

## Faithful Stephen

Christian Men

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Every member of God's church is a witness to God's truth and of his way of life. We are ambassadors for Christ, as you well know, and we represent God's family. So to have a superb example presented to us in God's inspired written Word means that it is wise for us to take particular notice of how he witnessed and what principles can be drawn from what he did. Stephen was such a witness.

Beginning in Acts 6, we find that although the church was increasing in membership, the smooth days were over, at least those exceptionally good days that marked the start of the Christian era. The problem we find in Acts 6 was quite different from the one involving Ananias and Sapphira and their deception. They were keeping back part of something of true value and were lying about it.

If one of you are tempted to say "I have given up everything for Jesus Christ," remember that it is probably the case that you have not. Ananias and Sapphira had not, and furthermore they knew they had not, which is what made the situation so serious.

In Acts 6, no one was being critically evil or lying to the Holy Spirit or anything of that nature, it was a question of administration resulting from the church's growing pains. The people of Jerusalem spoke different languages. We know this because Luke recorded in Acts 6 of where the people each heard the apostles speaking in his own language.

Among these many languages, two were most prominent: Aramaic, a form of classical Hebrew spoken by those of Jewish descent, and Greek, spoken by those who had settled in Judah as a result of the conquest of Alexander the Great, some 300 years earlier.

Greek was the dominant international language of the day and these two languages understandably resulted in two main divisions of the church. It was this dual language that led to the problem here in Acts 6.

We have not been told anything about any distribution of food thus far in the book of Acts and this is because in Luke's day everybody just naturally understood what was involved. One of the duties imposed on Jewish people, by law, was care of widows and orphans and there were times when this was neglected. The Minor Prophets frequently

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chastised the people of their day for this failure, but generally one could not just pretend to be a virtuous Israelite while neglecting the care of these persons.

Now the early church apparently followed this pattern with its own widows. For those who were Jewish, there were provisions, meeting the needs of the orphans and widows through the Temple authorities. Money was regularly collected for that purpose, but relations were not all that good between the Temple authorities in the early Christian community.

So rather than depend on the Temple authorities to take care of their widows, which they might have had a legal right to expect, these early Christian communities were taking care of the widows by themselves. Now it seems that the widows of the Greek-speaking communities were neglected, or at least the Greek division of the church thought they were. We do not know why they thought this, but that was their attitude.

It may be that the Jewish-Christians were thinking of themselves more as Jews than as Christians and so were depending on the Jewish state to take care of their needs and were assuming that the Greek language members would have separate means of dealing with their own problems. Or maybe there was just an unequal distribution and the widows of the Greek congregations were just not getting enough. Whatever the case may be, misunderstandings developed and the objection was raised, there in the church.

**Acts 6:1** Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

How were the apostles to deal with this problem? It seems that on this occasion there apparently was no overt divine revelation as there had been in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. What we have is an administrative decision. The apostles considered the problem, no doubt guided by God, having prayed about the situation, listen to what they told the members of the church, picking up in verse 2

**Acts 6:2-4** Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Now that is what the church did. The story tells of who were elected and what the results of their service were. The apostles went to the congregation itself and properly appealed primarily to those who were complaining of the difficulty. Basically they said, "Look just choose people who, you, in your judgment, are able to oversee the distribution fairly." The apostles were not trying to protect their own rights or their own positions of power or even protect their own point of view, they simply wanted to solve the problem.

The church got together and chose the first deacons, seven of them. The significant thing about their choice is that every one of these men, judging from their names, was a Greek-speaking Christian. The Greeks were the ones who were complaining that their widows were neglected, and it may be that there were more Aramaic-speaking Christians in the church than there were Greek-speaking Christians, but the church as a whole said, "let us elect Greek speaking leaders or deacons."

Now if they had humanly reasoned, they might have said, "There should be a few Greeks on this board to represent the Greek point of view, but we are the majority at least four of the seven, maybe five of the seven, should be Aramaic," but they were not reasoning that way.

This brings to mind something that happened when the Worldwide Church of God broke up. There was one place in one of the larger cities that had quite a large black membership and so what happened when Worldwide split was they start forming this new church they said, "Now is our chance and our opportunity to rule." That was the wrong attitude that they picked up in society and that was their first reaction to what had happened.

This was not the attitude that they had here in Acts. They wanted to be fair about who they chose and they were given stipulations as to the qualifications for these men. Now picking it up here in verse 5

**Acts 6:5-7** And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Now maybe they deliberately picked the Greek-speaking leaders because that is where the greater need was or else they just picked out seven best men.

Here is what little we know of each one of them. Stephen, Luke says, was a man full faith and of the Holy Spirit. We will see him again in the next chapter. The name Stephen means wreath or crown. Phillip appears again in Acts 8 and in Acts 21:8 he is called an evangelist. He is the only person in Acts to be named that.

We know nothing more about Procorus from the Bible except that tradition says he became a bishop of Nicomedia and was martyred at Antioch. Nicanor and Timon we know nothing about. Parmenas, we know nothing about him from the New Testament. We do know that Nicholas was from Antioch and had been a convert to Judaism. So we do not know much about most of those men.

These men became the first official body of officers in the church, other than the apostles who were appointed by Jesus Christ. The selection of these men gives us important principles for sound church leadership.

The apostle Paul writes about spiritual gifts and various places in his letter stressing always that, God through His Holy Spirit, gives gifts to each one, just as he has given gifts to each one of us. This means every Christian has at least one gift. So if we have a situation in which people are not exercising their gifts in a congregation, the result is always an impoverished church.

No one person has all the gifts. So if the gifts he does have, but that others do not have, are unused the church is poorer by that amount of gifts. It takes everyone using all the possible gifts that they have and developing them to make a sound and productive church.

Now a principle for sound church leadership is suggested in the instruction given to the people in Acts 6, before the election.

**Acts 6:3** Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

These words point, not to administrative skills or abilities, but rather to spiritual qualifications. The church, above all institutions, should know how to choose leaders on

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the basis of Christian character and spiritual maturity. This is an essential point in the choice of these first deacons. The job they were being chosen for was the distribution of food to the widows.

When the church chooses leaders it should not be concerned about how much money a man has or how much management experience he has acquired, but whether he is wise and Spirit filled.

In the case of the church's negligence in this Hebrew and Hellenist area, their main problem was not money or the lack of it, or even food or the lack of it, the problem was essentially spiritual. Therefore it needed persons who were spirit filled and had wisdom to deal with the situation.

When a person is young the person basically thinks that he or she knows just about everything but as we get older that changes. We start with self confidence, but as we get older we see the problems are not always susceptible to simple solutions and we begin to discern our own inability to handle them.

By electing deacons as the first administrative officers in the church, other than the apostles, the church was electing people to do what is essential to true Christianity. This is because their service was patterned on the service ministry of Jesus Christ, the One who we always look to for the fine example, that One who is the epitome of the great example. Deacon means servant and Jesus was the servant of everybody.

When we think about success we have to remember that the Bible's evaluation of success is completely different than the world's evaluation. If you ask people of the world, who they think are really great, the world answers that it is those on the top of the administrative pyramid; those who have a lot of people under them.

Now if we are talking about a person's private circumstances, it is those who do not need to work, but people work for them. They have servants and the more servants they have the more important they are in this society.

Now if we are talking about those who do work, which is most of us, the principle is the same. Most people are near the bottom of the pyramid. So many do not think they are very important at all. The managers and supervisors are seen to be more important, next is middle management, and then at the very top you have the chief executive officer, the CEO, the president, the chairman of the board and so on.

People think that the person at the top of the administrative pyramid is the most

important person, but that is not the way Jesus spoke of greatness.

**Luke 22:25-27** And He said to them [His disciples], “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.

There we see Christ’s example and He wants us to be a server. Here the disciples had been arguing about greatness, so Jesus replies to them in connection with His washing their feet. He showed them how they should feel and act toward each. He showed that they should not aim for at higher office or greater power, but rather to be humble and to serve and aid one another.

He is our example and pattern to follow and imitate in living God’s way of life. He came among human beings as the epitome of the One who humbly serves and that is our goal that we all should have. Now on the flip side, he who aims for higher office in greater power in this life will receive the opposite recompense under God’s government.

**Mark 9:35** And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”

If you want to be great in God’s sight, try serving people. It seems fairly simple, does it not? You do not have to be ordained to serve. Men and women who are ordained deacons and deaconesses have already been humbly serving in that capacity for a long time before even being ordained.

Men tend to feel like they are falling short of God’s standard of righteousness if they are not ordained, but we know that all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Ordination does not guarantee salvation or greater reward. There will be many in the church that receive greater rewards in God’s Kingdom than those who were ordained as physical human beings.

A great number of ministers and deacons, who were previously in the church, but who have not stayed faithful to God’s truth is a sad proof of that fact. Serving others must be done for the right reason and in balance with our other responsibilities as Christians. If

you want to be even greater in God's sight, properly serve people and that includes doing things for them that the world would call menial.

Remember Jesus when he was about to be crucified and wanted to give his disciples a graphic demonstration of what true greatness was. He removed His outer clothes, wrapped Himself with a towel, knelt before them, and washed each of the disciples' feet. That is the attitude of humility that we all, as members of God's church, seek to reach but fail to do. We should at least seek and try because only by the help of the Holy Spirit will we accomplish that true humility that Christ reached and is.

Now the Lord of the universe knelt before Galilean fishermen and performed a servant's task. Peter understood how incongruous this was, at least from his point of view. He told his Master, "You shall never wash my feet." But notice here that he did not say "no, let *me* wash their feet," he just did not want the Master washing his feet. So Jesus taught him how to be a servant.

Now keep in mind Peter was unconverted at that time, he had not received the Holy Spirit yet, but I am sure he was being helped somewhat by God's Spirit to understand the things that Christ wanted him to understand early on.

When we are talking about these deacons, we are talking about what is absolutely essential because we do not have real Christianity without this vital function. That is why these men now became the leaders of the local churches. They did not replace the apostles of course, the apostles have their own special role, and they had a unique function. But apart from the specially chosen commissioned apostles, the deacons, who were servants became the first local leaders and the church. We do not have any evidence up to this point that there were local men ordained as elders. There may have been, but there just does not seem to be a record of that, so the first example we have here is of these deacons being ordained.

Up to this point the apostles had been evangelizing and spreading the gospel. Peter at Pentecost, Peter and John before the Sanhedrin. They testified and they were put in jail and sometimes they were beaten. In everything they counted it an honor to suffer for Christ. Beginning in Acts 6, Luke starts the story of Stephen, the first deacon.

**Acts 6:8** And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

We have his sermon and the story of his martyrdom in Acts 7. In Acts 8 we have the

story of the second deacon, Phillip, and the gospel spread to Ethiopia through him.

So here is the challenge from this great story, be a deacon, a servant that these these men were. How? Well, if you want to be a true deacon you will have to be like Jesus Christ. He is our model and He counted His equality with God not something to be grasped after or clung to but rather He emptied Himself and became a man, humbling himself even to death, that He might serve us. Now we will read here,

**Philippians 2:5-8** Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Hopefully we do not think, "I don't like that" or that "I don't want to serve anybody." As a natural human tendency, we do not want to serve anyone else. We never want to serve others naturally, we want people to serve us and it is only in Christ that we become truly different in our attitudes.

The world will hate you if you take this path just as it hated Jesus, Stephen, and others. They will say, "Let's get rid of that person!" But if it does you will be able to say, even as Stephen said echoing the words of his Master, "Lord, do not hold a sin against them." He was thinking of others and serving them even as he died. That is the pinnacle of the attitude that we are shooting for their own lives, that loving attitude that we are willing to forgive somebody even if what they have just done is permanent.

I want to look at Stephen's example now because it is so very rich in spiritual principles and he proved himself to be one of the finest witnesses in Scripture. His story is invaluable for every last one of us.

I want to begin Stephen's story here at the end of his life in Acts 7. Sometimes we see a movie or television show at the beginning with the end of the person's life and then you are curious as to what happened prior to that. That is not why I am doing this, I just want to be upfront with what type of person Stephen was and what happened.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and then he fell on his knees and cried out, "do not hold a sin against them" and when he said this he fell asleep. Now we will pick up the story in verse 54.

**Acts 7:54-60** When they [the Jewish freedman, which you can find in Acts 6:9] 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. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Now the second half of Acts 6:8-15 tells of the arrest of Stephen, the most prominent of the early deacons, and leads into the record of the sermon before the Freedmen in Acts 7. Stephen's sermon is the longest address in the book of Acts. It is essentially a pointed survey of the history of Israel and the points it makes are unfolded and reinforced all the way through the story.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr and generally speaking, a martyr is a person who dies for his or her beliefs and more specifically a Christian martyr is a person who was killed because of his or her witness of Jesus Christ, and of course God the Father.

Now martyr comes from the Greek word *martyrs* and it means a witness or one who bears the testimony. Stephen was announced an outstanding witness for Jesus Christ and it is because of his witness that he was put to death. His speech probably had a great impact on the apostle Paul's life as he looked back on his days as the ruthless Saul.

Before we look at the details of Stephen's speech, let us look at it in general to get an overview of some of its characteristics. First, it is not actually a defense. That is, Stephen is not dealing directly with the accusations that had been made against him. On the other hand, when Peter had been called before the Sanhedrin, Peter answered his accusers directly. Stephen did not follow that approach here.

They demanded to know by what power or name Peter had healed the lame man and he had given a direct answer to the accusation in Acts 4:7-10. Stephen does not follow Peter's procedure, he answers the accusations against him indirectly as he goes along.

Second, his speech is not like the sermon of Peter at Pentecost. When Peter spoke on Pentecost he quoted a verse of Scripture. He explained what it meant and how it had been fulfilled and then quoted another scripture and explained what that meant and so on.

Stephen's address is different. It is not that he is not biblical, in a sense he is entirely biblical since he is retelling the Old Testament. But he is not quoting Bible verses as he goes along nor is he explaining them. Only toward the end does he begin to bring in some specific text, quoting first Amos 5:25-27 then from Isaiah 66:1-2. Prior to those he does not bring in scriptures, he is giving the history of Israel.

Something else is noticeable when Stephen's speech is contrasted with Peter's. Peter preached about Jesus throughout and he preached about the resurrection. In Stephen's speech Jesus is not mentioned at all until the very end and then he is not mentioned by name as Jesus or Jesus Christ, He is called "the Just one" in verse 52. Again Stephen does not mention the resurrection, the doctrine that was so prominent earlier.

This sermon has many easily identifiable parts. Verses 2-8 deal with Abraham; verses 9-16 deal with Joseph; verses 17-43 (a major section), deals with Moses, followed by verses 44-50 that contrasts the wilderness tabernacle with the Temple in Jerusalem. Finally in verses 51-53, there is a summation where Stephen makes bold accusations against the Sanhedrin and the Freedmen.

This is a very fairly straightforward recital of Israel's history but if we read it carefully we discover that the section that deals with Moses actually answers the first of the charges that had been made against Stephen: that he had blasphemed against Moses and his discussion of the tabernacle answers the second question, that he had blasphemed against God.

Stephen was from the Greek-speaking portion of the early church, that is perhaps why he spoke so differently from Peter, who was a Jew. Stephen perceived with understanding what the apostle Paul later wrote about to the Gentile Corinth church. We will read II Corinthians 3. This section is entitled "Glory to the new covenant."

**II Corinthians 3:7-16** But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory

in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious [speaking of the Old Covenant], what remains is much more glorious [speaking of the New Covenant]. Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

This is what Steven was getting at in his message to the Sanhedrin, the Freedmen, and the other Jews that were there. This becomes particularly clear when Stephen talks about the Temple. It was cherished by the Jews but it was destined to pass away, and he seems to have understood that his speech is a transition speech that paves the way for presenting the gospel to the Gentiles which begins in the very next chapter of Acts.

Now the first section of Stephen's speech deals with Abraham and this is found in verses 2-8. There were many things that Stephen could have said about Abraham since a very long section of Genesis is given to Abraham's story, but Stephen is selective and what he emphasizes is the clue to his thinking. First, God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia.

**Acts 7:2** And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.

This is different from the impression that we have reading the early chapters of Genesis because Genesis seems to suggest that God appeared to Abraham when he was in Haran, but Stephen is saying that God actually appeared him even before he got to Haran, that is, when he was in Mesopotamia.

Why does that matter and how was that important? It is important in the context of the address because what we are going to find, not only here but later on also in the case of Moses, is an emphasis upon the fact that God is God, not only of one limited geographical place, such as the land of Israel, but of the whole world.

So it is significant for Stephen to have begun by saying that God revealed His glory to Abraham first, when Abraham was far away in Mesopotamia. Second, God Himself

appeared to Abraham. The fact that Stephen mentions the God of glory appearing to Abraham is also new. In Genesis we are told that God spoke to Abraham but here Stephen adds that God appeared to Abraham.

It is not that Abraham was in Mesopotamia and God, perhaps from Mount Zion many hundreds of miles away, shouted to him, "Abraham! Come over here. I want you to come to Palestine, (or whatever the name of the territory was at that time.)" Rather God appeared to him right there in Mesopotamia in all His glory and that revelation caused Abraham to respond by setting out on his journey.

Third, Abraham remained a pilgrim even in Canaan. When Stephen talks about Abraham's time in Canaan, he emphasizes that Abraham remained a pilgrim even there. Even though this was the land that God was giving him and his descendants, the land in which the people settled and the Temple was built, for Abraham, Canaan was only a land through which he was passing. Stephen says he (Abraham) did not own even a small bit of that land.

**Acts 7:5** And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.

This statement must have been meant as a rebuke to these settled leaders of the people. They were in the land God had given, it was a blessing but they have forgotten and they were too much at home in the land. As wonderful as a possession the Land of Promise was, they were nevertheless only to be pilgrims in it as Abraham had been.

Without this orientation they lacked a spiritual depth that characterized their ancestor. Abraham, we are told in Hebrews, was not looking for earthly city.

**Hebrews 11:9-10** By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

These Jewish rulers ceased to look forward, they had no vision. They were looking back and they had taken the things of the world and the blessings of the world to be permanent. They had allowed God's temporal blessings to eclipse their sense of God's presence, so they looked to the Temple and idolized it.

Now next Stephen talks about Joseph in verses 9-16. The primary point here is that Joseph was mistreated by his brothers, but nevertheless God controlled the seemingly negative situation and caused it to benefit but to later benefit millions of people. Here we will pick up the story in verse 9.

**Acts 7:9-10** “And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

Although Joseph is a remarkable illustration of Jesus Christ in the way he was mistreated, and he was sent into a foreign land where he became the salvation of his people, nowhere in the Bible is Joseph ever made a direct type of Christ.

The New Testament never says, as it does in Moses' case for example, that Jesus is the second Joseph or something like that. However, even though it may not be said openly, that comparison is at least in the background here, is an indirect reference, we might say, to Jesus Christ.

The point Stephen is making is that from their beginning and all through their history the Israelites persecuted and killed the prophet sent to them, just as Joseph's brothers persecuted him. Of course that is what the leaders had done in the case of Jesus Christ, they had killed Him. So all the way from the very beginning of Israelite's history they had persecuted, you might even say that it is a characteristic of theirs, that to this day, they have not yet been able to overcome.

When Stephen begins to talk about Moses, it is similar only in that he deals with the story of Moses in greater length because Moses was the one that Jews were primarily concerned about. Moses was the one through whom God had given the law and these leaders had built their whole lives around keeping the law of Moses.

Stephen talks about three main issues. The first is how Moses was rejected by the Israelite people. There were other things that Stephen could have said, just as in the case of Abraham, but he emphasizes that when Moses perceived that his heart lay with his people and he wanted to be identified with them rather than with the Egyptians, but they rejected him.

Now you know the story. Moses killed an Egyptian, thinking no doubt that this might be something like a rallying cry for revolution. Also he had receive an extensive education

in the royalty of Egypt. Now here in verse 22, Luke writes:

**Acts 7:22** And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.

He was uniquely qualified to lead the people, and he was taking the stand for righteousness against an injustice.

**Acts 7:24-25** And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he [speaking of Moses] defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian. For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand.

Even the day that Stephen was giving them this sermon they still did not understand. Perhaps Moses knew that the time prophesied for the coming of the deliverer had arrived. The 400 years that had been foretold for the time of slavery were up and now is the time he must have thought, "I'm the deliver. They will follow me!" But what a surprise Moses found. They did not follow him, they rejected him, and when word of his action got around he had to flee to Midian where he spent the next 40 years of his life.

Now the second thing that Stephen brings up about Moses is that God appeared to Moses when he was in Midian. This is the same point that Stephen made earlier in his recital of Abraham story. God appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, that is when he was in "Gentile country" (I say that because Moses preceded the Israelites there, but it would later become Gentile country). Now we are told that he also appeared to Moses when Moses was in Midian.

**Acts 7:29-33** "Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons. And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, 'I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and dared not look. 'Then the Lord said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.'"

This “holy place” was not Jerusalem, it was a mountain in “Gentile territory,” yet God was there and because God was there the ground was holy. By now we should be getting Stephen’s point and we may suspect that the Jews were beginning to get his point as well.

Stephen was basically saying: “This tight hold you think you have on God, this little thing that makes God Jewish and not the God of the Gentiles as well, is a corrupt thing and it is corrupting you. If you were faithful to patriarchal fathers, if you were guided by what the Scriptures tell you, you would know that God is the God of all people and that just because you have been given special privileges, you have the enormous responsibility of being a true witness to them.” This is true for us as well.

Stephen was teaching that God is omniscient and omnipotent and that in every nation He has those who seek Him. The third point that Stephen points out is that Moses was rejected again even after the Exodus.

Stephen continues Moses’ story showing that the rejection Moses experienced, when he killed the Egyptian, was followed by an even more substantial rejection after he had led the people out of Egypt.

**Acts 7:38-40** “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’”

So while he was on the mountain receiving God's law, the very law on which the Jewish leaders prided themselves and that they were accusing Stephen of breaking, the Israelites were down in the valley breaking it.

God had brought them out of Egypt, He revealed Himself to be the true God. The first of the Ten Commandments said, “You shall have no other gods before me,” yet that is exactly what the people were doing right off the bat.

At the very time that the law was being given, the people were making idols for themselves just like the idols of Egypt and they were also committing adultery and no doubt breaking each of the other laws as well. So in rejecting God they were also rejecting Moses and vice versa.

At this point Stephen brings in the first of his direct quotations. There are a few other places where he seems to refer indirectly to certain passages picking up some specific Old Testament words and phrasing, but here in verse 42, for the first time he gives a full quotation.

**Acts 7:41-43** “And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: ‘Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship; and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.’[the NIV says, “send you into exile beyond Babylon”]”

In many Bible versions there is a footnote giving the reference as Amos 5:25-27. The whole note comes after the phrase “carry you away” or the word “exile,” depending on the translation, and before the words “beyond Babylon.” The reason for that is because Amos did not say “beyond Babylon,” but rather he said “beyond Damascus.”

Amos said it this way because he was a prophet to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and he was prophesying their exile and they were taken beyond Damascus by the Syrians. But Stephen, who quotes the text, alters it because he is not talking to the people of the Northern Kingdom but rather to the leaders of Israel in the south, primarily Judah and Benjamin—the Jews. It is their history that he has in mind.

It is truly amazing how detailed the inspired written Word of God is in its purposes and how every word has such a strong meaning to it.

Now when they were carried away into captivity, it was not by the Syrians who took the people of the northernmost Israel into exile beyond Damascus in 721 BC, but rather by the Babylonians who took them beyond Babylon in 586 BC. In effect that was like hitting the Jewish leaders in the middle of the forehead with a 2x4 board. It was so stunning and so harshly thrown at them in sense that it infuriated them.

Stephen was telling them that the rebellious attitude of Joseph’s brothers and the people who came out of Egypt had been characteristic of the Israelites throughout history. The members of the Jewish leadership were part of that history and they were just descendants of those who returned to Canaan from Babylon and the attitude that took their ancestors to Babylon was still in them and that is what Stephen was forcefully

telling them.

They had told Stephen and he was blaspheming against the law of Moses and they were going to condemn him for that. Stephen responded, saying: "You have been breaking the law of Moses all your lives and because you have been rejecting Moses you have also been rejecting the truth about Jesus Christ. You are going to be judged by Him when he returns to judge the living and dead." Stephen's response to them was very strong and it infuriated them.

Another section of his speech is found in Acts 7:44-50. So far Stephen has been talking about individuals like Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Now he turns from individuals to deal with the tabernacle of the testimony.

As you know the tabernacle was the portable temple the Israelites carried with them during their wilderness wanderings and prior to the building of the Temple by Solomon. It came with and into the Promised Land and was retained in part up to and include including the time of King David. It was only during the reign of Solomon that a permanent Temple was built.

Now Stephen contrasts the wilderness tabernacle with the later magnificent Temple that was built by Solomon, rebuilt after the return from the exile, and then again rebuilt by King Herod. The Temple of Herod was the glory of Jerusalem at this time and much of it was covered with gold.

So as a person drew near Jerusalem he saw it shining against the skyline, it was physically impressive and a glorious sight to behold. The priests loved and revered the Temple so much that they could not see beyond it.

Stephen compares the wilderness tabernacle, which was not glorious, with this great Temple of Herod. The tabernacle was not spectacular from a human point of view but God could be found there. Now what about Herod's Temple, was God there? God had appeared in the Temple, Jesus honored the Temple, and even in Stephen's day Christians were still worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem.

**Acts 7:48-50** "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me?' says the Lord, or 'what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?'"

The place this speech occupies in Acts suggests that Stephen is saying that the day of the physical Temple is passing. It had originally been built by Solomon and had been a blessing, but it was passing away now simply because Jesus Christ had come. He is the real Temple and those who have faith in Him also become temples of the Holy Spirit as the power and mind of the living God is imparted to the elect.

This is interesting because what Steven is admitting is that the accusation made against him in Acts 6:14 is actually true. His enemies said, "For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

Stephen is admitting that yes, because God is not the God of the Jews only but of the Gentiles as well, and it is to the Gentiles that the gospel will now go. This speech, has prominence in Acts because it marks the closing of the exclusive original Jewish commission and is an indication of expansion to the Gentile communities.

At the end of his sermon Stephen applied what he said in true prophetic fashion.

**Acts 7:51-53** "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

Stephen made three accusations against the religious leaders here: 1) They were resisting the Holy Spirit as they had always done. 2) They were persecuting and killing the prophets as they had always done. 3) They were breaking the law of Moses as they had always done. It was at this last point where their anger had reached such a heated rage that they refused to hear another word and rushed him outside and stoned him.

We are told in Acts 6:15 that, before he began his address, Stephen's face glowed like that of an angel. Here at the end of his address, knowing what was going to happen, he looked up and saw, not an angel, but Jesus Christ, whom they had crucified. Remember Stephen did not mention the resurrection in his sermon, but Stephen saw the resurrected Christ and called attention to Him at that time.

**Acts 7:54-56** When they 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,

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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!"

Keep in mind two things here: First, that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God. Why is He standing? Acts 7:56 is a climatic verse in this chapter for several reasons, but one main reason is it repeats the claim Christ had made at His trial before the high priest in Mark 14:62. Just as His claim resulted in his being accused of blasphemy, so also these words brought a violent response toward Stephen.

The second thing to keep in mind here is that the term "Son of man," in verse 56, is filled with significance. This is the last time it is used in the New Testament and it is the only time in the gospels and in Acts, when it is not spoken by Jesus Christ. This expression "Son of man" shows that Jesus is the Messiah because it comes from Daniel 7.

**Daniel 7:13-14** "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.

The third reason this verse is climatic is because Acts 7:56 combines two great messianic passages, Daniel 7:13-14, that we just read, and also Psalm 110:1. Daniel 7:13-14 emphasizes of the universal aspect of Christ's rule. He is not simply a Jewish ruler, He is the Savior of the world.

**Psalm 110:1** The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool."

Psalm 110:1 presents the Messiah as being at God's right hand. Besides stressing power and position this always shows acceptance. Christ was there as the Mediator thus proving that people have access to God by means other than the Temple and its priests.

Stephen's character is worthy of emulation. He was a fine example and he had knowledge that surpassed most of this it seems and he was highly regarded. So what

did we learn from his exceptional example?

Let me give you a scripture summary list:

- 1) Acts 6:5 - he (Stephen) was full of faith because there was no doubt or fear in his heart.
- 2) Acts 6:8 - he was full of power and grace because through him God did great wonders and signs.
- 3) Acts 6:15 - he was full of light because God gave him truth and a glow of a spirit being.
- 4) Acts 7 - he was full of Scripture because he was able to cover history from Abraham to Christ.
- 5) Acts 6:3; 10 - he was full of wisdom because he asked for wisdom as we are told to do in James 1:5. 6) Acts 7:51-56 - he was full of courage because he did not fear to witness boldly to anti-christs.
- 7) Acts 7:60 - he was full of love because the stones broke his head but not his heart. He was able to forgive his murderers.

What a fine list of attributes and qualities this man exhibited. Every last person in God's church can exhibit these qualities whether ordained or not, you do not have to be a deacon, but we should all be shooting towards these qualities that Stephen had.

People often wonder why Jesus was standing in Stephen's vision recorded in Acts 7:55. In Hebrews 10 we are told differently about an earlier scene at God's throne.

**Hebrews 10:11-12** And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God,

Hebrews makes a contrast between Jesus, who sat down, and the temple priests who always stood for their work. There were no chairs in the Temple, signifying that their work was never finished. They had to make sacrifice upon sacrifice because their

sacrifices were only types of Christ's sacrifice.

When Jesus made His sacrifice His work was done, but in Acts 7:55 Jesus is standing. Now why is that? Jesus sits as a judge, but on this occasion He stood as an advocate. He was standing while interceding, showing his intense concern for Stephen. Jesus Christ's function in heaven with God the Father is to be the Mediator for all believers and intercede for them. In the Amplified Version of Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus says:

**Matthew 10:32-33 (AMP)** "Therefore, the one who confesses and acknowledges Me before men (as Lord and Savior, affirming a state of oneness with Me), that one I will also confess and acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven. But the one who denies and rejects Me before men, that one I will also deny and reject before My Father who is in heaven.

Stephen certainly did not deny his God and we must not deny Him either. We must show no embarrassment over God's truth, Jesus Christ, and God the Father.

In view of Acts 7:55 it may be that we have a case of Jesus' standing to plead for Stephen's call as his advocate, that is, Jesus takes the position of the defender and witness before the Father's throne. Possibly the standing indicates that Stephen sees Him performing his high priestly duties for which sitting would be inappropriate. We do not know for sure, because it is not spelled out, but that seems to be at least part of the reason.

Since the idea of rest after the completion of a work and calm expectation of the fruit of that work relates to sitting, then the standing position here exceptionally described of Christ at the right hand of God, is intended to express the eager interest with which he watched from heaven the scene of Stephen's persecution.

Also Christ was probably increasing the effectiveness of God's Spirit in Stephen, giving his faithful witness the power and strength to bear up under such persecution until he beamed in radiance from His very countenance. We have God's promise, through the apostle Paul, that God will do no less for us.

**I Corinthians 10:13** No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Most people misunderstand this word “temptation” or “tempted.” It is far broader than just the simple temptation that we think of being tempted by the eating ice cream or being tempted to break the commandments. The word translated ‘temptation’ here means far more than just enticement in the Greek. It is a broad term that suggests putting to proof by experience provocation, discipline, or any adversity. It includes any trial whatsoever.

So we are told here that God will not allow us to be tested by trial beyond what we are capable of enduring. And if it seems unbearable God will also guide us through it or save us out of it, so that we may be able to persevere and endure hardship. We have that guarantee and that promise. Stephen’s life manifested that there in the end, we actually saw what God can do. He just put Stephen to sleep. That was one of the ways He is able to do that.

I find it extremely encouraging especially when we see the world deteriorating right before us and we know that the Christians are being persecuted. We are seeing that in the media and also in reports that are coming out of all the countries of the world.

So what we see here in Stephen’s martyrdom is the magnitude by which God will intervene on our behalf if we totally put our faith in Him. If Stephen had been asked before his persecution, arrest, beating, and murder by stoning if he would be able to endure such torture he probably would have replied no, just as we would probably think that we could not go through it either. Even Jesus asked for mercy and relief from what was about to happen when He was facing the inevitability of His being murdered by crucifixion.

**Luke 22:41-44** And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Even Jesus needed to be strengthened. Nevertheless, God strengthened them both [Jesus and Stephen] by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gave them the spiritual ability to bear up under such horrible treatment because they had complete trust in God’s compassion for them.

In this life we go through many situations in which we are on trial and although we tried

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to do our best we often fail and are even misunderstood and it can be very discouraging. Still we want to do as well in our trials as we possibly can and we have to be strong and bear a faithful testimony in all circumstances.

The legal trial that really matters or the verdict that counts is the verdict that is given by God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. I do not know exactly what Jesus Christ says when He looks down, sees us, and pleads our case before the Father, though I am sure it varies in every case. I do know that if we are His, He owns us and pleads our case in heaven.

As long as that is true we can carry on, we can fight the good fight stand firm to the end, and bear a victorious testimony. God has not called all of us to be martyrs but he does call us to be living sacrifices. In some respects it may be harder to live for Jesus 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.

May God help us to be true and effective witnesses of His way of life, no matter what trials may come our way.