

Introduction

1. A few weeks ago we were introduced to Stephen as one of the seven men selected to oversee caring for widows within the Church
2. We also learned that he was known for performing signs and wonders among the people and was apparently a gifted evangelist who preached about Jesus in the Jewish synagogues
3. You will remember from our study of chapter 6 that a group of Hellenistic Jews known as the Synagogue of the Freedmen took offense at his preaching, confronted him and dragged him before the Sanhedrin with false accusations and fake witnesses
4. Rather than defend himself, Stephen decided to go on the offensive and recount the history of Israel:
 - a. He recounted how they resisted Joseph, Moses, and God Himself time and time again
 - b. He reminded them of how their forefathers had persecuted and killed the prophets
 - c. Israel had a pattern of resisting, persecuting, and killing the very ones that God sent to rescue or deliver them
5. He then ended his history lesson with a series of accusations against his accusers:
 - a. They were no different than their forefathers—stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears
 - b. They, too, were guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit
 - c. Just as their forefathers were guilty of persecuting and murdering the prophets, so were they
 - d. They were privileged to receive God’s Law, but did not keep it
6. This leads us up to the final part of Stephen’s story: how to you suppose his accusers responded to such accusations?

A. When Stephen’s accusers are confronted with the truth regarding their history of resistance to God, they become enraged (READ 54):

1. As we might expect, when confronted by the truth, they respond with rage:
 - a. **“They were cut to the quick”** (lit. **“they were sawn through to their hearts”**):
 - 1) Most translations render this as **“they became furious”** or **“enraged”**
 - 2) When confronted by the truth we generally see one of three reactions:
 - a) Indifference
 - b) Conviction
 - c) Or anger
 - b. The latter is what we see here; Luke records that they were so angry that they **“began gnashing their teeth at him”**
 - c. It’s important to remember here that Stephen was addressing two groups of people: the men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen and the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish legal authority in the land—**“they”** (v.54) refers to both
 - d. We’ve seen these same leaders react this way before—when they commanded Peter and John to stop preaching in Jesus’s name and they refused (Acts 5:33): **“But when they heard**

this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them.”—they were so angry they were willing to violate God’s Law and kill Peter and John!

2. Takeaway: the world may not like the truth, especially when it comes to sin, but fear of how they might respond should not deter us from speaking the truth

B. In contrast, when Stephen is threatened by the angry mob, he looks to heaven (READ 55-56):

1. Again, Luke describes Stephen as **“being full of the Holy Spirit”**: in this particular instance it refers to the special working or enabling of the Holy Spirit to empower and embolden Stephen at his time of need
2. He also describes Stephen as **“gazing intently into heaven”**:
 - a. The word for heaven can simply mean sky or it can refer literally to God’s abode and we find both here in this passage
 - b. In this first instance, heaven is singular and it refers to the sky as Luke describes Stephen staring intently up into the sky; it’s the exact same phrase used by the angels in Acts 1:11 when they ask the disciples why they were standing looking up into the sky after Jesus’ ascension
 - c. We know why Stephen is looking up—for the same reason we do when we are in need of help from Above
3. While staring up into the sky, something miraculous happens: he is given a glimpse into Heaven itself where he sees two things: the glory of God and Jesus Himself:
 - a. Stephen is one of a very few that were given a glimpse into heaven to see God’s glory:
 - 1) Micaiah (2 Chronicles 18:18-22)
 - 2) Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1)
 - 3) Ezekiel (1:1)
 - 4) Paul (2 Corinthians 12:1-6)
 - 5) John (Revelation 4:1-4)
 - b. However, there are two additional things about Stephen’s vision that are unique and they both relate to Jesus directly:
 - 1) The first is that he sees **“Jesus standing at the right hand of God”**:
 - a) Most references to Jesus being at God’s right hand describe Him as being seated:
 - David declared in Psalm 110:1 that Jesus would sit at the Father’s right hand: **“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at My right hand Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’”**
 - Jesus applied this to Himself on multiple occasions (Matthew 22:44; 26:64)
 - The last thing Mark tells us about Jesus in his Gospel is that Jesus **“sat down at the right hand of God”** after His ascension (Mark 16:19)
 - Paul wrote to the Colossians, **“therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God”** (Colossians 3:1)
 - The author of Hebrews wrote that when Jesus **“had made purifications of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”** (Hebrews 1:3)—he references Jesus sitting at God’s right hand three more times (8:1; 10:12; 12:2)

- b) These two verses in Acts are the only place we see Jesus standing and we will get to the importance of this in a moment
- 2) The other unique thing about Stephen's vision is that he refers to Jesus as the "**Son of Man**":
- a) This was Jesus' favorite and most often used title for Himself (used 84 times in the Gospels):
- The phrase is used throughout the OT to simply refer to someone as human, but there is one particular passage where it is used specifically as a reference to the One who would come from heaven (e.g. divinity) to earth and be given glory, eternal dominion and an everlasting earthly kingdom (READ Daniel 7:13-14)
 - So, when Jesus used this title to refer to Himself, He was revealing Himself as not just fully human but fully God (e.g. the one Daniel said would come from heaven) and the One who has authority over all things, including His right to judge, to forgive sins, to grant eternal life, to rule, and even to rise from the dead
 - He used this title to confirm to the High Priest at His trial that He was the Christ, the Son of God, and even declared that after His crucifixion they would see Him sitting at God's right hand (READ Matthew 26:63-64)
- b) Stephen's reference to Jesus as the Son of Man is unique because he and John (in Revelation) are the only other individuals to refer to Jesus this way:
- By using the title Son of Man here, Stephen identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of the One Daniel prophesied about
 - He was the "**Righteous One**" he mentioned in v. 52 that the prophets had announced (READ)
 - This also reveals Jesus as divine, the Son of God, who is now not only in God's very presence, but has been given divine authority
- 3) So, we have this amazing picture of Jesus, the Son of Man, the one who now sits at God's right hand with all power and authority, serving as both judge and jury, repaying men according to their deeds—except in this instance He's not sitting as expected, but has risen to His feet and is now standing as Stephen faces imminent death. Why is He standing?
- a) Luke doesn't tell us, so there are a lot of opinions but the most likely ones revolve around Jesus' role as both judge and advocate
- b) Matthew 10:28-33 sheds some light on why He's standing and it has to do with a promise He made to His disciples (READ Matthew 10:28-33)
- c) Jesus promised us that if we confess Him before men, He will confess us before the Father and I believe that is exactly what Jesus is doing here by standing up
4. Takeaway: when the world persecutes or threatens us for confessing Jesus and speaking the truth, we should fix our eyes on Jesus, the one who has promised to confess us before our heavenly Father

C. When Stephen's accusers are confronted with the truth about Jesus, they run him out of the city and stone him (READ 57-58):

1. Stephen's words further infuriated his accusers:
 - a. In v. 54 they were offended and became angry because Stephen accused them of resisting God and being guilty of persecuting and murdering the prophets
 - b. Here, they are offended and further enraged because they believe Stephen is speaking blasphemy by equating Jesus with Daniel's Son of Man and by claiming that Jesus is currently in heaven at God's right hand
 - c. This explains why they stone him (since that was the OT penalty for blasphemy; Leviticus 24:16)
2. What we see here is no longer a trial—rather, what started out as a sham trial with false accusations and fake witnesses has now turned into an angry, violent, and murderous mob:
 - a. There is no weighing of the evidence, or even a formal verdict
 - b. They are so enraged that they can't stand to hear any more, so they shout and plug their ears as they drag Stephen out of the city and begin stoning him—this is ironic on two fronts:
 - 1) Stephen had accused them of being “**uncircumcised in heart and ears**” and here they plugging their ears and refusing to hear
 - 2) He had also accused them of being like their forefathers who persecuted and murdered the prophets and here they are murdering one of Jesus's prophets
3. Takeaway: we cannot expect the world to act rationally when hearing the truth; their hearts and ears are uncircumcised and they are blinded by the enemy

D. In contrast, when Stephen is being stoned to death he calls upon the Lord (READ 59-60):

1. Have you noticed in how many ways the events surrounding Stephen's death parallel the events surrounding Jesus's death?
 - a. Both were falsely accused of blasphemy, including blasphemy against the Temple
 - b. Both were tried by a kangaroo court with false witnesses
 - c. Both refused to defend themselves
 - d. Both even involve declarations regarding the Son of Man and Jesus being at God's right hand
2. Here, we have two more ways in which they are similar, and it has to do with some of the last words they spoke:
 - a. Moments before Jesus died, he cried out to God to receive His spirit (READ Luke 23:46)
 - b. In the same way, moments before Stephen dies, he calls out to Jesus to receive his spirit (59)
 - c. Luke also records that as Jesus was being crucified, He “**was saying (ongoing), ‘Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’**” (Luke 23:34)
 - d. We see Stephen repeat this same plea, that God might forgive his accusers (60)
3. Takeaway: Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44) and that is the example we have in both Jesus and Stephen; we must remember that they are lost just as we once were; God desires them to repent and come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ just as much as He did us