Stephen: The Heavens Opened

Bible Stories Anthology — Acts 6–8

Copyright 2026

Distribution of this study as is in its entirety is permitted & encouraged.

Author: John Lobota

Research Assistant: Claude Cowork

papertiq@bellsouth.net

> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

A Face Like an Angel

He was chosen to wait on tables. The church in Jerusalem had grown so fast that the daily food for its widows was not reaching everyone fairly, and the apostles asked the believers to pick seven trustworthy men to look after it. Stephen's name was first on the list.

Within a short time this table-server was doing great wonders among the people, out-arguing the scholars of five synagogues, and standing before the supreme council of the nation on a charge that carried the death penalty. When the council looked at him, they saw a face like the face of an angel.

He answered them with the longest speech in the book of Acts — the whole history of Israel, from Abraham to Solomon, told in a single breath. It ended with the heavens opening, and a sight no one else in scripture ever saw: Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God.

Then they dragged him out of the city and stoned him. And as the stones fell, Stephen prayed for the men who were throwing them. At his feet, holding their coats, stood a young man named Saul.

The Setting

When. Some time after Pentecost — Luke does not say how long; perhaps a year or a few years. The church in Jerusalem now numbered many thousands (Acts 4:4 counts about five thousand men).

Where. Jerusalem: the synagogues of the city, the council chamber of the Sanhedrin, and finally a place outside the city wall.

The administration. The administration of grace had opened at Pentecost. But no one yet knew its full extent — the revelation to Paul that Jews and Gentiles would be one body lay years ahead (Ephesians

3:3-6). At this point the believers were still Jews, still worshipping at the temple, still keeping the customs of Moses. The gospel had not yet left Jerusalem.

Two kinds of Jews. Two groups made up the church. The **"Hebrews"** were Jews of the land of Israel, who spoke Aramaic and read the scriptures in Hebrew. The **"Grecians"** (in Greek, *Hellenistai*) were Jews who had grown up in the cities of the Roman world — Alexandria, Cyrene, Tarsus — and spoke Greek as their first language. Many had come to Jerusalem to live out their days near the temple. Some were widows, far from any family.

The council. The Sanhedrin was Israel's highest court, about seventy elders, priests and scribes, with the high priest presiding. It had tried Jesus. It had already arrested and beaten the apostles (Acts 5:40). Under Roman rule it did not have the legal right to carry out a death sentence — **"It is not lawful for us to put any man to death"** (John 18:31) — which is why it had needed Pilate to crucify Jesus.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Seven Men of Honest Report

> **Acts 6:1** *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.*
>
> **Acts 6:2** *Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.*
>
> **Acts 6:3** *Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.*
>
> **Acts 6:4** *But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.*
>
> **Acts 6:5** *And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:*
>
> **Acts 6:6** *Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.*
>
> **Acts 6:7** *And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.*

"A murmuring." The first quarrel in the church was over food and fairness. The Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in **"the daily ministration"** — the daily service or distribution. The word *diakonia*, "ministration," is where the word "deacon" comes from.

"It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables." The apostles did not dismiss the problem. They solved it by giving it to the right people, so they could keep to **"prayer, and… the ministry of the word."** "Serve tables" and "ministry of the word" use the same Greek word, *diakonia*. Both were service. They were simply different services.

"Seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom." The job was practical, but the qualifications were spiritual. Men who handle money and food for widows need to be trusted, filled with the gift of holy spirit, and wise.

Every name is Greek. Stephen (*Stephanos*), Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas. The church chose men from the very group that had complained — the kindest possible answer. One of them, Nicolas, was not even born a Jew: **"a proselyte of Antioch,"** a Gentile convert to Judaism.

"Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost." He is named first, and described twice in three verses as "full." His name means *crown* — the victor's wreath of leaves given to the winner of a race.

"They laid their hands on them." Laying on of hands was the sign of appointing someone to a task and identifying with him (compare Numbers 27:18-23, where Moses laid hands on Joshua).

"A great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." Even priests who served in the temple were believing. That must have alarmed the leaders who had condemned Jesus.

Wisdom They Could Not Resist

> **Acts 6:8** *And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.*
>
> **Acts 6:9** *Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.*
>
> **Acts 6:10** *And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.*

Stephen was not an apostle, yet **"full of faith and power,"** he **"did great wonders and miracles among the people."** The gift of holy spirit was not given to the twelve alone.

"The synagogue... of the Libertines." "Libertines" means *freedmen* — Jews who had been taken captive (many to Rome in 63 B.C., when the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem) and later set free, and their descendants. With them were Jews from **Cyrene** and **Alexandria** in Africa, and from **Cilicia** and **Asia** in what is now Turkey. The chief city of Cilicia was Tarsus. A young Pharisee from Tarsus named Saul was in Jerusalem in those very years, and as this series understands it, it is very likely he was among the men of Cilicia who argued with Stephen.

"They were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." Jesus had promised exactly this: **"I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist"** (Luke 21:15).

False Witnesses

> **Acts 6:11** *Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.*
>
> **Acts 6:12** *And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,*
>
> **Acts 6:13** *And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:*
>
> **Acts 6:14** *For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.*
>
> **Acts 6:15** *And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.*

When men cannot answer an argument, they sometimes attack the man instead. **"Suborned"** means they secretly put men up to it — bribed or persuaded them to lie.

The charges were blasphemy against **Moses**, against **God**, against **"this holy place"** (the temple), and against **"the law."** Under the Law, blasphemy was punished by stoning (Leviticus 24:16).

Notice the pattern. At Jesus' trial, false witnesses had said, "We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands" (Mark 14:58). Now they said the same of Stephen: that Jesus **"shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us."** They were twisting something true — Jesus had foretold that the temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24:2), and the believers did teach that Jesus was greater than the temple — into a lie.

"Saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." This is a **simile**, a comparison using "as." It was a face at peace, shining with the presence of God. When Moses came down from Sinai, **"the skin of his face shone"** (Exodus 34:29). The council accused Stephen of speaking against Moses; God gave Stephen a face like Moses'.

The Speech: God Was Never Confined to One Place

> **Acts 7:1** *Then said the high priest, Are these things so?*

"Are these things so?" The high priest gave Stephen a chance to answer. Stephen's answer is the history of Israel — and every part of it answers the charges. Watch for two threads running through it:

1. **God was never confined to the land or the temple.** He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, was with Joseph in Egypt, and met Moses in the desert of Sinai.
2. **Israel always rejected the deliverers God sent** — first Joseph, then Moses, then the prophets, and now the Just One.

Abraham: Called Outside the Land

> **Acts 7:2** *And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,*
>
> **Acts 7:3** *And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.*
>
> **Acts 7:4** *Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.*
>
> **Acts 7:5** *And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child.*
>
> **Acts 7:6** *And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years.*
>
> **Acts 7:7** *And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.*
>
> **Acts 7:8** *And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.*

“Men, brethren, and fathers.” A respectful address: the council members were his “brethren” as fellow Israelites, and “fathers” as the elders of the nation.

“The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran.” God’s first appearance to the father of the nation was not in the holy land, not in any temple, but in Ur of the Chaldees, a city of idols. Genesis agrees: **“Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country”** (Genesis 12:1) — “had said,” before the journey to Haran began.

“When his father was dead.” Abraham left Haran after Terah died. Genesis says Terah lived 205 years (Genesis 11:32), and Abraham was seventy-five when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4). Put together with Stephen’s words, this shows that Abraham was born when Terah was 130, not seventy. Genesis 11:26 names Abram first among Terah’s sons because he was the most important, not because he was the eldest. Stephen’s single phrase settles a question of Bible chronology.

“None inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on.” Abraham owned nothing in the land except a burial cave. He lived there as a stranger, holding only God’s promise.

“Four hundred years.” God told Abraham ahead of time that his descendants would be enslaved in a foreign land and then brought out (Genesis 15:13-14). God is not surprised by His people’s troubles.

Joseph: The First Rejected Deliverer

> **Acts 7:9** *And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,*
> **Acts 7:10** *And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.*
> **Acts 7:11** *Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance.*
> **Acts 7:12** *But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.*
> **Acts 7:13** *And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph’s kindred was made known unto Pharaoh.*
> **Acts 7:14** *Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.*
> **Acts 7:15** *So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers,*
> **Acts 7:16** *And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem.*

“The patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him.” The heads of the tribes of Israel sold their brother. The council was made up of their descendants. Stephen did not need to spell it out.

“But God was with him.” In Egypt — far from the land, in a pagan nation, in slavery and in prison — God was with Joseph. As Joseph himself told his brothers, **“ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good”** (Genesis 50:20).

“At the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren.” The first time the brothers came, they did not recognize him. The second time, they did. Israel had not recognized Jesus the first time.

“Threescore and fifteen souls.” Seventy-five. The Hebrew text of Genesis 46:27 says **“threescore and ten”** — seventy. Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, was quoting the Greek Old Testament, which counts seventy-five in Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5 by including more of Joseph’s descendants. One of the

Dead Sea Scrolls, a Hebrew copy of Exodus, also reads seventy-five. The two numbers count the family in different ways.

"Laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought… of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem." This is a well-known difficulty. Genesis records that Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah at Hebron from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23:16-17), and that Jacob bought a field at Shechem from the sons of Hamor (Genesis 33:19), where Joseph's bones were later buried (Joshua 24:32). Jacob himself was buried at Hebron. Stephen, speaking under pressure to men who knew these records as well as he did, gathers the two purchases and the two burial places into one sentence. Some suggest Abraham also bought ground at Shechem, where he first built an altar (Genesis 12:6-7), though Genesis does not record it. What is plain is Stephen's point: the fathers themselves were buried in the land, waiting for the promise — and one of the burial places was Shechem, in Samaria, the region his hearers despised.

Moses: Rejected, Then Sent

> **Acts 7:17** *But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,*
>
> **Acts 7:18** *Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph.*
>
> **Acts 7:19** *The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.*
>
> **Acts 7:20** *In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months:*
>
> **Acts 7:21** *And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son.*
>
> **Acts 7:22** *And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.*
>
> **Acts 7:23** *And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel.*
>
> **Acts 7:24** *And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian:*
>
> **Acts 7:25** *For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.*
>
> **Acts 7:26** *And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?*
>
> **Acts 7:27** *But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?*
>
> **Acts 7:28** *Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?*
>
> **Acts 7:29** *Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons.*

Moses' life falls into three periods of forty years, and Stephen marks each one:

- **Forty years in Egypt** — **"when he was full forty years old"** (7:23).
- **Forty years in Midian** — **"when forty years were expired"** (7:30).
- **Forty years in the wilderness** with Israel (7:36).

(Moses died at 120, Deuteronomy 34:7.)

“Exceeding fair.” Literally, *fair to God* — beautiful in God’s sight. God had His hand on the child from birth.

“Learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.” Moses had the best education in the world.

“He supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.” Here is the heart of the speech. Moses came to his own people as their deliverer, and they did not understand. **“Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?”** It is exactly how the nation had answered Jesus.

> **Acts 7:30** *And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.*
>
> **Acts 7:31** *When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord came unto him,*
>
> **Acts 7:32** *Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold.*
>
> **Acts 7:33** *Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.*
>
> **Acts 7:34** *I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.*

“In the wilderness of mount Sina… in a flame of fire in a bush.” God met Moses in the desert, outside the promised land, at a common thornbush. **“The place where thou standest is holy ground.”** Holy ground — with no temple, no altar, no priest. Wherever God is, the ground is holy. The council had accused Stephen of speaking against “this holy place.” Stephen reminded them that God had called other places holy long before the temple was built.

“I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people.” The doubling is a figure of speech called **epizeuxis** — the same word repeated for emphasis. God had not merely noticed; He had seen, seen clearly, and cared.

> **Acts 7:35** *This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush.*
>
> **Acts 7:36** *He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years.*
>
> **Acts 7:37** *This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.*
>
> **Acts 7:38** *This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:*

“This Moses whom they refused… the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer.” The man they rejected was the man God sent. Stephen says “this” again and again — **“This Moses,” “This is that Moses,” “This is he”** — pointing, as it were, with his finger.

“A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.” Moses himself had promised that God would raise up another Prophet like him (Deuteronomy

18:15). Peter had already told the people who that Prophet was (Acts 3:22-26). The council claimed Stephen spoke against Moses; Stephen showed that Moses spoke of Jesus.

"The church in the wilderness." "Church" is *ekklesia* — an assembly, a congregation of people called out and gathered together. Israel in the desert was God's assembly. The word is used here in its ordinary sense of Israel's congregation, not of the church of this present age.

"The lively oracles." Living words — the words of God given at Sinai, words that were alive.

The Golden Calf and the Host of Heaven

> **Acts 7:39** *To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,*
> **Acts 7:40** *Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.*
> **Acts 7:41** *And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.*
> **Acts 7:42** *Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?*
> **Acts 7:43** *Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.*

"In their hearts turned back again into Egypt." Their feet were in the wilderness; their hearts were back in Egypt. Rejection of God's messenger begins in the heart.

"Rejoiced in the works of their own hands." That is the essence of idolatry — worshipping what men have made. Keep that phrase in mind; Stephen is about to use it of the temple.

"God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven." Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27. "The host of heaven" is the sun, moon and stars. When Israel refused God, God let them have what they chose — the worship of the heavens instead of the Maker of the heavens. **"The star of your god Remphan"** was the star-god of the nations.

"I will carry you away beyond Babylon." Amos had said "beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). Stephen widens it to Babylon, where Judah was later carried captive — a prophet's warning that history had fulfilled beyond its first words.

The Tabernacle and the Temple

> **Acts 7:44** *Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen.*
> **Acts 7:45** *Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David;*
> **Acts 7:46** *Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.*
> **Acts 7:47** *But Solomon built him an house.*
> **Acts 7:48** *Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet,*

> **Acts 7:49** *Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?*
>
> **Acts 7:50** *Hath not my hand made all these things?*

"The tabernacle of witness in the wilderness." A tent — portable, made exactly to the pattern God showed Moses (Exodus 25:40). It went where the people went.

"Brought in with Jesus." In the King James Version, "Jesus" here means **Joshua**, who led Israel into the land. "Jesus" is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning "the LORD saves." (The same thing happens in Hebrews 4:8.)

"David… desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built him an house." God had not asked David for a house, and when Solomon built one he himself said, **"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?"** (1 Kings 8:27).

"Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands." "Made with hands" — the same idea as "the works of their own hands" a few verses earlier, used of the golden calf. Stephen did not say the temple was an idol. But he warned that a temple could be treated like one, if men thought they could contain God in it and did not need His Messiah.

"Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool." Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2. The God who made heaven and earth needs no house made by men.

"Ye Do Always Resist"

> **Acts 7:51** *Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.*
>
> **Acts 7:52** *Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:*
>
> **Acts 7:53** *Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.*

The history lesson turns suddenly into a charge.

"Ye stiffnecked." A **metaphor** from farming: an ox that stiffens its neck and will not bow to the yoke. God had called Israel "stiffnecked" at the golden calf (Exodus 32:9).

"Uncircumcised in heart and ears." Circumcision was the mark of the covenant. To be "uncircumcised in heart" was to carry the outward sign without the inward reality. Moses had said, **"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked"** (Deuteronomy 10:16). Stephen used Moses' own words against the men who claimed to defend Moses.

"Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." Their fathers resisted God speaking through Joseph, Moses and the prophets. Now they were resisting God speaking by holy spirit through the apostles and through Stephen himself.

"Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" A question that answers itself — a figure of speech called **erotesis**.

“The Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.” “The Just One” — the Righteous One — is a title of the Messiah (Acts 3:14; 22:14). Stephen spoke to the very court that had condemned Him.

“Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.” They prided themselves on the Law, given with the ministry of angels at Sinai (Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2) — and they had not kept it.

Cut to the Heart

> **Acts 7:54** *When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.*

On the day of Pentecost, Peter’s hearers were **“pricked in their heart”** (Acts 2:37) — pierced with conviction — and asked, “What shall we do?” Stephen’s hearers were **“cut to the heart.”** The Greek word here is different: *diaprio*, to be *sawn through*. It is used of fury, not sorrow (compare Acts 5:33). One word led three thousand to repentance. The other led a council to murder. The same truth, preached boldly, produces both.

“They gnashed on him with their teeth.” Grinding the teeth was a sign of rage and hatred (Psalm 35:16; 37:12).

The Heavens Opened

> **Acts 7:55** *But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,*
> **Acts 7:56** *And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*

“Being full of the Holy Ghost.” Stephen was full at the beginning of the story, full in the middle, and full at the end.

“Looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.” Stephen’s speech had begun with **“the God of glory”** appearing to Abraham. It ends with Stephen seeing **“the glory of God.”**

The **right hand** of God is the place of highest honour and authority. God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted Him there — “Sit thou on my right hand” (Psalm 110:1). Everywhere else in the New Testament, Jesus is described as *seated* at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3; 10:12; 12:2; Colossians 3:1). Here alone He is **standing** — and Luke records it twice, once in his own words and once in Stephen’s.

Why standing? Scripture does not say, and careful readers have suggested several reasons: a priest standing to minister; a judge rising to give sentence on those who had rejected His witness; or a host rising to welcome the first man to die for testifying of Him. As this series understands it, the placement of the scene in Acts is telling. This was the last great witness given to Israel’s highest court, at the close of the most direct charge against the nation anywhere in Acts. At that very moment heaven opens and the Lord is seen standing — and in the very next verses the man enters the story who will carry the gospel to the nations. It is a turning point, and the Lord stood for it.

"The Son of man." In the Gospels this is the title Jesus used of Himself. Outside the Gospels, apart from John's visions in Revelation (1:13; 14:14), no one but Stephen calls Him by it. It is the title from Daniel's vision of **"one like the Son of man"** brought before God to receive a kingdom (Daniel 7:13). At His own trial before this same council, Jesus had said, **"Hereafter shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God"** (Luke 22:69). Now one of His followers told the same council: I see Him there.

Cast Out of the City

> **Acts 7:57** *Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,*
>
> **Acts 7:58** *And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.*

"Stopped their ears." They would not hear another word. It was a picture of what Stephen had just charged them with — "uncircumcised in… ears."

"Ran upon him with one accord." The phrase Luke used of the believers' unity at Pentecost (*homothumadon*) is used here of a mob's unity in murder.

"Cast him out of the city, and stoned him." The Law required a stoning to take place outside the camp (Leviticus 24:14), and required the witnesses to throw the first stones (Deuteronomy 17:7). They followed the form of the Law. But no verdict is recorded, the council had no authority from Rome to put anyone to death, and the witnesses were false. As this series understands it, this was not an execution but a lynching carried out with the council's blessing.

"The witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." The witnesses took off their outer robes to throw the heavy stones, and laid them where Saul could watch over them. Luke introduces the future apostle Paul in a single phrase, as a coat-keeper at a murder. Years later Paul himself would tell the Lord, **"when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him"** (Acts 22:20). He never forgot.

He Fell Asleep

> **Acts 7:59** *And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*
>
> **Acts 7:60** *And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

"Calling upon God." In the King James Version the word "God" is printed in italics, which means the translators added it. The Greek says simply that he was *calling upon* someone and saying — and the words tell us whom: **"Lord Jesus."** Stephen prayed to the Lord Jesus, whom he had just seen at God's right hand.

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." On the cross, Jesus had said, **"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit"** (Luke 23:46). Stephen committed his life into the keeping of the Lord who had been raised from the dead and who would one day raise him too. Solomon had written of death: **"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it"** (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Stephen's life was safe in the Lord's hands.

“Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” On the cross, Jesus had prayed, **“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”** (Luke 23:34). Stephen died as his Lord died — praying for his killers. And at least one of them, standing there with the coats, would one day be forgiven and become the apostle to the Gentiles.

“He fell asleep.” Scripture’s word for the death of a believer. It is a **euphemism** — a gentle word put in place of a harsh one — but it is also exactly true. Sleep is not the end; sleepers wake. Paul would later write, **“I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him”** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Stephen sleeps, and he will wake at the coming of the Lord.

Scattered — and Preaching

> **Acts 8:1** *And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.*
>
> **Acts 8:2** *And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.*
>
> **Acts 8:3** *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*
>
> **Acts 8:4** *Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*

“Saul was consenting unto his death.” He approved. More than approved — he went on to lead the persecution, dragging men and women from their homes to prison.

“They were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria.” Before He ascended, Jesus had said, **“ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth”** (Acts 1:8). For years the believers had stayed in Jerusalem. The persecution that began with Stephen’s death carried them into Judaea and Samaria — exactly the next places Jesus had named.

“Devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.” Godly men gave him an honourable burial and grieved openly. Believers grieve too — but not as those who have no hope.

“They that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.” The enemy meant to stamp out the church. It spread the word instead. As Joseph had said long before, men meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

Rejected, then exalted. Stephen’s speech is the story of the Messiah told through the lives of those who went before Him. Joseph was rejected by his brothers, sold, and then raised to be the saviour of the world. Moses was rejected — “who made thee a ruler and a judge?” — and then sent as ruler and deliverer. The prophets were persecuted. And the Just One was betrayed and murdered — and God raised Him and set Him at His right hand.

The Prophet like Moses. Moses himself foretold Him (Deuteronomy 18:15). To reject Jesus was to reject Moses.

Alive and at God's right hand. Stephen saw Him — not in a tomb, but standing at the right hand of God. The cross, the resurrection and the ascension were not just doctrines to Stephen. He saw where they had brought his Lord.

To the Grace Administration

The gift is for every believer. Stephen was not an apostle, yet he was full of the gift of holy spirit, full of faith and power, and did great wonders. God does not ration His gift to a few leaders. "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal" (1 Corinthians 12:7).

God does not dwell in temples made with hands. In this administration, God's temple is His people. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Practical service is spiritual service. The men chosen to wait on tables were "full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom." The church needs both kinds of ministry, and both are service to God.

The door to the nations. Stephen's death scattered the church, and the scattering carried the word to Samaria and beyond. The man holding the coats would become the apostle to whom God revealed the mystery — "that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body" (Ephesians 3:6).

The hope of the believer. Stephen fell asleep, and he waits for the Lord's return. "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout… and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

To the Topic of Faithfulness Under Pressure

- **Answer with the scriptures.** Stephen did not defend himself with clever arguments. He told what God had done.
- **Speak the truth plainly**, even when it costs you. Stephen told the court what it did not want to hear.
- **Keep your eyes on the Lord.** Surrounded by men grinding their teeth, Stephen looked up.
- **Forgive.** Stephen's last words were a prayer for his killers.
- **God wastes nothing.** Stephen's death led to the gospel spreading, and to Saul's eventual conversion. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10) — and Stephen's very name means *crown*.

The Main Takeaway

Israel had always rejected the deliverers God sent — Joseph, Moses, the prophets, and at last the Just One — but God raised Him to His right hand, and a faithful witness who kept his eyes on Him could face death with the face of an angel, forgive his killers, and fall asleep in the hope of the resurrection.

- **Be full** — of faith, of the gift of holy spirit, of wisdom.
- **No service is too small.** Stephen began by waiting on tables.

- **God is not confined to a building.** He met Abraham in Mesopotamia, Joseph in Egypt and Moses in the desert.
- **Don't resist God** as the fathers did. Hear the One God has sent.
- **Look up.** Jesus is alive at the right hand of God.
- **Forgive as Christ forgave.**
- **Death is sleep for the believer**, and the Lord is coming to wake His own.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Stephen.** One of the seven chosen to serve the widows; "full of faith and of the Holy Ghost"; the first believer to die for his testimony. His name means *crown*.
- **The twelve apostles.** They gave the practical work to others so they could give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.
- **The seven.** Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas — all with Greek names. Philip would become "the evangelist" (Acts 21:8).
- **Nicolas.** A proselyte from Antioch — a Gentile who had converted to Judaism, now a believer and one of the seven.
- **The Grecians and the Hebrews.** Greek-speaking Jews from abroad, and Aramaic-speaking Jews of the land.
- **The synagogue of the Freedmen**, with Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia — Stephen's opponents in debate.
- **The false witnesses.** Men put up to lie about Stephen, as others had lied about Jesus.
- **The high priest.** President of the council, probably Caiaphas, who had presided at the trial of Jesus.
- **The council (Sanhedrin).** Israel's highest court.
- **Saul.** A young Pharisee from Tarsus in Cilicia, who kept the witnesses' coats, consented to Stephen's death, and then led the persecution — later the apostle Paul.
- **The devout men.** Those who buried Stephen and mourned him.
- **In Stephen's speech:** Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve patriarchs; Joseph; Moses; Aaron; Joshua; David; Solomon; the prophets.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Care of widows.** Scripture repeatedly commands care for widows, who often had no other support (Deuteronomy 14:29; James 1:27). The church provided a daily distribution of food.
- **Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem.** Jews from across the Roman world settled in Jerusalem, often in their old age, and had their own synagogues.
- **Freedmen.** Former slaves and prisoners of war who had been set free, and their families.
- **Laying on of hands.** A sign of appointing someone to a task and identifying with him.
- **The Sanhedrin.** About seventy members with the high priest presiding, meeting near the temple.
- **Stoning.** The Law's punishment for blasphemy. It was done outside the city; the witnesses threw the first stones; they took off their outer garments to do it.

- **Rome and capital punishment.** Under Roman rule the Jewish council could not lawfully put anyone to death.
- **Gnashing the teeth.** An eastern expression of fury and hatred.
- **Kneeling to pray.** Standing was the usual posture for prayer; kneeling showed special earnestness (Luke 22:41).
- **Burial and lamentation.** The dead were buried the same day; loud public mourning was customary.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Simile** — a comparison using "as" or "like." "His face as it had been the face of an angel" (6:15).
- **Epizeuxis** — the same word repeated for emphasis. "I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people" (7:34).
- **Metaphor** — speaking of one thing as another. "Ye stiffnecked" (7:51), like an ox refusing the yoke; "uncircumcised in heart and ears" (7:51); "cut to the heart" (7:54).
- **Erotesis** — a question asked to make a point. "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" (7:52); "What house will ye build me?" (7:49).
- **Anthropopatheia** — speaking of God in human terms. "Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool" (7:49); "the right hand of God" (7:55).
- **Euphemism** — a gentle word in place of a harsh one. "He fell asleep" (7:60).
- **Idiom** — "Men, brethren, and fathers" (7:2), a respectful address; "turned back again into Egypt" in their hearts (7:39), longed to go back.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Stephen was chosen to serve tables** — and was also full of faith, power and the gift of holy spirit.
- **Stephen was not an apostle,** yet he did great wonders and miracles.
- **The witnesses against him were false.**
- **Stephen's speech answers the charges** by showing that God was never confined to the land or the temple, and that Israel always rejected God's deliverers.
- **God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia,** before Haran.
- **"Seventy-five souls"** follows the Greek Old Testament's count of Jacob's family.
- **"Jesus" in Acts 7:45 means Joshua.**
- **Stephen saw Jesus standing,** not seated, at the right hand of God — the only time scripture says so.
- **In "calling upon God," the word "God" was added by the translators.** Stephen called on the Lord Jesus.
- **Stephen "fell asleep."** Scripture does not say he went to heaven; it says he sleeps, awaiting the resurrection.
- **Saul was present** and consented to Stephen's death.

- **The persecution scattered the church** — and the scattered believers preached everywhere.

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants every need in His family met fairly**, and the right people given the right work.
- **God gives His gift and His power to every believer**, not only to leaders.
- **God is not contained in buildings.** He meets His people wherever they are.
- **God sends deliverers**, and He wants His people to recognize and receive them.
- **God raised Jesus and exalted Him** to His right hand, where Stephen saw Him.
- **God wants us to forgive**, as Christ forgave.
- **God turns persecution into the spreading of His word.**
- **God will wake those who sleep in Jesus.**