

## “THE COMING OF THE RIGHTEOUS ONE”

Acts 6:8–7:53

Key Verse: 7:52

“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered...”

Have you ever been accused? How did you respond? Usually we get scared, or angry, or we clam up. How *should* we respond? Today we see a good example in a man known as St. Stephen. In Acts, this man serves as a kind of bridge. The first section of Acts, chapters 1–6, describes the birth and growth of the Jerusalem church. The second section, chapters 8–11, shows how the gospel begins to move out of Jerusalem into the larger world around them. Right in the middle is Stephen’s story. It’s amazing that just this one person becomes the catalyst for such a profound shift in the direction of the early church. In his speech to the Jewish Sanhedrin, Stephen mentions so many people, places, periods of time, and other details, it’s almost overwhelming. But if we look at his speech carefully, we can discover some key theological insights that equip the early believers to move out of a Jewish context and into the non-Jewish world with the good news of Jesus. Stephen’s speech climaxes with the coming of the Righteous One, our Lord Jesus Christ. So, we want to learn from Stephen the kind of faith we need to live as Jesus’ witnesses in our time. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

In 6:8–15 Luke briefly describes the ministry of Stephen and the opposition that arises against him. Look at verse 8. Stephen had been first on the list of the Seven chosen to help with the daily distribution of food to widows (6:5). He’s “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” Now it says he’s “full of grace and power.” It doesn’t seem he’s waiting on tables anymore; he’s “doing great wonders and signs among the people.” He’s doing what the original apostles were doing. It’s possible because the Holy Spirit is in him. The Holy Spirit has filled him with God’s grace and power. Filled with the Spirit, Stephen has become like Jesus.

Though his ministry is so graceful and powerful, there are still those who don’t like him. Read verse 9. (See map #1). The Jews mentioned in verse 9 had

been living in various places: Cyrene in North Africa, Alexandria in Egypt, and the provinces of Cilicia and Asia in modern-day Turkey. There were large Jewish communities in all these places. How did so many Jews get there? It was ever since the Assyrians invaded Northern Israel and forced them to scatter. They became known as the Ten Lost Tribes. Now, over 750 years later, at the time of the early church, there are Jewish communities in almost all the major cities of the Roman Empire. According to the ancient Greek historian Strabo, there were more Jews living *outside* the Holy Land than *inside* it. As we're going to see in the book of Acts, through these Jewish communities in various cities in the Roman Empire, Christianity will spread even more.

Look at verse 9 again. This "synagogue of the Freedmen" is in Jerusalem, but had its origins in Rome. The Roman General Pompeii had enslaved many Jews there decades ago. After gaining their freedom, they moved to the Holy Land to build this synagogue and restore their dignity. At the beginning of chapter 6, Luke also mentions "Hellenists" in the Jerusalem church. They were Jews who'd previously scattered to places in the Roman Empire where the Greeks had dominated for centuries. So they'd grown up speaking Greek and living in Greek culture. After moving to a community in Jerusalem, they studied the Greek Old Testament and spoke Greek to each other. In chapter 6, the chosen Seven all seem to be Hellenists, including Stephen. Most likely this synagogue of the Freedmen was for such Greek-speaking Hellenist Jews. To prove themselves, they stressed the importance of the law of Moses and the temple. Stephen goes to this synagogue to share the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. But many rise up to dispute with him. Soon in Acts we'll meet a young man named Saul of Tarsus, of Cilicia, another Hellenist who moved to Jerusalem to study, who goes on to become the main figure in Acts. Saul may have first heard Stephen in this synagogue and may have even disputed with him himself.

What happens? Look at verse 10. Because Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, no one can defeat him, just as Jesus promised (Luke 21:15). So what do they do? Look at verses 11–14. They played these same dirty tricks on Jesus during his trial. Here, they accuse Stephen of speaking against the law and the temple. Look at verse 15. Having the face of an angel shows that Stephen is innocent and endowed with the glory of God. Though his enemies can see this face, because their hearts are hard they still oppose him. Even so, Stephen respects them and calls them "Brothers and fathers" (7:2). He gives his

whole heart to share God's truth with them, not just to defend himself, but to help them receive Jesus. Let's think about the main lessons Stephen is teaching.

**First**, faith in God's salvation history. Stephen responds to his accusers by recounting the history of God's people based on the Bible (7:1–50). He retells the whole story from memory. In doing so, he doesn't idealize or glamorize God's people; he honestly includes their sins and failures, based on the facts mentioned in the Bible. Yet he deeply respects what God did through his servants Abraham, the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and the prophets—put together, it's the beginning of God's salvation history. Stephen's summary is brilliant and exact. It shows God's sovereign rule over history and God's faithfulness to his promises. It also tells us that the charge that he's speaking against the law is totally false. Stephen declares that the Bible is the timeless, "living oracles" of God for all people (38).

Why is Stephen's long speech so important? As Christianity begins to spread, pulling away from Jewish customs and traditions, new people could misunderstand that it means we can just forget about the Old Testament. But to truly believe and understand Jesus, like Stephen we need to know what God has done in history. So we've got to know the whole Bible. Only then can we fully understand God and his ways, our own helplessness in our sins, God's plan to send Jesus, what Jesus has done for us, and what real faith is. Today some people pick only parts of the Bible that suit their own agenda. But we can trust those like Stephen who speak of all that God has said and done. If we want to help people know Jesus, we've got to patiently show how the whole Bible points to God's hope for us in Jesus. As Paul says, the sacred writings "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," because "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." (2 Tim.3:15b–16). The whole Bible is the full and final revealed will of God, and all people need to listen to it. As Jesus' witnesses, we need this timeless faith in all God's word, and in God's entire salvation history.

**Second**, faith to live like sojourners and exiles in this world. In retelling the stories of God's people, what stands out here is how Stephen stresses all the places they lived *outside* the promised land (see map #2). Abraham was originally from the land of the Chaldeans, *Babylon*, in modern Iraq. Then he lived

in *Haran*, in modern southeastern Turkey. Even when he got to the promised land, God gave him “no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length” (5). God promised “that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others” (6). Soon God brought Abraham’s grandson Jacob and his entire family to *Egypt* (11–15). After he died, the family brought Jacob from Egypt to be buried in Abraham’s tomb—the only piece of land the family owned, which is actually in *Shechem* in *Samaria*, not Judah (16). (Now see map #3.) Later, Stephen mentions how Moses had to flee Egypt and become an exile in the land of *Midian*, in modern Saudi Arabia (29). After forty years God called him back to *Egypt* (30–34). Later, God led his people to live in the *wilderness* for another forty years (36b,38a). And due to their idolatry, God eventually would send them into exile beyond *Babylon* (40). So, most of Stephen’s summary of their history is actually outside the land of Israel. God was training his people to live by faith in all these lands. He still does.

In Stephen’s time, the Jews wanted to hold tightly onto the land of Israel. Especially the Hellenist Jews had moved back to Jerusalem for that purpose, to have some security. We too can be eager to settle down in this world and hold onto possessions and places as our security or identity. But God has always been a pilgrim God. He wants those who believe in him to live in this world as his pilgrim people, even if we stay in the same place (1 Cor.7:29–31). In his letter Peter urges us to live as sojourners and exiles in this world (1 Pet.1:1,17; 2:11). Hebrews 11:13 says, “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” To live as sojourners and exiles here, we need faith in the heavenly country, the city God has prepared for us in Jesus (Heb.11:16). 2 Corinthians 5:1 says, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” To live like pilgrims in this world by faith in Jesus, we need to hold firmly to this promise of God.

**Third**, faith to face jealousy and rejection. In his speech Stephen highlights two people in Israel’s history who faced jealousy and rejection, and both of them foreshadowed our Lord Jesus. First is Joseph. Read verses 9–10. Though his brothers tried to kill him, then sold him, Joseph ended up saving them and their families from the famine (11–14). Like Joseph, Jesus our Lord was handed over because of envy—even Pilate could see that (Matt.27:18; Mark 15:10). As we’ve

seen in Acts, the high priests and Sadducees were filled with this same jealousy toward the apostles and had them arrested (5:16–18). Later on in the mission field, Apostle Paul will face this same kind of jealous opposition (13:45; 17:5).

But the main person Stephen mentions who experienced rejection is Moses. In fact, Stephen spends the most time in this speech, 28 verses, speaking about Moses (17–44). Even from birth, Moses was rejected, by being exposed to die (19–21a). But God in his sovereign rule caused none other than Pharaoh's daughter to adopt him and bring him up as her own son, to be instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and to become mighty in his words and deeds (21b–22). When young prince Moses tried to save his own people by striking down an Egyptian who was oppressing them, a fellow Israelite told him, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" Then Moses fled to Midian, to live the rest of his life in obscurity (23–29). It seemed like a humiliating ending. But God had other plans. Look at verses 35–39. God sent the hand of his angel to call Moses from the bush. God used Moses to bring ten plagues on Egypt, to part the Red Sea, and to feed and give drink to the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness. In these verses the author repeats "This Moses," "this man," "this one" to emphasize Moses is the very one they rejected and drove away. But God established and used "this Moses" as their spiritual leader. Still, his people rejected him again. Read verses 39–40. The way the Israelites treated Moses is the way the people treated Jesus. During his earthly ministry Jesus performed wonders and signs. God the Father gave him living words to give to them. But they refused to obey him, and thrust him aside. Once they rejected and crucified him, they thought they could forget about him and do as they pleased. But God raised Jesus from the dead to be our Eternal Ruler and Redeemer, Deliverer, and the Prophet like Moses. Through his accusers and this trial, Stephen is now experiencing similar rejection. But he has firm faith, that Jesus who was crucified is our Risen Lord. Like Stephen, by faith in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus, we can go through any kind of rejection for his sake.

**Fourth**, faith to see Jesus and his people as our true temple. Stephen was accused of never ceasing to speak words "against this holy place," meaning the Jerusalem temple, the house of God. At that time, it was the largest, most glorious temple in the entire Roman Empire (picture). Visually it was impressive. And it made the people of Jerusalem feel secure. But in his speech Stephen

explains what is truly our holy temple of God. Look at verse 33. Here he points out that it was not in Jerusalem, but way out on Mount Sinai that God told Moses: “Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” “Holy ground” is wherever God meets and calls us personally. Later in his speech Stephen develops this more. Look at verse 44. Here God’s “house” is called “the tent of witness.” It was the portable house of the Pilgrim God (picture). Inwardly it was beautifully made, but outwardly it was covered with tents of goats’ hair—kind of ugly (Ex.26:7). Later Stephen says David asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob, but it was his son Solomon who actually built it (46–47), because David’s hands had shed too much blood (1 Chron.28:3).

Read verses 48–50. The truth is, God is not bound to any place, building or people. He is the God of all the earth. The Bible tells us that God made our Lord Jesus himself our temple. Jesus became our temple through his incarnation to dwell among us, and through his body given on the cross and raised to life for our justification (John 1:14; 2:20; Rom.4:25). Now we can come to Jesus by faith and get right with God. The Bible also tells us that those who are united with Jesus and have the Holy Spirit are his true temple in this world (1 Cor.3:16–17; 6:19). So instead of loving a special holy place or building, we need to love Jesus and his people as our true temple.

**Fifth**, faith in the coming of the Righteous One. In contrast to *his* coming, Stephen has mentioned how the patriarchs were **not** righteous—they were so jealous of Joseph they sold him (9). Even Moses was **not** righteous because he killed a man in Egypt (24). The Israelites were **not** righteous because, when Moses was gone, they made a golden calf and sacrificed to it (40–41). They even worshiped the host of heaven, the gods Molech and Rephan, and got sent into exile for it (42–43). Read verses 51–53. Stephen rebukes them for being stiff-necked with uncircumcised hearts and ears, and for always resisting the Holy Spirit. He rebukes them for following the bad habit of their fathers in persecuting every single one of God’s prophets, who were just trying to announce the coming of the Righteous One, Jesus. Most of all, he rebukes them for betraying and murdering Jesus. Rebuking can be so unpleasant. But sometimes rebuking is necessary, to see who we really are. Stephen’s rebuke may seem to have nothing to do with us today. But as the Bible says, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom.3:10). Even people who seem strict about God’s word and about worship are not righteous in the least. Sometimes, in our self-righteousness we

still, in a sense, betray and murder Jesus. Only Jesus is the Righteous One. Only by faith in Jesus are we clothed with his righteousness. Only by faith in his grace can we be healed and saved from our spiritual pride and ugly self-righteousness. Like Stephen surrounded by accusers, we need faith in the coming of the Righteous One, our Lord Jesus Christ. This faith gives us boldness in his grace to be his witnesses. One day, Jesus the Righteous One will come again as Judge, expose all the self-righteous, rescue all who lived by his grace, and take them home to be with him forever. This, too, is our faith, still today.

In this passage we learned the faith of Stephen: faith in God's salvation history, faith to live as pilgrims, faith to go through rejection, faith that Jesus and his people are our temple, faith that Jesus is the Righteous One. This faith can prepare us to witness to Jesus, no matter how people react to us, or even accuse us, and no matter where we are. May God grant us the faith of Stephen to live as Jesus' witnesses in our time.