

The First to Die

I'm reading Acts again, this time looking at the relationship between persecution and the spread of the gospel. Acts 6-8:3 is an account of the martyrdom of Stephen, the first disciple to die for his faith in Jesus.

Turning the world upside down

It was becoming clear that threats, imprisonment and beatings would not stop the news about Jesus spreading throughout Jerusalem. Every day in the temple courts and from house to house his followers never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news about Jesus, the Messiah.¹

If the disciples remained silent and kept to themselves they may have won the acceptance of the religious authorities as another stream of Judaism. But they are intent that everyone should know the good news about Jesus, calling them to repentance and faith in him.

They took this unacceptable position because Jesus had risen from the dead showing that there is salvation in no other name. Jesus had charged his disciples to take the message of salvation to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. They must obey him making disciples as they went, forming them into communities of the new Israel.

There was no chance the religious authorities could ignore this aggressive new movement. There was always going to be a clash. This is what Jesus prophesied, they persecuted him, they will persecute his disciples.

The opposition began with a ban on speaking about Jesus. When the apostles defied the ban, they were flogged. Now Stephen will pay the ultimate price.

There is a way out, but he wouldn't take it

It is significant that Stephen was not one of the 12 apostles. As the movement spread, new leaders are emerging who minister in power and proclaim the gospel with equal authority. Stephen is a Greek-speaking Jew took the gospel to the community of diaspora

¹Acts 5:42.

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Jews living in Jerusalem. His opponents are Jews from around the Mediterranean, some from Cilicia, the home of Saul of Tarsus.²

Stephen is a formidable opponent. The power of God is upon him to heal the sick and to speak with wisdom. If only he would remain silent and live in peace, he would be left alone. There was no reason for him to die. No need for him to deny Christ, all he had to do was stop talking and he could live. Instead he chose to obey God rather than man.

They seized him and hauled him before the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the same high priest and council that handed Jesus over to the Romans. They charged Stephen with some of the same offences—that he was against the temple and the law.

Who really is on trial?

Stephen stood before his accusers with the face of an angel, just as Moses' face shone when left the presence of God on Mount Sinai.³ Stephen was on trial for his life, yet he turned the tables on his opponents and put them on trial. He gave them a lesson on the history of Israel.

The history of Israel was the history of their rebellion. They had failed in their calling to reveal his glory to the world.

From the time of Moses, Israel had either run after other gods or tried to turn Yahweh into a national god who they could control. The Most High God cannot be limited to one land, one people, one temple. Heaven is his throne, earth is his footstool. God's plan includes the whole world and his people are a people on the move.⁴

These leaders of Israel are the children of those who rejected murdered the prophets. They have murdered the Messiah. They have broken the covenant, and judgment will fall on Jerusalem. With this, the Sanhedrin erupted with murderous rage, proving Stephen's point.⁵

²It's call the synagogue of the Freedmen as they were freed slaves or their descendants. Some may have been enslaved by the Roman general Pompey when he conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC and subsequently freed before returning to Jerusalem. See Eckhard J. Schnabel, Acts. ed Clinton Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 345-346.

³Exodus 34:29.

⁴John B. Polhill, Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, The New American Commentary 26 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 188.

⁵Alan J. Thompson, The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan, vol. 27, New Studies in Biblical Theology, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2011), 168.

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Victory in death

Stephen filled with the Spirit looked up to heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God in his glory. Jesus is the Son of Man who has been give all authority to rule and to judge the world (Daniel 7:13-14). All of God's plans and promises to Israel are fulfilled in him. Jesus fufills and replaces the temple, the law and the sacrificial system.⁶ The Messiah Jesus is on the throne of the universe.⁷ Jesus is standing, ready to receive his servant. Jesus is standing ready to judge those who condemn him. The future was with all those who will follow the suffering and victorious Son of Man.

Covering their ears and screaming they rushed at him and dragged him out of the city to stone him. Before the final fatal blow struck, Stephen fell to his knees and like Jesus, prayed for the forgiveness of his attackers.

Stephen the first witness to die for his faith in Jesus as the crucified, risen Lord and Savior.⁸ His death proved that no matter how many messengers God sent, Israel as a nation was beyond redemption. Yet God had not given up on his plan that through Abraham's descendants, God's blessing will go to all peoples, nations and languages. The true Israel are those, both Jews and Gentiles, who put their trust in Jesus as Messiah and Lord and receive salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁹

The struggle continues

At the moment of Stephen's death, Luke shines the spotlight on a young man watching on with satisfaction. For Saul this was just the beginning. He was ready to launch his campaign to destroy this movement of Jesus' disciples wherever he found them.

Stephen's witness is over, others will now take his place. A great persecution driven by Saul of Tarsus will propel God's people out of Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria and Antioch.¹⁰ The word is on the move and nothing can stand in its way.

⁶David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 266-67.

⁷F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*. ed. Gordon D. Fee, rev ed., NICNT, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1988), 166.

⁸Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*. ed Clinton Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 396.

⁹Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 258.

¹⁰Scott Spencer quoted in David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 268.