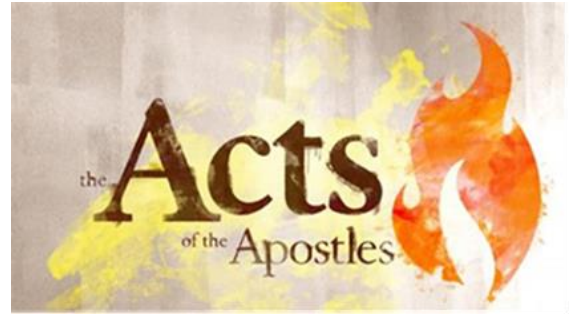


## ACTS: THE (SHORT) STORY OF STEPHEN – Part 9

Acts 6:7; 8:2

The Stephen Story is both long and short. It's long in that it covers more than two chapters; it's short because Stephen was elected as one of the seven servants, who quickly began to preach/teach, and was killed.



Luke jumps from the 12 to the 7 and to full scale opposition and persecution. The easy days ended abruptly as Peter and John's issues with the Sadducees morphed when the bold Stephen took the message to a wider audience.

One commentator describes Stephen as an “in your face” preacher/apologist who blamed the traditional Jews for rejecting Jesus and, some for killing him. Again, one commentator says, “he challenged certain Jews with a damning indictment of how they treated Jesus.”

Like Peter and John, Stephen trumpeted the reality that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Add this to the “and you rejected and killed him,” and one can see how this was adding fuel to the soon to be blazing fire.

It began with Acts 6:8-10 and Luke setting Stephen apart as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” Luke was giving Stephen the “prophet” treatment, especially when he adds, “he was full of grace and power.”

We are not sure how much time passed between Stephen being elected as a “servant” and when he took on a preaching role, but it could not have been long. We can also tell Stephen jumped to the proverbial chase and told the Jesus story and named names in detailing the ways many Jews treated Jesus. In Acts 6:9 Luke tells us Stephen received instant pushback: “they argued with Stephen.”

This was not productive inter-faith dialogue and maybe this wasn't a time for what we know today as honest but uplifting and calm conversation between religious groups.

It may also be attributable to the supernatural power (wisdom and spirit) that propelled Stephen's message (6:10).

Stephen is up against unbeatable odds, a mass of people who lob false accusations against him:

(1) blasphemy against God and Moses (6:11);

(2) he continually says things against this holy place and the law (6:13);

(3) and he declares Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place (Temple) and change the customs of Moses (6:14).

Was he? Did he? To a Jesus follower, no. To a hyper-traditional Jew who did not see Jesus as Messiah, yes. For a Jew who rejected Jesus and who could not see God moving due to their all but "time warp" allegiance to the long past glory of Israel (eons past), no, no, no.

It must be noted that while falsely accusing Stephen of breaking Blasphemy rules they broke the law forbidding false witness against another person.

This is situational use of the Mosaic Law.

Do we do this today? Yes, yes, yes.

They simply did not get it, or they simply did not want to get it. The *New Interpreters Bible Commentary* sums up Stephen's theology: "The Lord God's activity on behalf of Israel is not bound by a particular place of worship or time of salvation. The resurrection of Jesus had confirmed him as God's Messiah and the central symbol of Jewish faith and life – not the Temple, not the Torah, not any institution of Jewish national life or relative cult. But Temple politics are a politics of power." (p125)

Again, Temple politics are a politics of power... *and rocks and stones.*

Their belief system was being challenged, as was the power, position and privilege enjoyed by the religious leaders. They were non-progressive and worse, acting like a heathen mob.

In 7:57, “the mob with a loud shout all rushed against him.” Note that no actual verdict was rendered. This was murderous rage. Shut down and shut up this blasphemer and all would be well in Judaism: “They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.”

The Supreme Council finally had blood, and this was just the beginning. Saul would soon come out of the gate. None of them had any idea they were battling God. Gamaliel was right: “if this is God’s doing you will be fighting against God.” It was an unwinnable war. Just ask Saul after that whole Damascus road thing.

So, the charges:

**1. Temple:** By first century, God (had effectively) become secondary to both the Temple and law.

An alive, organic, progressive relationship with God had given way to a static, non-progressive, stuck in the past, myopic view of the primacy of the Law and Temple... All of which prohibited them from seeing – feeling Jesus as Messiah.

They were literalists. So, did Jesus say the “Temple would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days?”

We can see how an uninformed, uninterested, or unwilling to understand person would see this as an impossible thing.

So, no, Jesus was not referring to the Temple itself but to Himself with the death and resurrection.

God had shifted the work of the Temple and the essence of the law to the persons of Jesus and the spirit:

*“The law is now written on your heart;”*

*“Salvation is no longer a result of following the law.”*

*“I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it – perfect it.”*

This was indeed heavy and *new* theology - but it was God's progressive plan.

So, when Stephen in 7:51 calls Israel "unrepentant" and "stiff-necked", they acted in ways showing they were content to stay wed to the past, even if God was moving on.

Plus, the Supreme Council was close to losing:

- Power
- Position
- Prestige
- Money

And they would fight and kill to maintain it all.

## 2. Blasphemy – God and Moses

No, they heard it, but again, "Moses over Jesus" is to deny God's progressive movement.

So, all accusations were false, but the crowd was so angry and so determined to defend God they acted with unbridled anger. They dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death.

### Takeaways:

1. There has always been an "I'm right, so you're wrong" element in faith. These are often focused on non-absolutes like creation, revelation, women in ministry or versions of scripture. If, however, it's about a non-negotiable like resurrection, salvation or God's plan, then it's a problem.
2. The rabid Jews held a stuck-in-time and romanticized view of Israel, the Temple, the Law and God. God is not trapped in time. While we are focused on the "good ole days," God is moving on.
3. It's true that people of faith treat their own harshly when differences of opinion crop up, or if certain sins take place. It can get ugly and it's not a

good look for the church. Really, who wants to join a group who shoots their wounded? The people of God cannot be against the people of God.

4. God does not need our help in defending Him or scripture or the movement. He needs for us to do His will. He needs us to love people into the Kingdom. He needs us to demonstrate who/what God actually is.

This means it's OK to stay in our lane.

Our job is to love God, serve God and be in the presence of God.

God can defend Himself... let's don't make it harder!

Amen & Amen.

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