

“I See the Heavens Opened”

Today’s passage records a defining moment in the history of the early church. Stephen’s martyrdom initiates a necessary break between Judaism and Christianity that allows Christianity to truly become a worldwide movement for all people. Up to this point the spread of Christianity has been primarily confined to Jerusalem among Jewish people making it seem that one must first be Jewish before becoming a Christian. But as a result of Stephen’s courage and boldness the truth is affirmed that access to God is not found through Judaism and its forms, but through Jesus and Jesus alone. Jesus has opened wide the doors of heaven!

Read Acts 6:8 – 8:3

1. What sticks out to you in this passage?
2. The accusation against Stephen was that he spoke against Moses and God (v. 11) and specifically that he never ceased to speak words against the temple and the law (v. 13). Why did the gospel preached by Stephen sound to the Jewish religious leaders to be against these things?
3. Scan Stephen’s speech (7:2-50). How does he demonstrate from the Old Testament scriptures that the land, the law, and the temple were never meant to be understood as God’s final act in redemption history? How does he demonstrate that these point to a greater fulfillment?
4. Though Stephen is the one on trial, how does he turn it around and put the Jewish religious leaders on trial?
5. What is significant about Stephen seeing the heavens open and Jesus standing at God’s right hand (v. 55-66)? What does this say about access to God?

Brian said:

I want to say a couple of things to those who are followers of Jesus. First, **just as you initially gained access to God through faith in Jesus, that access is maintained only by Jesus.** Even though we believe that our entrance into a relationship with God was totally based on what Jesus did, we can sometimes slide into thinking it is maintained by being good enough; being obedient enough. As disciples of Jesus, we DO strive to love God by obeying him, but this does not maintain our connection to God. Our ongoing access to God is maintained by Jesus alone, just as our initial access to God is found in Jesus alone. Walk in this truth! Walk in the grace of this truth!

6. In a Jewish context, following the law and temple rituals were things that Jewish Christians might have felt a need to keep following to maintain access to God. What are extra things that we might slide into thinking are necessary to maintain our access to God?

7. The necessary break between Judaism and Christianity, which enabled Christianity to become a worldwide movement for all people, happened in large part because of Stephen. What strikes you about Stephen in this passage?

8. What is your main application from this study?