

## WHAT MORE CAN HE SAY?

by Ray C. Stedman

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When I entered the city of Jerusalem for the first time I came down from the Mount of Olives and went through the gate called St. Stephen's Gate. In my mind's eye I can still see the activity in the Old City and I can feel again the tremendous impressions that were mine as I came in through that gate named in honor of the first Christian martyr. We meet him today in our studies in Acts.

Of course this gate is not the one through which Stephen actually passed on his way to being stoned, for that wall and gate were destroyed by Roman armies in A. D. 70, but it is probably erected on the same site and so it is properly named.

Stephen, you remember, was one of the seven chosen by the congregation of the early church to be apostolic helpers. Another was Philip, whom we meet again in chapter eight. These two men, like the apostles, did mighty signs and wonders among the people in that early day. We pick up the story in the sixth chapter of Acts, beginning with Verse 8:

**And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. {Acts 6:8-15 RSV}**

Here Dr. Luke ties together certain very interesting observations which, if we read between the lines a bit, will give us background to understand how the murder of Stephen occurred. Stephen, you remember, was one of those Greek-speaking Jews called the Hellenists in this account, one who had been born in another country and who spoke not Hebrew or Aramaic but Greek. He was among those converted by the witness of the apostles and so he had become a Christian.

There were in the city of Jerusalem a number of synagogues that had been formed by Greek-speaking Jews from various parts of the world. To these synagogues Stephen evidently went and preached in Greek, thus giving testimony to his faith in Jesus Christ. Dr. Luke records five of them. One was the synagogue of the Freedman. That sounds as if it would be something almost Christian in emphasis, but these were not spiritually freed men; they were physically freed. This synagogue was founded by Jews who had been slaves in the Roman empire and had later been set free. Then there were two groups from Africa: the synagogues of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians. Also there were two from what we presently call Asia Minor, or Turkey: Cilicia, and Asia, two of the Roman provinces of that day.

Now it is interesting that the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus, and undoubtedly in this synagogue was a young man named Saul of Tarsus who was among those who disputed with Stephen when he came preaching Jesus Christ. Saul also was among those of whom it is said here, "But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he (Stephen) spoke." Here was this brilliant young Jew, Saul of Tarsus, later to become the Apostle Paul, who, as a Jew, was tremendously stirred by the things that he heard Stephen say about Jesus Christ. He arose and disputed, but he could not answer Stephen. That must have been a gall to this young man, a blow to his pride, that he could not answer him from the Scriptures, since Saul prided himself as an authority on the Scriptures because he sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the great teacher.

When these men could not answer Stephen, they resorted to tactics often employed by people bested in an argument: When you cannot out-argue an individual, you usually try to out-shout him. When he still won't be silenced you have to try yet other tactics, as these did. They set about to charge him officially before the court, and to find false witnesses to testify against him that he had blasphemed Moses and God. It is interesting to me that they put Moses first here, making him more important than God. They stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they seized Stephen and brought him before the council.

So here is Stephen, standing before the same Sanhedrin that condemned the Lord Jesus to death and that had just had such difficulty with Peter, John, and the other apostles. By the time Stephen came before the council the official charges had been narrowed to two very specific offenses, that he was saying threatening things:

1. Against the temple ("This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place ... for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place"), and
2. Against the law, ("and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us").

In other words, Stephen was accused of threatening the establishment, represented by the temple and the priesthood, and of attempting to change the status quo.

Does that sound familiar? Yes, you say, these are the very charges leveled against the radicals and the demonstrators in our own day. We say of them, "You're threatening to change the establishment, and you're out to change the status quo." And, as today, these charges against Stephen were partly true and partly false. Stephen probably had said something very similar to what was alleged here, but not exactly. What he said could have been taken this way (as it evidently was), but he did not mean it that way. So it was impossible for him to answer with a simple "Yes," or "No," when the high priest read him the official charges and asked, "Are these things so? i.e., how do you plead: guilty or not guilty?" Stephen could not say "Yes," or "No," he had to explain what he meant. He had said something about Jesus' coming, and that the worship of the temple was changed. He had said that the customs which Moses had given would be altered, but he wanted to make clear what he meant.

Therefore there follows, in Chapter 7, the longest sermon in the book of Acts. It is Stephen's brilliant defense of what he believed, and is really a review of the history of the people of Israel. He answers the two charges against him, and he brings a third charge which he levels against the people. Just to help you find it, his answer to their charge regarding Moses is summed up in Verse 37. They had charged him with saying that Moses' teachings were to be changed (blasphemy!). Stephen answers by saying,

**"This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up.'" {Acts 7:37 RSV}**

In other words, Stephen's answer is that Moses himself had said that things were going to be changed, that God was going to raise up another prophet who, like himself, would speak to the people and give a whole new set of provisions for life from God.

Then he answers the charge concerning the temple in a brief section toward the close of his message, Verse 44:

**"Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, even as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations which God thrust out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked leave to find a habitation for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands; as the prophet says,  
'Heaven is my throne,  
and earth my footstool.  
What house will you build for me, says the Lord,**

**or what is the place of my rest?  
Did not my hand make all these things?" {Acts 7:44-50 RSV}**

His argument is that God himself, through the prophet Isaiah, had predicted that the temple would not always be an adequate place to worship God. In fact, no building ever will be. God is bigger than buildings. God is the One who made all things, who makes the material from which a building is made, and who makes the men who put that building together. God has not designed that he should be worshipped in a building made with hands. Isaiah said that, not Stephen. And so he successfully answers this charge.

It is an important point he makes. I have always been disturbed by the widespread teaching that a building can be called the house of God. Here, in our Sunday school, I labor diligently to keep our teachers from saying that to our children. No building is the house of God, or ever was. Even the temple, as Stephen points out here, was not rightly called the house of God. "Where is the house which you will build for me, says the Lord? Did not my hand make all these things?" When this church building is filled with people, who are indeed the house of God (for man is the house in which God intends to dwell -- your body, and my body), there is a sense in which this building is the house of God, because God is here *in his people*. But when we all leave and the lights are turned out, this building is no more the house of God than any other building in Palo Alto. It is no more holy, no more sacred. It is nothing more than a building, an empty building to be used for whatever purpose is helpful at the moment. It is not the house of God.

*You* are the *house of God*. That is the great truth that Stephen tries to get across to these people.

Then he levels a charge against them. He says, in effect, that far from following the great men of faith whom they professed to admire and revere, they were actually identifying themselves with the godless and idolatrous forces that had opposed these men of faith throughout all the history of Israel, and had even put them to death on many occasions. He selects from the course of Israel's history three of the outstanding heroes of faith and indicates the contrast between them and his listeners.

I am going to read the words of the seventh chapter because this is a great message. I want to divide it as Stephen does, and comment briefly here and there. I want you to see how this mighty preacher of the early church developed his thesis: that God was always working through men of faith and vision who dared to change the status quo, who dared to challenge the establishments of their day in the way the God himself always challenges, and then to see how he draws the contrast with these who charge him.

He begins with Abraham, the first of the three figures:

**"Brethren and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Depart from your land and your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living; yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him in possession and to his posterity after him, though he had no child. And God spoke to this effect, that his posterity would be aliens in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and ill-treat them four hundred years. 'But I will judge the nation which they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' 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." {Acts 7:2-8 RSV}**

What is he saying? That Abraham was a man of lifelong faith, who dared to change his life pattern in obedience to God, who left his country and even his father's house and went out into a land he had never seen before, and there, though he never owned a foot of ground in the land, nevertheless believed that God would do what he had said. Though he had no child he believed that God would give him descendants. God, of course, honored that promise and eventually gave him a child, Isaac, and in time fulfilled all the promises. Stephen here is drawing a very pointed unspoken contrast. Abraham, he said, your father, was a man of faith who dared to make changes in obedience to God.

The next man from their past is Joseph:

**"And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him governor over Egypt and over his household. Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent forth our fathers the first time. And at the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and called to him Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five souls; and Jacob went down into Egypt. And he died, himself and our fathers, and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem." {Acts7:9-16 RSV}**

Joseph was a man of integrity and truth who believed God, and God took him through deep waters and dark places, but eventually exalted and honored him and fulfilled His word to him in everything He promised. Joseph was a man of faith who obeyed God and because he did, God fulfilled every letter of his word to him. Therefore Joseph contrasts with these men standing before Stephen, who refuse to obey God simply because it will mean some changes in their lives. Joseph went through constant change, and yet God honored him.

The third man is Moses. Stephen spends most of his time on Moses because Moses is the one whom he was charged with blaspheming. He divides Moses' life into three stages. The first is given in Verses 17-29:

**"But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt till there arose over Egypt another king who had not known Joseph. He dealt craftily with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, that they might not be kept alive. At this time Moses was born, and was beautiful before God. [Is that not a wonderful phrase?] And he was brought up for three months in his father's house; and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.**

**When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. And seeing one of them wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking the Egyptian. He supposed that his brethren understood that God was giving them deliverance by his hand, but they did not understand. And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and would have reconciled them, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you wrong each other?' But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' At this retort Moses fled, and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons." {Acts 7:17-29 RSV}**

You may ask, "Why did Stephen tell these stories to people who knew them by heart?" It is because he wanted to remind them of something. They had said to him, "You are blaspheming Moses, the great leader, the infallible authority." But Stephen was saying, "Have you forgotten that Moses was a failure the first eighty years of his life? Have you forgotten that when Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was acting on the basis of the human knowledge and resources he possessed, that he fell flat on his face? And that when he tried to deliver his people, instead of becoming to them a missionary, as he thought God had appointed him, he became a murderer and had to flee. Instead of being a deliverer he became a refugee. Have you forgotten about Moses? He was a failure when he did not act by faith."

Then the second stage:

**"Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it he wondered at the sight; and as he drew near to look, the voice of the Lord came, 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. And**

**the Lord said to him, 'Take off the shoes from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the ill-treatment of my people that are in Egypt and heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.'**"

**"This Moses whom they refused, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?' God sent as both ruler and deliverer by the hand of the angel that appeared to him in the bush."  
{Acts 7:30-35 RSV}**

Catch the argument now. "You want to follow Moses," he says. "Well, Moses failed when he walked by the sight of his own eyes and in the wisdom of his own mind. But when God appeared and empowered him and taught him the proper source of strength and authority, He sent him back, and this same Moses, whom they would not receive as ruler and judge, God sent back to be a ruler and deliverer." Stephen is driving home this point: The only one worth following is God!

When men and women, boys and girls, act in faith toward God they have all the power of an omnipotent God behind them. But when they refuse to obey God they fall flat on their faces! The arm of flesh will fail you. Everything will turn to dust in your hand. Nothing will work out, and instead of being victors you will become victims.

And now the third stage, by which Stephen drives home his point with a vengeance:

**"He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up.' This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and rejoiced in the works of their hands. But God turned and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:**

**'Did you offer to me slain beasts and sacrifices,  
forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?  
And you took up the tent of Moloch,  
and the star of the god Rephan,  
the figures which you made to worship;  
and I will remove you beyond Babylon.'" {Acts 7:36-43 RSV}**

Stephen says that the people refused to obey Moses and so they began that whole system of idolatrous worship which led God at last, centuries later, to disperse them into the country of Babylon for seventy years of captivity. His whole point is that, as they turned from Moses and disobeyed him they fell into these evil idolatrous practices so that God had to judge them. And, his point is, Moses himself had said that it would happen again. Moses had said, "God will raise up unto you a prophet like unto me; and him you must hear." This, of course, would be Jesus. Yet Jesus is the one they are now rejecting. They are following exactly the course of their fathers.

Now, if you skip down to Verse 51 you get this conclusion.

**"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit." {Acts 7:51a RSV}**

These Jews would understand these terms. "Stiff-necked" -- proud, stubborn, they would not bow their heads at all. "Uncircumcised in heart" -- the foreskin of their heart has never been removed; there had been no exposure of their life to the grace and the glory of God. They were defiled, yet refuse to repent.

**"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy**

**Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." {Acts 7:51-53 RSV}**

What forthright truth this is. It was terribly hard to bear. These rulers of the Jews became so enraged that we read in the next verse,

**Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. {Acts 7:54 RSV}**

They ground their teeth against him, they gnashed their teeth. They were so stirred by this truth that they could not stand it.

That is what truth does. You must either accept it or fight against it. Truth never permits you to remain neutral, never leaves a middle ground; it always bursts through and drives you either to one side or the other. As Jesus said repeatedly of his own ministry, "I have not come to bring peace on the earth, but a sword" {cf, Matt 10:34}, (I have come to divide people.) "He who is with me gathers; he who is against me scatters," {cf, Matt 12:30}. You can tell who is with him because they are harmonizing and healing, gathering together, and breaking down dividing walls. Those who are against him are dividing and severing, causing divisions and fomenting factions, creating schisms, scattering. This is what these rulers experienced:

**Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." {Acts 7:54-56 RSV}**

Those are almost the identical words that Jesus himself had used before this same group just a few weeks earlier. He had said, "But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven," {cf, Matt 26:64}. When they heard Stephen say this they knew the issue was Jesus, not Stephen. What do you do with Jesus of Nazareth? They were condemned by their own Scriptures. There was not a word they could say against Stephen. The very Scriptures they professed to believe, in his mouth had condemned them, and they knew it. The issue clearly was Jesus. They either had to crown him, or to crucify him again. They either had to kiss his feet, or kill his servant, one or the other.

They chose to kill his servant. We read,

**But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears [i.e., put their hands over their ears so they could not hear Stephen's words] and rushed together upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting to his death. {Acts 7:57-8:1a RSV}**

A vivid picture, is it not? It is noteworthy to see how God stands by his faithful martyr here. Stephen's eyes are opened, even in the presence of the council, and he sees the Lord Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father.

It is my conviction that every believer who dies sees this event, that when a believer steps out of time into eternity the next event waiting for him is the coming of the Lord Jesus for his own.

Here Stephen sees him waiting to step out and receive him in a few moments, when he will be taken out of the city and stoned to death. This is the sight that greets the eyes of those who fall asleep in Jesus, and Stephen sees it. He prays to him in words that echo those of Jesus himself on the cross. Jesus had prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}. Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, and do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Twice in this account we have reference to young Saul of Tarsus. All of those who killed Stephen laid their garments at his feet. He kept the garments of the rest while they were doing the stoning. He had voted against Stephen in the council; he was consenting unto his death. But the idea the Holy Spirit wants us to grasp from this account is a truth that we have exemplified here and that has been manifested through the church many times since this day: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. When the church suffers this way it always grows immensely.

This has always been true. We have here with us in the congregation this morning two missionaries who spent forty years in the Congo. They were there during the rebellion that broke out a few years ago in which so many nationals and missionaries lost their lives. They told me last night that before the rebellion there were thirty-five thousand Christians in their section of the Congo, after many years of missionary labor. Then came the rebellion. Hundreds of national Christians were killed, and missionaries had to lay down their lives as well. Yet within a year or so after the rebellion the number of Christians had leaped from thirty-five thousand to seventy thousand. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

Out of the blood of Stephen there came the preaching of Paul. By the death of this first martyr there was brought to the church the heart and soul of the mighty apostle to the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul. Paul never forgot this scene. It was etched in his mind and memory so that he could never forget.

To this memory Jesus referred when he said to Saul, arresting him on his way to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, ... It hurts you to kick against the goads," {cf, Acts 26:14 RSV}. What did he mean? This memory of Stephen was like a goad digging at young Saul's conscience, bothering him constantly, and preparing his heart for that moment when the Lord Jesus, who had received Stephen's spirit, would appear and reveal himself to this young man who would be converted and become Paul the Apostle.

As we come to the close of Chapter 7, we come also to the close of the opening phase of the church's expansion. Jesus himself had said, in Acts 1:8 "You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses, [in three stages:] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." At the beginning of chapter eight you find the apostles now thrust out into Judea and Samaria. The end of the first phase has come, and the opening of the second now begins. Later, when Paul is converted, we find the beginning of that campaign which is still the occupation of the church in this very day and hour, the carrying of this great gospel unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

This book of Acts is an unfinished book. We are still privileged to be writing it today. In this day and age there may be some who will be called, like Stephen, to lay down their lives for Jesus' sake. The opposition is sharpening, the hostility is emerging, more vicious, more furious, more enraged on every side. Sooner or later, as with these rulers, confronted with truth they cannot avoid, the depths of depravity that lie in the human heart, covered oftentimes with a religious glaze, will break out, will erupt like lava from an active volcano, will vomit out upon this earth in a tremendous manifestation of hostility against the message of Jesus Christ and persecution of its bearers.

We may face this in our own day, who knows?

May God grant that, like Stephen, we will be faithful unto death.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, this account has sobered us as we realize that this is no child's play we are engaged in. This is no Sunday school picnic. There is nothing Mickey Mouse about this. It is a real battle and it can come to blood and sweat and tears. We pray, Father, that we may, like Stephen, be found faithful unto death, recognizing that the One whom we serve is the rightful Lord of heaven and of earth. To him all power is committed, right now, in heaven and on earth. Nothing can withstand us, nothing can stop us. Nothing can thwart the moving of his program through this age. May we be in line with it, honestly, openly, genuinely, sincerely. Judge among us, Father, any sham, any phoniness, any fakery, and purge it out from our

midst, that we may be, as these early Christians were, men and women filled with power, with spirit, with charm, with love, and with grace. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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