

Series: “Stephen: The Man With a Face Like an Angel”

Main Idea: When we’re on trial for Christ, we must respond with three resolves, as did Stephen in Acts 7.

Two keys to understanding Stephen’s defense...

1. His goal wasn’t to defend himself.
 2. His goal was to confront hearers with the reality of Christ.
- I. Put the spotlight on God (1-50).
 - A. Stephen used Scripture to clarify what God is like.
 1. He’s the God of glory (2a).
 2. He’s never been restricted to one place (48-50).
 3. Anyone can enjoy His presence anywhere—by faith (2b-47).
 - B. Stephen used Scripture to clarify how God works.
 1. He was with Abraham (2-8).
 2. He was with Joseph (9-16).
 3. He was with Moses (17-44).
 4. He was with Joshua, David, and Solomon (45-47).
 - II. Put the spotlight on Christ (51-53).
 - A. We are sinners.
 - B. He is the Righteous One.
 - III. Be prepared for the consequences (54-60).
 - A. We may experience the fury of people (54).
 - B. We will experience the fellowship of Christ (55-60).
 1. Stephen saw Jesus (55-56).
 2. Stephen talked to Jesus (59).
 3. Stephen modeled Jesus (60).

Make It Personal: Ponder two questions...

1. Do you know Christ?
2. Is it your passion to make Him known to others?

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:14-17

Every day when we wake up, we have the opportunity to take the stand for Christ. At school. At work. With our neighbors. Wherever. In a very real sense, we live our lives on trial for Christ.

And sometimes, we are literally put on trial for Christ. Three days ago I received the following email from World Help:

Only days ago, ISIS released gruesome footage of the beheadings of 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya. The shocking executions paint a harrowing picture of ISIS’s growing dominance beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq and into the region at large.

In the highly produced video titled “A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross,” prisoners in orange jumpsuits are shown being marched along the Mediterranean coastline by masked soldiers. Forced to kneel in the sand, the last words reportedly uttered by the men were simple, “Jesus, help me.” Simultaneously, each Christian was violently beheaded on camera, with chilling after-shots of the tide turning crimson as it mingled with pools of their blood.

These men were fathers and sons. They were husbands. They were uncles. They were neighbors and friends. *They were our brothers in the Lord.* And now, they are gone.²

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the expositional series in Acts at WBC in 2001.

² Worldhelp.net. “How Should Christians Respond to the ISIS Beheadings?”

How should we respond in the face of such injustice? We need help. I know I do.

A couple of weeks ago we began a series on the life of an often overlooked man of God who faced great injustice. In fact, he became the church's first martyr. He can help us. He's a role model who has much to teach us. His name is Stephen.

Stephen was a shining light in the early church. He was a gifted, godly servant, for which reason the Jerusalem church recruited him for benevolent ministry (Acts 6:5). One of the primary reasons the church members selected and the apostles appointed Stephen was that he was a man full of the Holy Spirit. He was a Spirit-filled man (6:5).

How can you tell if a person is filled with the Spirit? Here's a vital indicator. Rather than being consumed with his *rights*, a Spirit-filled person lives with a bigger agenda, namely, knowing Christ better and then making Christ better known to the world.

It's not surprising that on both the day Stephen was recruited for ministry and the day the Lord took him home to heaven as a martyr, Luke says this man was "filled with the Spirit (6:5 & 7:55)."

If you want to tell if a person is truly filled with the Holy Spirit, check out his passion in life. Such a person will live for, and be prepared to die for his Master. The church needs more Stephens.

It was on the last day Stephen walked this planet that he revealed the Spirit's bigger agenda in vivid fashion. As we learned in our last study in Acts, Stephen did more than serve widows in the church. He also did evangelism outside the church. He went to the local synagogue to show his fellow Jews that the Messiah had come, and His name was Jesus.

They couldn't refute him, so they resorted to mudslinging. As a result, Stephen was arrested and brought to trial before the Sanhedrin.

How do you tell someone they're *wrong* when they're convinced they're *right*? It's not easy.

When the Jewish leaders brought Stephen to court, they leveled three accusations against him (see 6:13-14). They said he spoke against the *temple*, against the Mosaic *law*, and that he tried to change Jewish *customs*. For the Jewish leaders, these three things were everything. You had to have them to be right with God. There was no way to God apart from the temple, the law, and the customs. To teach otherwise was blasphemy, and that's exactly what they said Stephen did.

But did he? Did Stephen speak against the temple and the law, and did he seek to change Jewish customs as his critics accused? We find the answer in Acts 7. But we also find much more.

Acts 7 begins with a question, "Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these charges true?'" By the way, this high priest is probably Caiaphas, the same official who tried Jesus. He remained in office until A.D. 36. You may recall that the charges leveled against Jesus were very similar to those against Stephen. And this high priest who condemned Jesus certainly had no fondness for His followers.

Two keys to understanding Stephen's defense...

There are two keys to understanding Stephen's defense. If you don't grasp these, you won't understand why Stephen said what he said in Acts 7.

1. *His goal wasn't to defend himself.* This may sound odd to us, to be on trial and not have as your primary goal your *defense*, but it's true. Stephen lived with a higher

goal than his comfort. There really is something more important than what happens *to me*. Stephen knew that. His goal wasn't to get out of this mess. It wasn't even to clear his name. Rather...

2. *His goal was to confront hearers with the reality of Christ.* I must warn you. If you are a casual Christian, Stephen's example will unnerve you. If you see Christianity as merely giving God a couple of Sundays a month and then doing your own thing the other twenty-eight days, you will try to write off Stephen as a radical fanatic.

But he's not. Stephen was an ordinary Christian in the early church. What he did and what happened to him as the result of what he did, was repeated in the lives of hundreds and thousands of other ordinary Christians in the first century.

Stephen wasn't odd. What's odd is to think we can receive as our Savior the One who gave His life for us, and then *not* give our lives wholeheartedly to Him. No, Stephen's goal wasn't to defend himself. What mattered to him, as it should to us, was viewing every situation in life as an opportunity to make Christ known to others.

Stephen was placed on trial for Christ in Acts 7. The truth is, in a way every one of us is on trial for Christ every day. And if we're going to please God when we're on trial for Christ, we must respond with three resolves, as did Stephen in Acts 7.

I. Put the spotlight on God (1-50).

Listen to Stephen's introductory words (2), "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham." Stop there. When on trial for Christ, what's the first thing Stephen did? He put the spotlight on God.

Stephen shows us how to help people who are religious, yet lost—especially those who are antagonistic against us. How should you respond to a person who clings to empty religion, and refuses to contemplate his need for Jesus Christ? What can we say to the person who says, "Why should I change? Why should I let go of my religious traditions and enter a faith-relationship with Christ?"

We need to do what Stephen did. Start by putting the spotlight on God.

Herein lies a huge problem. People all around us don't know the truth about God. What's worse, they *don't know* that they don't know the truth about God. They're clinging to misconceptions, just like the Jews did here, dangerous misconceptions.

Someone will say, "Wait in minute. What makes your opinion about God any more valid than the next person's opinion?" If we're sharing opinions, not a thing.

But Stephen didn't share opinions, nor should we. In his defense, he put the spotlight on God by stating what God Himself revealed about Himself. That is, he proclaimed Scripture.

Stephen's defense is full of Scripture. From memory he cited nine Old Testament references, in some cases from sections of God's Word we seldom read, let alone memorize!³ Stephen knew the Scriptures well, and he used them in his defense. He didn't share personal experiences, and he certainly didn't share his opinions. He proclaimed God's Word.

That's what we must do, too. But to use Scripture we must *know* it. And to know it, we must make it a priority to *learn* it. And then, having learned it, we must share it.

Stephen started with God. He used God's Word to clarify two items about God.

³ Texts like Genesis 12:1, Genesis 15:13-14, Exodus 2:13-14, Exodus 3:5, 6, 7, 8, 10, Exodus 32:1, Deuteronomy 18:15, Amos 5:25-27, and Isaiah 66:1-2.

A. Stephen used Scripture to clarify what God is like. Again, remember the charges. They accused Stephen, first of all, of speaking against the “holy place (6:13),” the temple. Their conception about God was linked to the temple. “You can’t know and approach God apart from the temple,” they said.

To which Stephen, in essence, said, “Your *God* is too small.” And he used the Scriptures to support three truths about God. He stated the first truth at the beginning of his message, the second at the end, and the third he developed throughout.

1. *He’s the God of glory (2a)*. Listen to Stephen’s first words again, “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The *God of glory* appeared to our father Abraham.” What is God like? Fundamentally, He is the God of *glory*. He is unique, majestic, and full of splendor. He will not fit in a man-made box, even if it is the temple itself. In fact, at the end of the defense, Stephen states plainly truth #2 about God.

2. *He’s never been restricted to one place (48-50)*. “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ⁴⁹”“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? ⁵⁰ Has not my hand made all these things?”

The critics said Stephen spoke against the temple. That wasn’t true. He didn’t badmouth it, for certainly he and the other early Christians went there often. What he spoke against was the Jews’ unbiblical view of the temple. The fact is, the God of glory has never been restricted to one place. To the contrary...

3. *Anyone can enjoy His presence anywhere—by faith (2b-47)*. Stephen devotes the “meat” of his message to substantiate this truth about God. He retells Israel’s history, starting with Abraham (in verse 2), hitting the highlights all the way to Solomon (in verse 47).

But this was no mere history lesson. This was documentation of evidence to support a critical truth about God. Yes, God chose the nation of Israel. But He intended Israel to be the vehicle through which He revealed Himself to the world.

And yes, God authorized the Israelites to construct the tabernacle, and later the temple. But He has never been restricted to a “place” on this planet. He is the *Most High*. He doesn’t live in houses made by men. The temple was merely a symbolic illustration of His presence.

The fact is, anyone can enjoy God’s presence anywhere, as long as he or she comes to Him on the basis of redeeming faith, not human merit. It’s true. Anyone. Anywhere.

Do you see the connection between this truth about God and the mission Jesus gave us in Acts 1:8? “You shall be my witnesses.” Where? Just in Jerusalem? No. “Start in Jerusalem, yes, but then go to the ends of the earth!” Jesus said.

Hundreds of years before Pentecost, the psalmist prayed this in Psalm 67:3, “May the peoples praise You, O God; may *all* the peoples praise You.” That’s what God is like. You can’t lock Him into one place. He’s much too big for that, as Stephen made clear by use of the Scriptures.

B. Stephen used Scripture to clarify how God works. To be honest, in some ways reading Stephen’s speech is like reading a basic, children’s Sunday School lesson. There’s nothing flashy about it. He simply retold the story of Israel’s history, and he told it to men who knew it well.

Why? Remember, his critics accused him of teaching radical stuff. They believed it was some new-fangled blasphemy.

So what did Stephen offer in defense? He went back two thousand years, and walked down the road of redemptive history with his critics.

Stephen's defense in Acts 7 is the longest message Luke recorded in the book of Acts. When I timed it, Stephen's speech took me six minutes and twenty seconds to read. Why did Luke include this lengthy response? Perhaps it's because what he said was so pivotal to the rest of Acts and the New Testament. The themes Stephen mentioned became the seed thoughts that Paul later developed in his epistles.

Stephen gave the bones. Paul put the flesh on them.

I'm convinced if we're going to know God accurately, we need to know how He has worked in history. That's why next week, the Lord willing, I want to come back to Stephen's speech and take a closer look at how God worked in history, line by line. In today's study, however, I want us to see the big picture.

How does God work? He works with people. Christianity is rooted in history. God is forming a people for Himself today, yes, but He's been doing it for a long time. We can learn a lot about God by examining His dealings with people from the past. Stephen hit the following highlights in a two thousand year history. Here's what's true of God...

1. *He was with Abraham (2-8)*. Abraham. A pagan man that worshipped a pagan god in Mesopotamia. That is, until the true God broke into his life.

Stephen says in verse 2, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ³ 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'"

And so Abraham became a man of faith. He left his homeland and set out for a promised land. Did he receive the promise? No. According to Stephen (5), "He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground."

Abraham didn't have a temple. He didn't even have a piece of the promised land. All he had was God and God's promise.

Then Stephen moved ahead three generations to Joseph...

2. *He was with Joseph (9-16)*. What was true of Joseph? Stephen used a key phrase in verse 9. Though his brothers sold him as a slave into Egypt, "God was with him." And again, Joseph didn't have the temple nor an inch of ground in the promised land. But he had God. God was with him. As He was with *Moses*.

3. *He was with Moses (17-44)*. Stephen spends more time talking about Moses than all the others put together. That's not surprising. Remember his accusers' words in Acts 6:11, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy *against Moses* and against God."

Was Stephen anti-Moses? Not at all. And to make that clear Stephen reminded his hearers of a couple of things they seemed to have forgotten.

First, Moses' own people rejected him the first time he tried to deliver them (25)—the insinuation being, just like the Jews later did with Jesus. And secondly, Stephen pointed out a promise Moses made (37), "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.'"

Was Stephen against Moses? Certainly not. He was just willing to talk about *all* of Moses' teaching, including the part about the Prophet Moses predicted—that being, of course, Jesus.

Stephen concluded his defense by showing that God...

4. *He was with Joshua, David, and Solomon (45-47).* Yes, this was more than a history lesson. When Stephen hit the replay button on Israel's past, his aim was to confront his hearers with a truth about God, a truth they didn't want to face.

Throughout the Old Testament, for the most part God's people were on the move. They didn't worship God by coming to the temple in Jerusalem. Abraham didn't. Joseph didn't. Moses didn't. Even David didn't. In the history of God's dealing with His people, from Abraham in 2000 B.C., to David in 1000 B.C., and even up to Stephen's day, anyone could approach God anywhere, as long as he did so *by faith*.

That's Stephen's point. That's the truth about God. And Stephen loved his hearers enough to tell them the truth about God, even if it wasn't popular, even if it irritated them.

When we're on trial for Christ, we too must exhibit this resolve. We must do everything we can to put the spotlight on God.

But we mustn't stop there. You see, there's a problem. Yes, God invites anyone, anywhere, to come to Him. But contrary to popular opinion, there aren't *many roads* that lead to God. There's only one road—which brings us to our second resolve.

II. Put the spotlight on Christ (51-53).

To this point, Stephen has given his audience some *light*. Now he gives them some *heat*.

Verses 51-53, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Those aren't exactly words you'd use if your goal was to save your neck. But that wasn't Stephen's goal. Remember, he lived with a higher agenda. In a sense, he turns the tables on his accusers, and says, "I'm not the one on trial. Actually, *you are*, and here's your crime. You're stiff-necked. You've got uncircumcised hearts. You accuse me of blasphemy, but the truth is, you're guilty of blasphemy. You resist God the Holy Spirit. And worst of all, you've killed the One predicted by Moses and the prophets!"

I'm amazed at Stephen. It's easy to love people who love you back. But Stephen loved his hearers enough to tell them the truth about themselves.

And he knew it would cost him. Indeed, he knew.

Out of his love for God and his accusers, Stephen put two undeniable realities on the table, and forced his listeners to deal with them. If you want to experience eternal life, you too must deal with them.

A. We are sinners. You may be religious. You may be a "good guy." But you, says Stephen, are a sinner.

The early church leader Augustine was once accosted by a heathen who showed him his idol and said, "Here is my god; where is thine?" Augustine replied, "I cannot show you my God; not because there is no God to show but because you have no eyes to see Him."

That's our problem, too. Until the Lord opens our eyes, we are blind to the Light before us. Though God exists, we "have no eyes to see Him," as Augustine put it. We

are sinners, who've gone our own way and as such we are under God's judgment. There's only one remedy, through one Person.

B. He is the Righteous One. He is the *only* truly righteous One. He gave His life as a ransom payment for sinners on the Cross, then rose again, and He makes righteous those who will repent and believe in Him.

I am the way, the truth, and the life, He said. No one comes to the Father except through Me (John 14:6).

There is no other way, and Stephen risked his own life to make that truth known. And he didn't do it in vague terms. He made it personal, *very personal*.

Years ago, George Whitefield preached to a New England church three evenings in a row on "You must be born again." His words were so powerful that the elders finally approached Whitefield and asked, "Mr. Whitefield, why do you keep preaching, 'You must be born again?'"

Whitefield responded, "Because *you* must be born again!"⁴

That's what Stephen did. He got personal. *You* are sinners. *You* have rejected the Messiah. And *you* are in trouble. My friend, if Jesus Christ is not *your* Savior and Lord, *you*, too, are in trouble.

One of the great mission fields in the world is inside the modern church, for there, tragically, are many people who have religion, but don't have Christ.

I'm inviting you to make three resolves today, as did Stephen in Acts 7. First, we must put the spotlight on God. Then we must put the spotlight on Christ. Make sure you know Christ as your Savior and Lord, and then make Him known to others when He gives you a platform.

III. Be prepared for the consequences (54-60).

According to Luke, Stephen experienced two consequences. And we may as well.

A. We may experience the fury of people (54). "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him." The story of God's people is full of ups and downs. It's not unusual to be misunderstood and rejected. As Stephen just illustrated, Joseph was. Moses was. Jesus was. And now he was.

Yes, if we stand up for Christ, if we put the spotlight on Christ and expose men and women in their sinful condition, there will be a price to pay. We may experience the fury of people. We *may*.

But here's a guarantee. Even if the fury comes...

B. We will experience the fellowship of Christ (55-60). "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Those are Jesus' final words in Matthew's gospel. We always have His fellowship.

Here's what that meant for Stephen. First of all...

1. *Stephen saw Jesus (55-56).* "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

There's nothing that could inspire this man to finish well anything more than this sight. *He saw Jesus.* He saw the One he lived to please.

And when he told his accusers, they went wild. These religious dignitaries covered their ears and started yelling as loud as they could. Then they threw off their robes,

⁴ Kent Hughes, p. 106.

hauled Stephen out of the city, grabbed for stones, and began to pummel his body. It was mob violence against one.

But Stephen wasn't alone, and he knew it. His Lord was more real to him than ever before. Stephen *saw* Jesus. But that's not all.

2. *Stephen talked to Jesus (59)*. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Stephen knew that Jesus commanded his destiny. That's why he prayed to Him.

Then he fell down on his knees. There was something else on his heart, something else the Spirit compelled him to do. And so he cried out in verse 60, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

And then he died. In so doing...

3. *Stephen modeled Jesus (60)*. He died as did his Master, with forgiveness on his lips.

Stephen teaches us what the purpose of life is all about. Perhaps we've lost sight of the purpose, and so we need Stephen.

Know this. If we stand up for Christ, we may feel the fury of people. That's inevitable at times. But this is reality all the time. We will certainly experience the fellowship of our Savior.

It's been said, "When you have nothing left but God, then you become aware that God is enough."⁵

In his book, *Through The Fire* Joseph Stowell comments, "I think of David Livingstone, the pioneer missionary to Africa, who walked over 29,000 miles. His wife died early in their ministry and he faced stiff opposition from his Scottish brethren. He ministered half blind. His kind of perseverance spurs me on. As I run, I remember the words in his diary: Send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me. Sever me from any tie but the tie that binds me to Your service and to Your heart."⁶

Trials are opportunities if we see them as such. Stephen did. When placed on trial for Christ he saw before him a golden opportunity. And by the help of God's Spirit, he, this Spirit-filled man of God, made the most of it.

Make It Personal: Ponder two questions...

1. *Do you know Christ?* As did Whitefield, I ask again. *Do you know Christ?*
2. *Is it your passion to make Him known to others?* May God help us to be like Stephen.

⁵ Maude Royden

⁶ Joseph Stowell, *Through The Fire*, Victor Books, 1988, p. 150.