

# Stephen And The New Deal

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Luke begins the action of the book of Acts just weeks after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his second chapter, only days after Christ's dramatic ascension to the Father's right hand, he relates the giving of the Holy Spirit that launches the New Testament church. The ensuing chapters detail its subsequent growth and expansion throughout the world as God added thousands of believers to the church (Acts 2:41; 4:4). He shows the apostles performing stunning signs and wonders—even Peter's shadow passing over the sick left healed people in its wake (Acts 5:12-16).

An anomaly to the dynamic story of the church's growth is that seven percent of the book is devoted to one man, Stephen, a “mere” deacon, ordained to “serve tables” (Acts 6:1-6). Most of the original twelve apostles receive far less coverage. Biblical historians know so little about the ministries of most of the apostles that they cannot be sure where many of them went to preach the gospel after that momentous Pentecost in AD 31.

What makes Stephen so special? Why is he highlighted?

After Stephen begins preaching and performing marvelous wonders, his enemies incite the people against him and have him seized and dragged before the Sanhedrin. The high priest offers Stephen a chance to reply to the false charges of blasphemy against the Temple and the law, and he begins with a history of God's promises and deliverances of Israel (Acts 7). With no thought for his safety, he candidly relates Israel's rejection of God and His prophets. The stirring climax of his reply berates them for their proud disobedience and their murder of the Messiah.

When [the Jews] heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 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, and said, “Look! I see the

heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. (Acts 7:54-58)

His accusations were so on-target that they incited murderous vengeance in the Jews, and Stephen paid the price in martyrdom. Luke records Stephen’s last and very significant words, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Why was Christ *standing* by His Father’s throne when Stephen was stoned?

### **God’s Frequent Disappointments**

Before God created mankind, He created multitudes of angels—creatures of magnificent power and beauty who gave great pleasure and service to God. He created three archangels of superior beauty, intelligence, and power. One of these is of particular note. Ezekiel 28:15, 17 uses the words “perfect,” “beauty,” and “splendor” to describe him. His Hebrew name, given in Isaiah 14:12, is *helel*, meaning “shining one.” He had a radiance that “lit up” the heavens. However, he became enamored of himself, eventually thinking he could outshine God Himself, his Creator!

And so, he fell. In his pride, he dared to confront God at His throne and was cast ignominiously down to the earth (Isaiah 14:13-15; Luke 10:18). Now he is called Satan the Devil, the Adversary, the serpent or dragon, Destroyer (Abaddon or Apollyon), and the ruler of this age. He now “deceives the whole world” and targets God’s elect, acting as “the accuser of our brethren” (Revelation 12:9-10).

One third of the angels over whom he ruled obeyed an angel rather than God Almighty (Revelation 12:4). Jude writes that those who basked in the light of the Shining One, wishing to break the chains of God’s authority over them, are now imprisoned in darkness awaiting final judgment (Jude 6). They are, of course, the many demons that are still active in this world, which is their prison.

In this story, we see an example of some following a leader appointed over them rather than remaining faithful to God's Word. What a disappointment to God.

Subsequently, God created beings from dust in His image (Genesis 1:26-27), giving them temporal life so they could be destroyed if they rejected His tremendous offer of eternal life (Genesis 2:7). Ensconcing them in the ultimate environment, God's own Garden (verse 8), He made a deal with them: They could eat anything they desired except the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and they would live happily in God's presence (verses 16-17).

Almost immediately, the serpent offered them a "sweeter" deal, questioning God's intentions and promising them greater knowledge and wisdom if they ate of the Forbidden Fruit (Genesis 3:1-5). With little resistance, they hungrily accepted (verse 6). God drove them from the Garden and placed an angel with a flaming sword at its entrance to bar access to the Tree of Life (verse 24). And as He had predicted, they died.

After about sixteen centuries of human decline into greater and greater sin, God brought on the Flood, wiping His creatures from the earth except for those few saved in Noah's ark. Man, too, proved a disappointment to God.

After the Flood, God chose one upstanding man, Abraham, and in exchange for his allegiance, offered him a land of milk and honey with innumerable descendants to inhabit it (Genesis 12:1-3). He gratefully accepted, as did his son and grandson. While these patriarchs were not perfect, they were obedient and learned humility. A people of God was forming, and their trajectory was positive.

Later, through Moses, God offered this deal to all of Abraham's descendants, now called Israel, with the conditions of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Exodus 21-24; see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). They chose the former but did the latter and died in the desert (Numbers 14: 20-35)! From that time forward, with a few notable exceptions, their

trajectory continued downhill. The children of Israel went into captivity for their sins (II Kings 17:5-23) and seemed to disappear from history (James 1: 1).

Even God's own chosen people, with the amazing gift of God's law and His guidance and protection, could not maintain their part of the deal with their Creator. They also became a disappointment to God.

Can He make a deal with any of His created sons and daughters and trust him or her to live up to it? At this point, His patience and hope must have started wearing thin. But God's endurance is deep.

### **Better Deal—Higher Stakes**

God did not throw in the towel, so to speak. As an omniscient Being, He knew His clay creations were weak and ill-equipped to be faithful partners with Almighty God. In eternity past, He and the Word had devised an ultimate deal with the highest of stakes and the greatest of consequences. This one was “for all the marbles”!

They agreed that the Supreme Being we know as the Father would offer the Word, His like-kind Companion, as an example and sacrifice to show that the deal could work. God would prove that the God-Being we know as the Son, made human and subject to every temptation common to man, could keep a promise and, by doing so, make it possible for His human creations to keep their end of the deal.

Yet how high the stakes! If this deal failed, it was all over—the Father would have to live through eternity with no Son. Man, too, would suffer—if the Son failed, man would have no Savior and no possibility of forgiveness and eternal life.

But, as commissioned, the Son, Jesus Christ, overcame the world and the Adversary. He lived perfectly and offered atonement for the sins of those who would accept God's upgraded deal: “Obey Me, follow Me, and I will give you a gift—the Holy Spirit as a pledge of eternal life with Me and at the

resurrection a spirit body like My Son's! You will be what We are! As a bonus, I will offer instantaneous forgiveness of breach of contract (sin) upon repentance through My one perfect Son to cover any errors along the way."

What a deal!

One would think everyone would sign up for such an arrangement. Early on, a few thousand did. Due to adverse circumstances in Judea, church members were asked to pool their resources so that all might eat (Acts 4:32-37). Most did, but greed prevailed in Ananias and Sapphira, and they were struck dead for misrepresenting their contribution to God and their brethren (Acts 5:1-11). Was this just the beginning of another group of chosen people, succumbing to human nature, bringing disappointment to God?

Would anyone but Jesus Christ yield himself entirely and totally to God? Despite resistance and even persecution, the apostles and most of the brethren were yielding and obeying. Astonishing miracles were occurring. The church was growing and expanding beyond Jerusalem.

But were any of them willing to *give all*—even to the death—for this ultimate deal?

## **Stephen's Sacrifice**

These circumstances set the stage. Enter Stephen, a man just ordained a deacon, set apart to manage the church's physical work so the apostles could concentrate on spiritual matters (Acts 6:2-4). Stephen soon proved himself a humble servant of the people and unquestioningly devoted to God. God filled him with the Holy Spirit, and He performed miracles of faith and power through him (verses 5, 8). God used him mightily to spread the Word of God and dispute gainsayers (verse 7, 9-10).

God chose Stephen above the others because of his yielded, submissive, serving, faithful, deeply converted attitude, much as He had chosen David over his brothers. Rank is of minor consequence to God, but contriteness and meekness are monumental (Isaiah 66:2). He can do mighty works through faithful men and women who submit to His leadership.

God's work through Stephen quickly offended the religious leaders of Jerusalem. They suborned lying witnesses to testify that he had blasphemed the Temple and the law (Acts 6:11-14), just as they had tried to entrap Jesus. While Stephen did not seek an appearance before the high priest, the Jews dragged him before the Sanhedrin to face their fabricated charges. At that point, God, not Stephen, made the man's face appear as that of an angel, showing His favor (verse 15).

Stephen knew his life was on the line. According to Jewish law, blasphemy was a capital offense. As He had done while physically among them, Christ understood the hearts of these men very well. He knew that if Stephen turned the tables and accused *them* of blaspheming the true Temple of God (Jesus Christ) and of law-breaking (lying, murder, etc.), they would retaliate by killing him.

The first man after Jesus to be challenged with giving "his own life also" (Luke 14:26) stood face to face with death. What would Stephen do? Would he compromise, becoming another disappointment? Or would he stand firm?

Christ stood to watch this scenario play out. He stood to witness Stephen's choice: Would he shrink back or boldly stand in faith?

As Stephen stood firm in his faith, rocks bouncing off his head and body, the host of heaven probably stood cheering and singing "Hallelujah!" to the Father and Son. God's Spirit, giving the man power to stand (Ephesians 6:13), had succeeded—despite Satan, despite the opposition of this world, despite human weaknesses—*through* a human other than the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Why did Christ stand? He was not disappointed this time. He was elated!

### **A Living Sacrifice**

Someone had finally given his all for God and for the magnificent deal—the New Covenant—that He offers those He calls. What a shining sacrifice and witness Stephen is! It must have impressed itself deeply on the mind and

heart of one Saul of Tarsus, who—while a leader of the mob who had arrested Stephen (Acts 7:58; 22:4, 19-20; 26:10; Galatians 1:13)—must have taken great inspiration from it after his own conversion (Acts 9:1-19).

The apostle Paul may have thought of Stephen when writing Romans 12:1-2:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Not many of us at this point have been called to die as a martyr for God and His Word. Can we name anyone who has been asked to do so in these modern times? Maybe some of us will be challenged to make this ultimate witness in the future, perhaps during the terrible days of the Tribulation. We have no way of knowing.

But what about today? Notice that Paul writes about presenting ourselves as *living* sacrifices. We do not have to die as Stephen did to make an acceptable sacrifice to God. Are we giving our all for God in our daily lives, giving our time and energy to provide a holy and acceptable service to Him, learning and doing His will despite the myriad temptations to the contrary?

Stephen gave his life. His final act presented the world with an astounding witness of a converted, deeply convicted man who had surrendered everything for his Lord and Master. His witness, recorded for our benefit, lives on as often as we read it or think about it.

Can we, members of the same Body, do less?