextualization.***

Stephen's speech is an example of biblical contextualization. Contextualization takes place when we make our message relevant to the context in which we present it. Stephen spoke from the Jewish Scriptures. He obviously knew his audience well, and he spoke in a way that was relevant to them. But the gospel was so revolutionary in nature that unless they were willing to repent of their past ways and take the radical step of conversion, they had to oppose him. Each generation of Christians must seek ways to make the gospel relevant to their communities without compromising its content.

### **Contemporary Application:**

#### **THE CHALLENGE OF balanced Christianity.**

In our age, when specialization has gone to an extreme in almost every sphere of life, **Stephen's balance has much to say to us. He sought to be obedient in all areas of life and thus exhibited combinations that we sometimes think do not go together.** We are so influenced by pragmatism that we may look at specific things a person can achieve without thinking about other areas of his or her life. Take the example of a wonderful singer who is a poor wife and mother because of an uncontrollable temper. We might use her in an evangelistic rally, claiming that her private life does not necessarily impact her public singing. Or we might excuse a brilliant apologist for not being faithful in attending worship every Sunday, saying that he has a lot of study to do. Or we may leave biblical reflection to the teachers among us and look to the creative people to come up with new ideas for our programs.

Stephen's life shows us that it is possible, and indeed essential, for Christians to be balanced.

Singers must be patient at home. Apologists must be faithful about participating in worship. Creative people must be men and women of God's Word. **Biblical balance refers to total obedience.** Such totality will force us to avoid unhealthy excesses. For example, we cannot neglect our families, because obedience to Christ includes caring for our families.

*Acquiring inspired wisdom.*

**QUOTE:** If we are to have inspired wisdom so that opponents of the gospel will not be able to "**stand up against [our] wisdom or the Spirit by whom**" (6:10) we speak, **we must work both at our message and our lives. We must outthink and outlive those who oppose the gospel.**

*How to become winsome radicals.*

**QUOTE:** The call to be winsome radicals, like Stephen, is an important challenge facing Christians today. If we are faithful to God, we are sure to face anger and opposition from within and outside the church. We will be treated unjustly, and many will attribute unworthy motives to what we do. Our "true worth" will not be recognized, and perhaps we too will end our lives as Stephen did—as apparent failures.

**Stephen's life shows us how to maintain winsomeness in a hostile world. He was "a man full of God's grace" (6:8).**

Whatever people may do to us, however severe their sins against us may be, we must be able to affirm the supremacy of grace—that God's grace "superabounds" (lit. trans. of *hyperperisseuo* in [Rom. 5:20](#) and *hyperpleonazo* in [1 Tim. 1:14](#)) over all sins and situations. We must affirm the principle that God will work good through what we have experienced because we "love him" and "have been called according to his purpose" ([Rom. 8:28](#)). We must be able to say, as Joseph said to his brothers who had treated him so badly, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" ([Gen. 50:20](#)). We will need to battle in the presence of God, as the psalmists did ([Ps. 73](#)), until we know that he has comforted us and that the vision of superabounding grace has overcome our bitterness. Then, having tasted of the comforting grace of God, we will be able to minister this grace to others ([2 Cor. 1:3-7](#)).

**Stephen clearly achieved his winsomeness through his contact with God. Evidence of this intimate relationship abounds in [Acts 6-7](#).**

**His communion with God seemed to deepen as the viciousness of the opposition deepened.**

When he was brought to trial, so close was his tie with God that his face looked like that of an angel ([6:15](#)). When he is then described as being filled with the Spirit, he had a vision of Christ and began to say the same things that Jesus said at his death ([vv. 56, 59-60](#)).

**QUOTE: The key to maintaining winsomeness under pressure is maintaining our tie with God, as Stephen did. We must develop the discipline of seeking God and his beautiful face first ([Ps. 27:4](#)) whenever we are attacked, so that we can always operate out of an experience of grace. Then grace will make us gracious, and we will become winsome radicals. **Millions of Christians, by not waging a****

war against bitterness, have missed out on the opportunities to radiate God's grace through winsomeness and charm.

With this winsomeness... Stephen had the face of an angel and expressed God's wrath against sin.

**QUOTE:** Sometimes we hear people say, "He's such a saint, he never gets angry." This is because we have come to value an understanding of tolerance that is far from the biblical lifestyle...

*Failure at times to get angry over wrong  
is a reflection of fallenness  
rather than godliness.*

*How the Scriptures can make us radicals.*

In our discussion of biblical radicalism, we pointed out that Stephen's radicalism had Scripture as its source and authority. In the same way we too, because of the radical nature of God's truth, will become radicals if we take the Scriptures seriously today. (4 ways)

**(1) We can *rediscover truths*** that have been hidden from us because of theological, cultural, historical, or other blinds. Stephen had to remind his audience of what the Bible said about the temple. These were truths that had been obscured through years of

tradition. The evangelical church has recently rediscovered similar truths—for example, the biblical use of the whole body in worship, resulting in dance and the use of the hands. Another has been the importance of worship as an end in itself rather than as a means of evangelism or teaching. Helpful in this process is learning from people of other traditions who may not be hampered by the blinds we have. For example, evangelical authors like A. W. Tozer, who helped the evangelical church rediscover biblical spirituality and worship, have found much inspiration from Roman Catholic spiritual writers.

**(2) We can see *implications in what the Bible says***, which will open the door to radical ideas. Stephen concluded that the temple was not necessary by drawing implications from what the Old Testament said about God. In a similar vein, the Bible does not give an explicit prohibition of slavery. But about two hundred years ago, Christians in Britain realized that what the Bible said about the worth of individuals clearly contradicted the form of slavery that was practiced in the British Empire. Thus, they fought it on scriptural grounds. In this century Christians in our part of the world have been realizing this about casteism and class prejudice.

**(3) The Bible can become a radical book when we try to *apply it in a thoroughgoing manner***. Stephen had the audacity to point the finger and say "you," and to thunder accusations against his opponents as he applied the truths he expounded. ***QUOTE: Thoroughgoing application is one of the most "dangerous" aspects of preaching. Christians, especially those in the evangelical tradition, like to hear doctrinally sound messages. Many appreciate our preaching on unpleasant topics like hell and judgment. But what if we apply some of the teachings to areas that are not considered "kosher" by evangelicals? They may accuse us of meddling rather than preaching.***

(4) We can be radical in *the form in which we express Christianity*. *QUOTE: Christians get used to ways of worshiping God and communicating the gospel. But some of the ways we are "comfortable with" may be hopelessly irrelevant if we want to reach the lost around us. True Christian love drives us to do things with which we are uncomfortable so that we can reach our contemporaries (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Others who see these new ways of communication may become upset and oppose them.*

**QUOTE:** If Scripture drives us to radicalism, we must not be surprised if our best efforts at obedience to God go unappreciated. Ours is a market-oriented culture, and the church has been heavily influenced by this. Markets thrive on popularity, but radical things are rarely popular, at least at the start.

For this reason we may shy away from biblical radicalism.

We may avoid preaching a sermon that people will not like. We may avoid talking about a scriptural truth that will be opposed by influential people.

*The perspective of God's sovereignty should help us be faithful. If we do "not become weary in doing good ... at the*

*proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" ([Gal. 6:9](#)).*

**QUOTE:** *The reaping in Stephen's case took place after his death. But he was faithful. Thus, undaunted by the world's fascination for quick results, the Christian remains faithful to the eternal will of God. "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" ([1 John 2:17](#)).*

*Becoming biblical contextualizers.*

**Stephen contextualized his message by adapting it to his audience without toning down its radical nature. In contextualizing the gospel today, we must present it so that our audience understands it and does so in a way that is relevant to them and grabs their attention. We may use language and practices that our audience already uses, if are consonant with scriptural measures of judgment. But we must not tone down our message and leave out things that are unpleasant. Neither may we add things that are alien to or contradict the Scriptures, for then contextualization becomes syncretism. When that happens, people end up accepting what we say and remain perfectly happy**

## as Buddhists, Hindus, or secularists.

Missiologist Paul Hiebert has popularized the term *critical contextualization* to refer to a biblical way of doing this. **We must study people and their culture as well as biblical teachings that relate to their ideas and practices. We must then come up with a message and a lifestyle that is relevant, understandable, and inviting to their situation.** This message will challenge their culture through God's principles. When that happens, **some who do not want to change will be provoked and oppose the Word. But others will accept what we say and be transformed by Christ.**

### (Important Context)

**Sacred space?** It is true to say that at different times in the history of the church, Christians have neglected the teaching of Stephen that there is no special place (such as the Jerusalem temple) to worship God. Believers have fought battles, for example, over the place of the altar in worship. On one extreme are the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and "high church" Anglican (Episcopalian) traditions, who have the holy altar depicting the presence of God in the sanctuary. On the other extreme are the Brethren Assemblies, who call their places of worship gospel halls. These halls have the pulpit in the middle, depicting the primacy of God's Word.

The Reformers were surely correct in battling what may be called the sacralizing of space. There is no place in the New Testament for holy places where people go on pilgrimage, expecting merit to accrue to them by being there. The popularity of these places even today may be traced to a lack of an intimate knowledge of God resulting from not having the confidence to freely enter his throne, which the new covenant opened for us ([Heb. 4:16; 10:19-20](#)).

**KEY: While the Protestant, especially the evangelical, movement can be credited with combating the unbiblical sacralizing of space, it may have gone too far in emphasizing intimacy with God to the exclusion of honoring the holiness of God. We must remember that the same letter that speaks of confidence in entering the throne of God also asks us to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Heb. 12:28-29).**

*"Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth" (Ps. 96:9).*

*God's people opposing his representatives.*

Stephen's indictment of the Jews as opposing those whom God sent with his message should cause us sober reflection. This is especially so since **the history of the church has so many instances of Christians being out of step with what God is doing**, either opposing the very people who were pleasing God or siding with those who were championing unbiblical standards. Let me cite **three examples**:

- **When William Carey (18<sup>th</sup> century Baptist missionary to India – known as the “father of modern missions”)** attempted to place before a meeting of Baptist ministers the challenge of missions, he is said to have been **rebuked by a senior minister** with the words, **"Sit down young man! When God chooses to**

*convert the heathen he will do it without your aid or mine!"*

- When the sixty-five-year-old British Methodist leader Thomas Coke announced that he was planning to take a missionary team to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), a famous churchman, Dr. Edward Pusey, wrote accusing him of trying to build an empire. Coke "was known," said Pusey, "to be ambitious, affecting high titles of honor, to which he had no claim."
- When Hitler began his radical nationalistic program, many Christians joined him. Moreover, many not only in Germany but also throughout the world kept quiet when they heard about the atrocities being committed against the Jews.

## **QUOTE:**

**I think a major reason for this scandalous record within the church is that Christians often want to be comfortable; thus, they resist change. Christianity, however, can**

never coexist with comfort. Human thoughts are too far from God's, and the world is in so much trouble that the nearer we get to God's way of thinking, the more uncomfortable we will become. Evangelicals often called themselves conservatives because they are faithful to the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Yet the conservative mentality is often associated with an unwillingness to change and accept the mistakes one has made. Biblical Christians must always be open to change because they know how far they are from the ideals of God. We must be open to self-criticism and remember that this self-criticism will often come through people who have discovered something from the Word that the rest of us had neglected. May we welcome such prophets, rather than persecute them. And may we humbly open ourselves to correction.

## Stephen's Vision ([7:54-56](#))

WITH HIS ACCUSATION against the Jewish people ([7:51-53](#)), Stephen brings his speech to an (abrupt?) end. Predictably, the reaction is bitter ([7:54](#)). Yet the next verse starts with one of the many glorious "buts" found in the Bible, signaling a change in the direction or tone of events. The Greek literally says of Stephen, "But being filled with the Holy Spirit..." ([7:55a](#)). The word "being" (*hyparchon*, not translated in the NIV) means here "to be in a state, normally with the implication of a particular set of circumstances." Stephen had been filled with the Holy Spirit throughout his Christian life, and this fullness did not leave him at his time of crisis. It intensified into a special anointing, opening the door to a vision of God's glory and of Christ ([vv. 55b-56](#)). As F. F. Bruce points out, "It was the Spirit of prophecy that took possession of him now." Here is another instance where God comes with a special revelation of himself to comfort the faithful in their time of deep crisis.

Stephen's vision is filled with deep significance. At his time of shame and apparent defeat he "saw the glory of God" ([7:55b](#)). He also saw Jesus and exclaimed, "Look ... I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" ([7:56](#)). This is the only New Testament occurrence of the title "the Son of Man" outside the Gospels. Stephen's statement reminds us of a similar statement made by Jesus to the same court only a few months before. The high priest had asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" and Jesus had replied, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" ([Mark 14:61-62](#)). For that Jesus was adjudged guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death ([14:63-64](#)).

Now Stephen is, as it were, challenging that judgment by affirming that Jesus is indeed the glorious Christ and is now at the right hand of God. The Sanhedrin had no choice but to condemn Stephen too, unless they were willing to say they were wrong about their verdict on Jesus. This vision must have given Stephen courage.

"The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies" ([Ps. 110:1-2](#)). Stephen's vision confirms their interpretation of that psalm.

Why is Jesus *standing* and not seated, as the other Scriptures declare? Many explanations have been given for this shift. I agree with the many commentators today who argue that Luke intends Jesus' standing "as a witness or advocate in Stephen's defense." Jesus had said, "I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God" ([Luke 12:8](#)). In keeping with that promise, as Stephen is rejected by earthly courts, he finds Jesus acting as his advocate and testifying on his behalf. But Jesus is also the Judge, whose judgment alone matters from the eternal perspective. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. Rejection by his own people, the Jews, would have been hard to bear, but acceptance by that greatest of Jews, great David's greater Son, more than compensates for the pain.

### **Stephen's Death ([7:57-60](#))**

WITH DRAMATIC CRISPNESS Luke describes how the angry audience acts in haste to put Stephen to death. When they add these words about the vision of Jesus to his damaging statements about the temple, they have no choice but to kill him for blasphemy—just as they had killed Jesus. Their covering of their ears ([7:57](#)) must have been a characteristic response to blasphemy. They wish "to shut out his words lest God come and consume them for listening to such blasphemy." Stephen is dragged out of the city for stoning ([7:58a](#)) in keeping with the command to "take the blasphemer outside the camp ... and ... stone him" ([Lev. 24:14](#)). Luke mentions Saul at this point ([Acts 7:58b](#)), in keeping with his habit of introducing major characters of his book in a narrative before they come into prominence (cf. [4:36-37](#); [6:5](#)).....

Stephen's last words are surprisingly close to two of the last words of Jesus just before he died. He asks God to receive his spirit ([7:59](#); cf. [Luke 23:46](#)) and not to "hold this sin against" his killers ([Acts 7:60](#); cf.

[Luke 23:34](#)). Only Luke mentions the two parallel statements of Christ. Presumably he wants his readers to note the similarity. As we will see below, he has entered into the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings.

## **BRIDGING CONTEXTS:**

**LUKE UNDOUBTEDLY HAD several reasons for giving Stephen so much prominence in Acts.** In the previous study we discussed three of them: the example of balanced Christianity that one sees in his life, the model of godly radicalism and contextualization in his ministry, and the important place his message had in the development of Christian doctrine. **The present passage shows the way Stephen and the early churches faced persecution. Suffering is one of the major subthemes of this book.** It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Luke is describing the suffering of Stephen and the church and their response to it in order that his readers might glean lessons on how Christians should face suffering.

### ***Suffering and fullness.***

Stephen's experience of the Spirit's fullness in preparation for death (7:55) gives us a fresh insight into the nature of that fullness. It is given here to help a faithful Christian face suffering. This theme receives extended treatment in Romans 8, the great chapter of Paul that describes the Spirit-filled life. The second half of that chapter is devoted to the experience of the Spirit amidst suffering ([Rom. 8:17-39](#)).

**Stephen's anointing with the Spirit's fullness took the form of a vision of God's glory and of the exalted Christ in his role as advocate in heaven. Through it Stephen received strength to face his painful ordeal triumphantly.**

**On many other occasions in Acts when God's servants suffered for the gospel, God revealed himself in some recognizable way that gave them the courage to go on (4:31; 18:9; 23:11; 27:23-24).** We can conclude that **God, knowing how much we can endure, gives us his strength in our times of need, which boosts our spirits and spurs us on to obedience, even to obedience leading to death.** In a similar way God fulfilled this promise in the life of Paul when no relief from suffering came to him:

*"My grace is sufficient for you,  
for my power is made perfect in weakness"  
(2 Cor. 12:9).*

### ***Sharing in Christ's sufferings.***

We noted in the "Original Meaning" section Stephen's two statements that are similar to what Luke records Jesus as saying at his death (7:59-60). **When we compare Luke's records of the deaths of Jesus and Stephen, the tie between them is too close to be coincidental. Stephen is accused of a similar charge made against Christ: offense against the temple (Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58). In a remarkable fulfillment of a prophecy made by Christ at his trial (Luke 22:69), Stephen receives a vision of the Lord Jesus at the right hand of God. Both Jesus and Stephen are taken out of the city to be killed. As they die, they say similar things. Not only has Jesus come close to Stephen, Stephen has, in the process, become like Jesus.**

Paul speaks of desiring these same two things: "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings [and] becoming like him in his death" (**Phil. 3:10**). Stephen has, in effect, entered into the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings.

The Bible's teaching on this doctrine is a natural extension of the doctrine of our union with Christ. **Christ is a suffering Savior, and if we are to be truly one with him, we too must suffer. There is a depth of union with Christ that comes to us only through suffering.** But not only do we share in his sufferings, *he shares in our sufferings*. The exalted Christ, sharing in the glory of God, is not deaf to our cries of pain as we suffer; he himself suffers with us when we suffer. Paul came to understand this on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" ([Acts 9:4](#)). Saul had been hitting the church, but Christ had been feeling the pain!

**Thus, in our times of suffering we can affirm by faith, "This is going to bring me closer to Jesus. Therefore it is a blessing."**

### ***Suffering and evangelism.***

**As noted above, Luke implies that Stephen's death and the persecution that followed served the cause of the gospel in being a catalyst in getting the message out (8:4; 11:19).**

[In the previous study, we saw that Stephen's ministry opened the door *theologically* for the world mission of the church (by showing that the temple was not necessary). Now it opens the door *circumstantially* for world missions, for it catapults missionaries out of Jerusalem into other geographical areas mentioned in the Great Commission. We can glean here a principle that is always true, insofar as other passages also suggest it: **God uses persecution and suffering to advance the gospel.** Writing to the Philippians about his imprisonment, Paul said, "*Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel*" ([Phil. 1:12](#)).]

**Perhaps the strongest affirmation of this belief is Colossians 1:24-25:**

*"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness."*

## **CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION:**

**QUOTE:** We must not forget that the Spirit's fullness is also given to prepare us for suffering, which is such an important part of the life of obedience. God is powerfully at work both when the sun shines brightly and when the dark clouds loom over us.

**QUOTE:** The Japanese evangelist and social reformer Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960) once thought that he was going blind. He described what he felt like in this way: "The darkness, the darkness is a holy of holies of which no one can rob me... *In the darkness I meet God face to face.*"

Amidst our pain we will wonder whether it is worth suffering for the gospel. At such times we ought to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" ([Heb. 12:2](#)). With such a vision we can run with perseverance the race that is set before us, refusing to give up when the going gets tough and divesting

ourselves of unnecessary earthly weights that so easily entangle us ([12:1](#)).

### ***Suffering and the pursuit of pleasure.***

Can we sustain the biblical idea that suffering is a blessing in a hedonistic society, which is bent on a relentless pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of suffering? Not unless we rediscover true Christian hedonism. Because God is the Creator of all things, we also know that he is the source of purest and fullest pleasure (for he created pleasure). The greatest pleasure is to know God intimately. As David said, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps. 16:11).

Our pursuit of the highest pleasure, therefore, is a pursuit of union with God in Christ. And one of the deepest aspects of that union is sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Paul said, "I want to know Christ ... and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10). As Peter O'Brien has pointed out, the Greek here implies that sharing in Christ's sufferings is an aspect of knowing Christ.

#### **QUOTE:**

*The question, then, is how important knowing Christ is to us. If it is our consuming passion, we will not resent suffering because amidst the pain, we have the underlying assurance that it is leading us to achieve our deepest ambition in life.*

John and Betty Stam were missionaries in China who were martyred by the communists in the 1930s while they were still in their late twenties. John Stam once said, "*Take away everything I have, but do not take away the sweetness of walking and talking with the King of glory!*" Those who find such joy in their union with Christ will find that suffering is indeed a blessing, for it leads them to greater depths of the greatest pleasure one can know. We need to redeem pleasure from the stranglehold of emptiness to which the world has condemned it.

### *Suffering and ministry today.*

**Not only does suffering deepen our tie with Christ, it also enhances the effectiveness of our ministry, especially the ministry of evangelism. This again is a message that ought to be emphasized in a world that seeks to avoid pain.**

#### GREAT PRACTICAL EXAMPLE!

For example, *much is being written today about the dangers of stress. But we must never forget that a certain type of stress is necessary and helpful for effective ministry—the stress of taking on the pain of our people. Did not Paul say, "I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28)? Note too his stress over the way-ward Galatians: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!" (Gal. 4:19-20).*

QUOTE:

**The truth is that what we suffer increases our credibility in ministry.** Paul can tell the Galatians, "**Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus**" (**Gal. 6:17**). **Such credibility opens the door for us to exhort people with some authority.** Paul told the Ephesians, "**As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received**" (**Eph. 4:1**). **Exhortation has gone out of fashion today, and one wonders whether that situation would change if Christian ministers were willing to suffer more.**

It is, however, in evangelism that the power of suffering is best illustrated. **The North African Christian writer and apologist Tertullian (c. 160-225)**, addressing the rulers of the Roman empire, said, "**Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to the dust... The more you mow us down the more we grow, the seed is the blood of Christians.**" A similar statement comes from an **Anglican bishop from Uganda, Festo Kivengere**. Speaking in February 1979, on the second anniversary of the death of his archbishop, Janani Luwum, he said, "**Without bleeding the church fails to bless.**"

This century has seen a lot of persecution and martyrdom of Christians. Dr. Paul Carlson may have been correct when he told the Congolese believers before his martyrdom that more believers have died for Christ in this century than in all the previous centuries combined. But associated with the persecution is great effectiveness in evangelism, as the amazing growth of the church in China in the past half-century proves. The rapid growth of the church in Sri Lanka in the past fifteen years and the rise of persecution have gone hand in hand. Speaking on persecution in Sri Lanka at the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, my father said that **the question to ask is not,**

"Why are we being persecuted?" but,  
"Why are we not being persecuted?"

*Evangelism provokes persecution while  
persecution energizes evangelism.*

If we are obedient to Christ, even if we live in countries where there is relative freedom for Christians, we will face suffering of some sort— even if it is the suffering of tiredness or of pressure out of a concern for people. **It may be the hurt that comes from people who disappoint us even though we refuse to give up on them. It may mean being betrayed by people we trusted. It can take the form of persecution for sharing Christ with non-Christians who do not want to hear the gospel, or for telling Christians things that they do not like to hear.**

*Obviously, all the above things can be easily avoided.*

## **QUOTE:**

*We can avoid tiredness by not responding in love to a need of someone else. We can avoid the pressure of concern for people by not taking things pertaining to their lives as a personal responsibility. We can avoid the hurt of disappointment by not having such high hopes for people. We can avoid betrayal by not*

*trusting people and investing in them. I fear that much thinking on Christian ministry tends in the direction of helping us avoid such pain. Such patterns indicate that the church has lost the biblical understanding of suffering and pain as something glorious.*

***Today we have a lot of “therapy” for sufferers... While this may be helpful, more helpful is a theology of suffering.***

Even with all the therapy we cannot avoid or escape suffering. In fact, by trying to avoid or escape suffering we may become disobedient to God's will.

A theology of suffering will take the bitter sting out of it. It will help us to maintain joy in the midst of it and turn the suffering into something constructive for the kingdom.

**- NIV Application Commentary, The**

**Introductory QUOTE:**

*Stephen's address opens with "the God of glory" and closes with the glory of God ([Acts 7:55](#)); and all the time he spoke, his face radiated that same glory!*

**This is the longest address in the Book of Acts and one of the most important.**

In it, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel and the contributions made by their revered leaders: Abraham ([Acts 7:2-8](#)), Joseph ([Acts 7:9-17](#)), Moses ([Acts 7:18-44](#)), Joshua ([Acts 7:45](#)), and David and Solomon ([Acts 7:46-50](#)). But this address was more than a recitation of familiar facts; it was also a refutation of their indictments against Stephen and a revelation of their own national sins. Stephen proved from their own Scriptures that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those they had accused him of committing.

***They rejected their God-sent deliverers (vv. 9-36).*** I have combined the sections dealing with **Joseph and Moses** because these two Jewish heroes have this in common: they were **both rejected as deliverers the first time, but were accepted the second time.** Joseph's brethren hated their brother and sold him into servitude, yet later he became their deliverer. They recognized Joseph "at the second time" ([Acts 7:13](#)) when they returned to Egypt for more food. Israel rejected Moses when he first tried to deliver them from Egyptian bondage, and he had to flee for his life ([Ex. 2:11-22](#)). But when Moses came to them the second time, the nation accepted him and he set them free ([Acts 7:35](#)).

**These two events illustrate how Israel treated Jesus Christ. Israel rejected their Messiah when He came to them the first time ([John 1:11](#)), but when He comes again, they will recognize Him and receive Him ([Zech. 12:10](#); [Rev. 1:7](#)).** In spite of what they did to His Son, God has not cast away His people ([Rom. 11:1-6](#)). Israel today is suffering from a partial spiritual blindness that one day will be taken away ([Rom. 11:25-32](#)). Individual Jews are being saved, but the nation as a whole is blind to the truth about Jesus Christ.

[Acts 7:42](#) should be compared with [Romans 1:24-28](#), for all of these verses describe the judgment of God when He "takes His hands off" and permits sinners to have their own way. When **Stephen quoted Amos 5:25-27**, he revealed what the Jews had really been doing all those years: in outward form, they were worshiping Jehovah; but in their hearts, they were worshiping foreign gods! The form of the question in [Acts 7:42](#) demands a negative reply: "No, you were not offering those sacrifices to the Lord!"

**In this day of "pluralism" of religions and an emphasis on "toleration," we must understand why God hated the pagan religions and instructed Israel to destroy them. To begin with, these religions were unspeakably obscene in their worship of sex and their use of religious prostitutes. Their practices were also brutal, even to the point of offering children as sacrifices to their gods. It was basically demon worship, and it opened the way for all kinds of godless living on the part of the Jews. Had the nation turned from the true God and succumbed to idolatry, it could have meant the end of the godly remnant and the fulfillment of the promise of the Redeemer.**

## QUOTE:

*God's Law was given to the Jews to protect them from the pagan influence around them, and to enable them to enjoy the blessings of the land. **It was the Law that made them a holy people, different from the other nations.***

*When Israel broke down that wall of distinction by disobeying God's Law, they forfeited the blessing of God and had to be disciplined.*

**They despised their temple (vv. 44-50). The witnesses accused Stephen of seeking to destroy the temple, but that was exactly what the Jewish nation did!**

Moses built the tabernacle and God's glory graciously dwelt in the holy of holies ([Ex. 40:34-38](#)). Solomon built the temple, and once again God's glory came in ([1 Kings 8:10-11](#)). But over the years, the worship at the temple degenerated into mere religious formality, and eventually there were idols placed in the temple ([2 Kings 21:1-9](#); [Ezek. 8:7-12](#)). Jeremiah warned people against their superstitious faith in the temple and told them that they had turned God's house into a den of thieves ([Jer. 7:1-16](#)).

Had the nation heeded their own prophets, they would have escaped the horrors of the Babylonian siege (see the Book of Lamentations) and the destruction of their city and temple.

***They stubbornly resisted their God and His truth (vv. 51-53).*** This is the climax of Stephen's

speech, the personal application that cut his hearers to the heart. Throughout the centuries, Israel had refused to submit to God and obey the truths He had revealed to them. Their ears did not hear the truth, their hearts did not receive the truth, and their necks did not bow to the truth. As a result, they killed their own Messiah!

The nation refused to accept the new truth that God was revealing from age to age. Instead of seeing God's truth as seed that produces fruit and more seed, the religious leaders "embalmed" the truth and refused to accept anything new. By the time Jesus came to earth, the truth of God was encrusted with so much tradition that the people could not recognize God's truth when He did present it. Man's dead traditions had replaced God's living truth (see [Matt. 15:1-20](#)).

*Stephen the Martyr ([Acts 7:54-60](#))*

You wonder what kind of a world we live in when good and godly men like Stephen can be murdered by religious bigots! But we have similar problems in our "enlightened" age today: taking hostages, bombings that kill or maim innocent people, assassinations, and all in the name of politics or religion. ***The heart of man has not changed, nor can it be changed apart from the grace of God.***

What were the results of Stephen's death? For Stephen, death meant *coronation* ([Rev. 2:10](#)). He saw the glory of God and the Son of God standing to receive him to heaven (see [Luke 22:69](#)).

Our Lord sat down when He ascended to heaven ([Ps. 110:1](#); [Mark 16:19](#)), but He stood up to welcome to glory the first Christian martyr ([Luke 12:8](#)). This is the last time the title "Son of man" is used in the Bible. It is definitely a messianic title ([Dan. 7:13-14](#)), and Stephen's use of it was one more witness that Jesus is indeed Israel's Messiah.

## QUOTE:

***God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but He does call us to be "living sacrifices" ([Rom. 12:1-2](#)). In some respects, it may be harder to live for Christ than to die for Him; but if we are living for Him, we will be prepared to die for Him if that is what God calls us to do.***

In 1948, Auca martyr **Jim Elliot** wrote in his journal, "*I seek not a long life, but a full one, like You, Lord Jesus.*"

Two years later, he wrote:

*"I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those whom I would have kept on earth till they were older. God is peopling Eternity, and I must not restrict Him to old men and women."*

Like Stephen, Jim Elliot and his four comrades were called on January 8, 1956, to "people Eternity" as they were slain by the people they were seeking to reach. What has happened to the Aucas since then is proof that the blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church. Many Aucas are now Christians.

*"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life"*

**(Rev. 2:10)**.

- Bible Exposition Commentary

# The CORONATION of Stephen

(his name means: "Crown")

The five crowns mentioned in the New Testament represent special honor and recognition for a life of Christian service. The Greek word for crown is "stephanos." It is not a golden crown with jewels, like seen on kings or queens in children's books or movies, but the stephanos was literally an adornment worn around the head as a crown of victory in the Greek athletic games, given to the runner who crossed the goal first or to the disc or javelin thrower with the longest throw and others who excelled. In the Olympic Games, the reward of the victorious athlete was the laurel crown. The Christian's crowns are symbolic of something of inexpressible value.

The first mention of a crown is in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27: *"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run... I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."* The subject of most of chapter 9 is preaching the gospel. Paul is teaching spiritual truths using terminology very familiar to the Corinthians, intense physical training, exercising self-control in all things, keeping the body and mind in subjection to the will of God, in order to win the most people to the Lord. This is all "for the gospel's sake" as verse 23 reveals. The incorruptible crown is for those who keep running in the Christian race and are not rejected from the competition.

Next is the crown of rejoicing. *"For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy."* (1

Thessalonians 2:19, 20) Paul also referred to the Philippians believers as his "joy and crown." Paul had won these people to the Lord, and they had stood fast in spite of persecution and pressure. Paul was rejoicing that they had withstood the storms, and their tenacious faith he "wore" as a victor's wreath. The crown of rejoicing is for believers led to the Lord.

Next is the crown of righteousness. *"Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."* (2 Timothy 4:8) This crown is for living righteously according to God's Word. Some who have heard and believed will *"turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."* (2 Timothy 4:4) Not everyone will love His appearing. J. Oswald Sanders writes, "This crown is awarded to those who have completed the Christian race with integrity, with eyes fixed on the coming Lord. It is the reward for fulfilling the ministry entrusted to one."

Next is the crown of life, mentioned in James 1:12: *"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."*

James chapter one makes it clear that God's people will be besieged with temptations. Paul expressed his concern for believers in 1 Thessalonians 3:5: *"For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain."* In Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed, there were those who hear God's Word, but immediately *"the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart."* (Matthew 13:19) The crown of life is awarded to those who persevere and resist temptations.

The crown of glory is mentioned last, and is for Christian leadership. *"...when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."* (1 Peter 5:4) Peter exhorts overseers to shepherd the flock of God. The shepherd knows his sheep, guides, feeds, cherishes, protects and preserves them. This kind of pastoring is worthy of the unfading crown of glory.

New Testament Greek scholar, Kenneth Wuest makes the point that "The crown given to victors in either athletics or war was made of oak or ivy leaves, the festal garlands of the marriage feast, of flowers. These would wither and fade. But the victor's crown which the Lord Jesus will give His faithful under-shepherds will never wither or fade. What form this reward will take, is not stated." Although it is not known exactly what these crowns will be, only those who remain faithful will have the joy of receiving them. Revelation 3:11 says, *"Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown."*