

Abounding Grace Christian Church

The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Church – Part 26

I. Exposition of Chapter Seven (conclusion).

A. The Martyrdom of Stephen.

1. Verse 54 – “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.”

- a. Stephen’s strong rebuke angered the Sanhedrin to the point of an intense rage. The phrase, “...they were cut to the heart...” is found one other time in this book, as we’ve seen in 5:33 (translated “furious” in the NKJV). Marvin Vincent says it means; “to saw asunder”. A strong figure for exasperation.¹ Another reference adds; “...used metaphorically meaning to be enraged, moved with anger, to be cut or torn emotionally.”² In both cases, this emotional response led to the desire to murder.
- b. The phrase, “...gnashed at him with their teeth.” – means “to bite with loud noise, to grind or gnash the teeth. Literally, they began to gnash their teeth at him (just like a pack of hungry, snarling wolves).”³ Dr. Utley adds; “This is a sign of rage (cf. Job 16:9; Psalm 35:16; 37:12; Lam. 2:16).”⁴

2. Verse 55 – “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”

- a. Dr. Stanley Horton points out, “In contrast to those who were resisting the Spirit, Stephen, being still ‘full of the Holy Spirit,’ ‘gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God...’ – This is why it’s so important to stay full of the Holy Spirit. If we’re not, we could end up resisting what is really of God. There are many true Christians, for example, who resist the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, Divine healing and miracles and therefore, never receive all the “glory of God” available to them today.
- b. “...and Jesus standing at the right hand of God...” – This is showing that nothing escapes the knowledge of God. Jesus is always aware of what is happening to His people.

“The Bible normally speaks of Jesus as seated at the right hand of God (i.e., the place of highest honor and authority in heaven, 2:34; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69; Col 3:1). But here Jesus stood in order to welcome his first martyr (i.e., one who dies for their cause or beliefs) into heaven. Stephen had boldly confessed Christ and defended the faith to people. Now Christ, in honor of his servant, acknowledged him to his heavenly Father. For all faithful Christians near death, the Savior stands ready to receive them into his glory...”⁵

3. Verse 56 – “...and said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’” – Here we see Stephen refer to Jesus as the “Son of Man.” As we’ll see in the following verses, this seemed to infuriate the Sanhedrin even more. Dr. Thomas Constable writes:

“This was a title of the Messiah used by Daniel that implied the universal aspect of His rule (Dan. 7:13-14). Only Jesus used this title of Himself in the Gospels. It was His favorite designation of Himself. He had used it of Himself when He stood before the Sanhedrin not many weeks earlier (Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Stephen was virtually saying that his vision confirmed Jesus’ claim to be the Son of Man. Access to God is through Jesus Christ, not through temple ritual, as the Jews taught (1 Tim. 2:5).”⁶

4. Verse 57 – “Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;...” – This was the last straw for the Sanhedrin. They considered what Stephen had said about Jesus to be blasphemy. Dr. Horton asserts:

“Hearing this, the Sanhedrin yelled (shrieked) and put their hands over their ears; thus they closed not only their ears but also their minds to Stephen’s words and vision, proving their hearts were indeed uncircumcised... Then, with one spontaneous impulse and purpose, they ‘rushed at him,’...”⁷

5. Verse 58 – “[A]nd 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.” – Death by stoning is what Moses mandated for blasphemy

¹Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 471.

²Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*. (AMG Publishers; Revised edition, 1993)

³A.T. Robertson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. III, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 97.

⁴Robert James Utley, *Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*, vol. Volume 3B, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 107.

⁵*Fire Bible: Student Edition*, Donald C. Stamps, Gen. Ed. (Springfield, MO: Life Publishers Int’l, 2007), 1529-1530.

⁶Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Acts* (<http://www.soniclight.com>: Sonic Light Publication, 2019), 182.

⁷Stanley M. Horton, *Acts: A Logion Press Commentary* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2001), 156.

(cf. **Leviticus 24:14–16; Deuteronomy 13:9; 17:7**). Regarding why they drove him out of the city, Utley states; **“No one could be killed inside Jerusalem because it was “holy” ground!”**⁸

a. **“...a young man named Saul.”** – Here we are briefly introduced to Saul of Tarsus who would later be known as the Apostle Paul. Richard Longenecker gives insight as follows:

“This suggests that Saul had some official part in the execution. ‘Young man’ is used in Greek writings of the day for those from about twenty-four to forty years old. Some have argued from the action of the witnesses and from Saul’s age that he was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin at the time, though he may also have been exercising only delegated authority.”⁹

6. **Verse 59** – **“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’** – Regarding this statement by Stephen, Horton states: **“By addressing this prayer to Jesus he was recognizing that Jesus is divine, truly God. This must have enraged the Sadducees even further.”**¹⁰ Utley adds some other interesting thoughts:

“Notice that Stephen believed that he was going to heaven to be with Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 5:6, 8) and not to hades (i.e. the holding place of the dead like the Hebrew *sheol*). Stephen may have witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion, or at least had heard about it in detail because he uses two similar phrases (i.e. vv. 59 and 60, cf. Luke 23:34, 46).”¹¹

7. **Verse 60** – **“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.”** – As stated above, this is the other statement by Stephen very similar to what Jesus said; **“Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’”** – **Luke 23:34**. The phrase, **“...he fell asleep,”** is a commonly used phrase in the New Testament describing the death of a believer; (cf. **I Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20; I Thessalonians 4:15; II Peter 3:4**). We know from other Scriptures that the believer goes directly into the presence of the Lord at death (cf. **II Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23**). The idea of **“falling asleep”** denotes that the believer will rise again bodily. It shows the temporary nature of physical death.

II. Exposition of Chapter Eight.

A. Saul continues to persecute the Church.

1. **Verse 1** – **“Now Saul was consenting to his death.”** – The word **“consenting”** is probably not a strong enough word here. The New American Standard Version reads: **“Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death....”** Horton adds:

“He did not share the feelings of his former teacher, Gamaliel (Acts 5:38). Instead, Paul considered Stephen’s ideas dangerous and felt that they should be rooted out. But neither he nor the rest of the Sanhedrin could root out the work of the Spirit.”¹²

a. Paul reveals in later writings how much he regretted having been a persecutor of the Church (cf. **Acts 22:20; I Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13, 23; Philippians 3:6; I Timothy 1:13**).

2. **Verse 1 (continued)**. – **“At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”** From this we see that the murdering of Stephen was only the beginning. The church became greatly persecuted in Jerusalem by the Jews.

3. **Verses 2-3** – **Saul made havoc of the church and dragged believers out of their homes, taking them to prison.** Note the following:

“Saul...seems to have been the leader (vv. 1-3; 9:1) – or at least a main instigator – of the church’s first widespread persecution. It was intense and severe. Men and women were put into prison (v. 3) and beaten (22:19), and many were put to death (22:20; 26:10-11). Yet God used this persecution to start the great missionary work of the church (i.e., taking his message to different lands, people groups and cultures, v.4). By God’s design, this difficult time was the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus’ Great Commission – His direct command to take His message to ‘Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (Ac 1:8). Notice that the persecution brought out greater boldness in Christ’s followers as the ‘preached the word wherever they went’ (v.4)”¹³

⁸Robert James Utley, *Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*, vol. Volume 3B, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 108.

⁹Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 148.

¹⁰Horton, 157.

¹¹Robert James Utley, *Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*, vol. Volume 3B, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 108.

¹²Horton, 158.

¹³*Fire Bible: Student Edition*, Donald C. Stamps, Gen. Ed. (Springfield, MO: Life Publishers Int'l, 2007), 1530.