

Acts 6:8 – 7:8

8 After choosing the 7 men that had wisdom and the Holy Spirit, Luke tells about one of those men, Stephen. Like the Apostles, he was given the ability to perform great wonders and miraculous signs. Only two others outside the apostles are listed as performing miracles, Philip who was in the group chosen along with Stephen, and Barnabas. No example of what Stephen did is given, but we might assume that it is the same thing Jesus and the Apostles did, healings and casting out demons. That is an answer to the prayer in 4:30. The account of Stephen stands between that of Peter's ministry to the Jews and Paul's to the Gentiles. Stephen is ministering to the Grecian Jews, a kind of in between step of the two great apostles. Perhaps he testified in synagogues of Grecian Jews in Jerusalem, being one himself. The fact that his name was first in the list of those first chosen among thousands to serve the church shows that he was an exceptional man of God. The verse says he was full of God's grace and power. What does it look like to be full of God's grace? 7:60

9 A group of Grecian Jews (probably from 3 separate synagogues) were stirred to try to stop Stephen. He may have been a member of one of those synagogues. The Talmud estimates that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem at that time. The Freedmen were descendents of Jewish slaves who were captured by Pompey in 63BC and later freed. Stephen must have been so powerfully persuasive, through both the miraculous and his Spirit inspired preaching, that they felt their synagogues were threatened. Alexandrians and Cynenians were from two major North African cities. Cilicia and Asia were Roman provinces in Asia. The Apostle Paul was from Tarsus in Cilicia and may have attended that synagogue. He may have been one who debated Stephen. That would explain why he was present at the stoning.

10 The subject of the debate was probably along the lines of the accusation. Was salvation through the Temple rituals or through the death of the Messiah and faith in Him? Did Jesus fulfill the Law for us or does God desire for us to merit righteousness through keeping its 613 laws? Does God reside in the Temple or in the body of Jesus? (John 10:36) These were fundamental issues for the Jews. We can criticize their motives, but many surely thought they were defending the revelation of God to Moses. Stephen's answers were wise and of a an irresistible spirit. The wording could mean the Holy Spirit's persuasion, or it could mean Stephen's demeanor. I would think it was both, as the Holy Spirit gives us a persuasive demeanor. Since they were losing the debate, they decided to make false charges to the Sanhedrin. Jesus warned that this would come. Matthew 23:34

11-13 Before the Sanhedrin could convict, they had to have two witnesses that agreed upon the evidence, in this case a blasphemous statement. They coached several men that were willing to take on the role of accusers and recite the damning statement that was fed to them by the leaders of these synagogues. They weren't lying about what he said, but they were lying about the context, misrepresenting what he was preaching. The same was true of Jesus' accusers. It is getting very common today in our political area, a true quote, but out of context and void of the original meaning and intent.

14 This is the same argument used against Jesus. Jesus never said he would destroy it, and the context was in regards to his body not the Temple. It was true that God was about to allow it to be destroyed. Stephen was preaching the New Covenant predicted by the prophets. That is why they charged him with altering the customs that Moses gave them. (Jeremiah 31:31-34) The moral law had not changed, but ritual that foreshadowed reality was no longer needed. The reality of all of those pictures was Jesus and His sacrificial death.

In the next chapter, Stephen will show he thoroughly respects the Law. However, he saw the Law as pointing to the coming Messiah. He was unapologetic in that regard and refused to be intimidated. He just keep preaching what he knew was truth, even though he knew there was a good chance he would pay for it with his life. This bold faith, full of the grace and power of God, made Stephen the first Christian martyr.

15 This is quite a contrast! He is accused of being an evil blasphemer, but he looks like an angel. It reminds us of Moses needing to veil his face because the glory of God was so bright upon it. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11; Ecclesiastes 8:1

7:1-8 Stephen was given the chance to defend himself. He began with the formation of the people of Israel. Since we have been studying this portion of Scripture in the sermons on Genesis. I'd like for you to comment on these first 8 verses. They take us from the call of Abraham to the 12 tribes. It shows that the foundation of his faith was the same as theirs.

As we go through his sermon, keep in mind that it is a rebuttal to the charges of blasphemy, that Jesus was the manifest glory of God. The other charge is that he was saying that Jesus would destroy the Temple.