

“I See the Heavens Opened”

Today, we come a passage that records a defining moment in the history of the early church. Jesus had commanded his disciples to take the message of the gospel to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and to the remotest parts of the earth. It was to be a message for all people. But up to this point, the church has stayed in Jerusalem and the spread of the gospel has been confined to Jewish people. That’s about to change.

As the gospel has been preached among the Jewish people, tension has been growing between the Jewish religious leaders and the Christian movement. In today’s passage that tension boils over and Stephen becomes the first martyr of the Christian faith, which begins a process of Christianity becoming untethered from Judaism. This is necessary if Christianity is ever going to be anything more than a Jewish sect. Up to this point, as the gospel has been spreading among Jewish people when they became believers in Jesus, they live out their Christian faith in the forms that they were used to in Judaism (e.g., They continue to go to the temple). But with the martyrdom of Stephen, a break begins between the church and Judaism that will allow Christianity to become a worldwide movement for all people.

One commentator made the point that Stephen died for the difference between Judaism’s approach to God and Christianity’s (Gooding). Judaism’s approach to God was wrapped up in the law and the temple. Christianity’s approach to God was centered on Christ. Luke wants us to understand this break between the church and Judaism and that it was fundamentally about Christianity’s new and different approach to God through Jesus alone without the need for priests, or temples or animal sacrifices. Because of Jesus, the heavens are opened wide.

And so, let’s look at this passage. We are going to look at the opposition that Stephen faced, then defense he makes, and then finally the truth of the gospel that he proclaims that ultimately gets him killed. I’m going to have to summarize a lot; there are 71 verses in our text. Hopefully, you had a chance to read it this week. Let’s look at the . . .

I. Opposition to the Gospel (6:8-7:1)

You might remember that Luke introduces Stephen in the first part of chapter six. He was one of the godly men selected to administer the care of the widows. But Stephen not only was involved in caring for the widows, he also had a ministry of preaching and performing signs and wonders among the people.

⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Stephen was from the Greek-speaking part of the church and so it is possible that the *synagogue of the Freedmen*, which was a Greek-speaking synagogue, was the synagogue he had attended. Men from this synagogue don't like what Stephen is teaching. They dispute with him.

Luke doesn't record what Stephen was teaching, but we can surmise that as a disciple under the teaching of the apostles that he taught the same things that they did – Jesus was crucified according to God's plan, he was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day. He would have proclaimed forgiveness of sins through Jesus and that because of this a new way was open to the Father – access to God through Jesus Christ.

This message of access to God, which didn't include the law or the temple, was offensive to some from the synagogue of the Freedmen and so they seek to silence Stephen.

¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

What they saw as they looked at Stephen is that even in this moment of hostility, he reflected the character of Christ.

Now, the general charge is that Stephen was against Moses and God (v. 11). The specific charge is that he *never ceases to speak words against this holy place* (i.e., the temple) *and the law* (v. 13). The charge is a mix of distorted truth and outright falsehoods. Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple, but he never said that he would do it, and so Stephen would not have made that claim. That's a falsehood. But the charge that he had said that Jesus would *change the customs that Moses delivered* was in fact true. Jesus did come to change the customs that Moses delivered. Jesus' healing on the sabbath was an example of this. To the Jewish leaders these kinds of things sounded like blasphemous words spoken against Moses and God.

^{7:1} And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

And with that question, we come to Stephen's defense, which takes up most of chapter 7.

II. A Defense of the Gospel

This is the longest of all the speeches that Luke records in Acts, which suggests the importance that Luke placed on this. In this speech, Stephen essentially does two things. First, he focuses on what the Old Testament said about the law and the temple, as well as the land. To the Jewish people these were the necessary forms and the ways God showed up and met with his people.

These were the forms that provided access to God. But Stephen challenges this thinking and demonstrates that these things rightly understood point to a greater fulfillment.

The second thing Stephen does is confront the Jewish religious leaders with the truth that in crucifying the Messiah, they have done what their fathers have done throughout history, which is to miss what God is up to by silencing his messengers.

And so let's look briefly look at what he says about **the land, the law, and the temple (7:2-50)**. In terms of the **land** (7:2-36), Stephen makes the point that God's activity has never been limited to just the Promised Land. God appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia (v. 2). God blessed Joseph when he was in Egypt (vv. 9f). God met Moses in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush that he told Moses to take off his sandals because the *place where you are standing is holy ground* (v. 33). The Jewish people venerated the land, and yet from their own Scriptures, Stephen demonstrates how God was never limited to acting in the land, and that wherever God shows up is holy ground.

Now, in terms of the **law**, the most important thing that Stephen said is found in verse 37. In a section where he is talking about Moses, he says:

³⁷ This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'

Moses was a prophet. God had given the law through him. But Moses himself made it clear that the law was not the final word from God, because God would raise up another prophet like him (Deut. 18:15). The prophet of whom Moses speaks is Jesus. If the Jewish people rightly understand the law, they would know that the law itself pointed to further revelation.

Finally, in addressing the **temple**, Stephen traces the history of the tabernacle, which had traveled with Israel in the wilderness and then was brought into the land. And then he talks about the temple, which Solomon built. He concludes his comments by saying what King Solomon himself had said at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:27):

⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

And then he goes on to cite Isaiah 66:1-2, which makes this point that God is not to be contained in a man-made house. His point is that the temple could not contain God and they were never meant to limit God's further redemptive activity among His people.

The land, the law, and the temple were all important. Stephen speaks respectfully of these things. They had their place in God's redemptive plan. But he makes it clear that they were never meant to limit God doing a new thing. In fact, when rightly understood they all pointed to a greater fulfillment.

The second thing Stephen does in his defense is boldly confront the religious leaders by telling them that they are just **like their fathers who have always resisted the Holy Spirit (7:51-53)**. This point is woven throughout the history of Israel that he presents. Let me read one example. In verse 38, he speaks about what happened in the wilderness when Moses was meeting with God to receive the law.

³⁸ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days,

Stephen makes the point that at the very moment that God was meeting Moses to give the law to Israel, the people of God missed what God was doing. They refused to obey Moses, and thus God. Stephen confronts them with the truth that they, like their fathers, are doing the same thing. With boldness and courage, Stephen says:

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears,

These are phrases which God had spoken in judgment against that generation that was in the wilderness that refused to obey Moses.

you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Israel repeatedly missed what God was doing. Their fathers had killed the prophets who announced the coming of the Righteous One, and the current generation murdered the Righteous One. The very ones who claim to uphold the law, Stephen says, *did not keep it*.

Stephen puts the land, the law, and the temple in their proper place. He demonstrates that they were never meant to be God's final word in redemptive history. And he confronts the current generation with the truth that, just like their fathers, instead of listening to God's messenger they killed him. The next thing that Stephen says will get himself killed. He proclaims the truth of the gospel that in Jesus there is full unfettered access to God.

III. The truth of the Gospel: Full unfettered access to God (7:54-56)

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

God is giving Stephen a glimpse into heaven. This is not a vision. Stephen sees the heavens opened. He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. There are differing views on what it means that Jesus is standing. Usually, we read that Jesus is seated at God's right hand. Some believe Jesus is standing to welcome Stephen into heaven. Others believe he is standing before the Father as Stephen's advocate. Whatever the case Stephen sees what he knows to be true and that is that Jesus is the one who provides access to God. Not the law. Not the temple.

In Jesus God has done a new thing. Jesus is the fulfillment of redemption history. He is the fulfillment to which the law and the temple pointed. And so why hang on to an old system where only one man, the high priest, could go into the presence of God once a year, while all the other worshipers remained outside? Why continue to practice daily animal sacrifices that were never sufficient for sin when Jesus has paid for sin once for all? In Christ, the heavens are opened. Access to God for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike is made available through the good news of the gospel that Stephen preached.

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen died for the difference between Judaism's approach to God and Christianity's. He died proclaiming the truth that in Jesus the heavens are open wide. Luke wants us to understand this difference, which created this necessary break from Judaism. Luke wants us to understand that we have full access to God through Jesus and Jesus alone.

Now, before we talk for a bit about application, I wanted to mention a couple of things. There is so much in this passage. First, we could have spent a lot of time focusing on Stephen and his character. He is a disciple who reflects the Lord Jesus in his life and death. As Jesus entrusted his spirit to the Father, Stephen entrusts his spirit to Jesus. He knows that he is going to die and in the very next moment he will be welcomed into God's presence because of Jesus. And like Jesus, he asks for God to forgive those who are murdering him. He is an amazing person. Lord, make us more like Stephen!

The other thing I want to mention is that Luke uses this account to introduce us to one who will become a central figure in the remainder of the book of Acts – the apostle Paul. Here he is named Saul. Luke goes on to say in chapter 8:

^{8:1} And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and

entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Saul approves of Stephen's execution and becomes a central figure in the early persecution of the church. As a result of this persecution, believers are scattered and Jesus' command to take the gospel to Judea and Samaria and the remotest parts of the earth begins. This necessary break between the church and Judaism begins and increasingly it will become clear as we go through Acts that one doesn't have to be Jewish first to become a Christian.

Now, in the remainder of our time, I want to mention a couple of points of application. First, to those who are not yet followers of Jesus the message to you is that **full access to God is available through Jesus alone.**

I've known people in the past who have said that they are not sure they can become a Christian because they are not good enough or they've done too many bad things. The message of this passage is that access to God is not found in keeping any kind of law or by being good enough. Access to God is found in Jesus Christ and in Jesus alone. Access to God is found through the forgiveness of sins that Jesus made possible through his death and resurrection. Today, you come to God by repenting of your sin and by faith trusting Jesus to forgive you. He fulfilled the law for you. He lived a good life for you. This is where access to God is found – Jesus.

Secondly, 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!

Here's the other thing I want to say to those who are followers of Jesus, and it flows from what I've just said. We need to make sure we **defend a gospel of full unfettered access to God through Jesus alone.** Stephen gave his life for this truth. Make sure that as you are seeking to help others find and follow Jesus that you don't subtly teach or suggest that access to God is by anything other than through faith in Jesus alone.

I've known people who at one time were involved in a one Christian group (it could be a Christian group on campus or a church), but eventually felt led to pursue God with a different group or church. And when they left, they were shunned and treated by people from the original group like they weren't even a believer. This is not defending full access to God through Jesus alone. This kind of thing is akin to what Stephen was confronting with the Jewish leaders who insisted that the only right way to seek God was their way through the law and the temple. Stephen died for the difference between Judaism's approach to God and Christianity's. We need to make sure we are defending what is truly Christianity's approach to God – full access to God through Jesus Christ alone.