

Main Idea: When we're on trial for Christ, we must resolve to do three things, 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. Use the platform to tell God's story (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).

Take Inventory: It boils down to two questions...

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

Scripture Reading: Colossians 4:2-6

What would you do if you were framed by people who, out of jealousy, got you arrested for a crime you didn't commit, and then put on trial before a hostile judge and jury? Most of us, if that happened to us, would at least initially be concerned about the injustice of it all.

“Hold on! This isn't fair! I've been misrepresented, and I have rights!”

Granted, there's nothing wrong with thinking about rights. We ought to be concerned about justice. But know this. As Christians we have a higher agenda. There's something that ought to occupy our attention more than our rights.

What ought that to be? We need this reminder. I know I do. What ought to be foremost in our thinking is the honor and purposes of the One who was violated for us, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

“You are not your own,” the Bible tells us. “You have been bought with a price.” And, “You will be my witnesses,” says the One who paid that price.

And perhaps one of the greatest occasions for telling the world about our Christ occurs when the world does to us what it did to Him.

Like Stephen did. Stephen was a shining light in the early church. He was a gifted, godly servant, whom the Jerusalem church recruited 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? One vital indicator is this. Rather than being consumed with his rights, a Spirit-filled person lives with a bigger

** 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 Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

agenda. He's consumed with his Master and the mission he has received, of making the good news of the Master 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 a powerful way. As we learned in our last study in Acts, Stephen did more than serve in the church. He also did evangelism outside the church. He went to the local synagogue to show his fellow Jews that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. 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* and that *you* are the one who's wrong? 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 commodities 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.

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?'" This high priest is probably Caiaphas, the same official who tried Jesus. He remained in office until AD 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.

2. *His goal was to confront hearers with the reality of Christ.* I must warn you. If we think of Christianity as merely giving God a couple of Sundays a month and then doing our own thing the other twenty-eight days, we will try to write off Stephen as a radical fanatic. 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 refuse to surrender our lives unreservedly to Him. What mattered to him, as it should to every person who knows Christ, was viewing every situation in life as an opportunity to make please Christ and make Him known to others.

Stephen was placed on trial for Christ in Acts 7. The truth is, when we're on trial for Christ, we must resolve to do three things, as did Stephen in Acts 7.

I. Use the platform to tell God's story (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 religion and refuses to contemplate his need for Jesus Christ? We need to do what Stephen did. Start by putting the spotlight on God.

Herein lies a 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.² This man knew the Scriptures well, and he used them in his defense. When on trial for Christ, he didn't share personal experiences, and certainly didn't share his opinions. He cited God's Word.

That's what we must do, too. Yet 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.

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 to prove his point he used the Scriptures to reveal 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 that box is the beautiful temple itself. In fact, at the end of the defense, Stephen states plainly this second truth 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.

² 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.

Does God live in a man-made building? No. Indeed, the God of glory has never been restricted to one place. Which is good news, for it means that...

3. *Anyone can enjoy His presence anywhere—by faith (2b-47)*. Stephen devotes the “meat” of his message to substantiate this essential 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 vital 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 in the way He Himself provides. It’s true. Anyone. Anywhere. As long as it is in the way He Himself provides, which is by His grace alone (rather than human merit), through faith alone (rather than human effort), in Christ alone.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Do you see the connection between Stephen’s point 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.

That’s why we support world missions. That’s why we send missionaries to the world. That’s why we preach Christ in this community, even though the world insists we keep our message private.

“Say whatever you want about spiritual matters. Just keep it to yourself.”

We can’t keep it to ourselves, not if we’re going to be faithful to our God. We must do what Stephen did and use the Scriptures, first, to clarify what God is like.

B. Stephen used Scripture to clarify how God works. To be honest, in some ways reading Stephen’s speech is like reading a children’s Sunday School lesson. 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 rather lengthy response? Perhaps it’s because it 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 time, 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 this message, however, I want us to get the big picture.

How does God work? He works with people. Indeed, He is forming a people for Himself, and He's been doing it for a long time. We can learn a lot about God by examining His dealings with people in the past.

Stephen hit the highlights in a two thousand year history. He tells his hearers, including us, what's true of God.

1. *He was with Abraham (2-8)*. Don't think of the Abraham we know later in life. Think of who he was before that, a pagan man that worshipped pagan gods in Mesopotamia. That was Abraham, or Abram as he was then known, a man heading for eternal destruction in hell, until the God of grace 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."

And so Abraham became a believer in the Living God. He didn't have a temple. He didn't have a home in the promised land either. But he had God, says Stephen. He had God and the promise of God.

Next Stephen moved ahead three generations to Joseph. What's true of God?

2. *He was with Joseph (9-16)*. Notice verses 8-9, "Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs. Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him."

Stop there. 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.*" Where? In some temple? No. As with Abraham, Joseph didn't have the temple nor an inch of ground in the promised land. But he had God. God was with him. What's more...

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

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. That's in verse 25, and that of course is the very thing 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.'"

So was Stephen anti-Moses? Certainly not. He believed in Moses, and in what Moses taught, including the part about the Prophet Moses predicted. He'll mention who that prophet was by name in just a few moments, but not yet.

Stephen concluded his defense by showing that God...

4. *He was with Joshua, David, and Solomon (45-47)*. We read about these men of God in verses 45-47. Joshua took the tabernacle into the promised land. King David wanted to build a temple for God, but wasn't permitted. Solomon built it, says Stephen. That's the story, but it's so much more.

When Stephen hit the replay button on Israel's past, his aim was to confront his hearers with a truth about God they hadn't been willing to face, but needed to. For the previous two thousand years, 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 BC, to David in 1000 BC, and even up to Stephen's day, anyone could approach God anywhere, as long as he or she did so the way God provided. And that was *by His grace through faith in the Messiah He would send*.

This is Stephen's point. This is 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, and even if it resulted in something very painful to himself.

There's the first lesson we learn from Stephen, and oh how we need this lesson in our day. When we're on trial for Christ, we must use what God is giving us, a platform to tell His story.

If we're not careful, we'll miss the platform. God sends them our way on a daily basis. A hard to please boss. A cranky neighbor. Cancer. A homesick camper. A summons to a courtroom. They are all God-designed platforms.

Our natural tendency with platforms is to want to get off as quickly as possible. But God is pleased when we, by His help, make the most of them by telling His story.

We tell them about God, that He's the God of glory. He's never been restricted to one place. Anyone can enjoy His presence anywhere, by faith. He was with Abraham. He was with Joseph. He was with Moses. He was with Joshua, David, and Solomon.

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 bring us to Him. There's only one, and we're called to make that known.

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

To this point in his defense, Stephen gave his audience some *light*. Now he begins to give them some *heat*. Notice 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 get off the platform. But that wasn't Stephen's goal. So at this point, in essence, he turns the tables on his accusers and says, "I'm not the one on trial. *You are*. And here's your crime. You are stiff-necked. You have uncircumcised hearts. You resist the Holy Spirit. And worst of all, you have killed the One predicted by Moses and the prophets."

I'm humbled by 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. And it did.

Stephen put two undeniable realities on the table, and forced his listeners to deal with them. If we want to experience eternal life, we too must deal with them.

A. We are sinners. We may be religious. We may be in the eyes of others a "good guy." But the undeniable reality according to God's Word is, we are sinners.

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, we have gone our own way, and therefore we are under God's judgment. We cannot stand in the presence of the God of glory. So He must cast from His presence forever.

Yet in His grace, He provided a remedy, a way of escape, a pardon. There is only one way, and it's through the person Stephen refers to as "the Righteous One."

Verse 52 again, "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."

Do you see what Stephen just did? He put the spotlight on Christ. He did it selflessly, yet boldly. There was no way his hearers would leave the room without thinking about Christ.

Who is Christ?

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

There is no other way to God than through the Righteous One. 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!"³

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. *You* too must be born again.

As we come to the end of Stephen's account, we're confronted with one final resolve. When we're on trial for Christ, first, we must use the platform to tell God's story. Second, we must put the spotlight on Christ.

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

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

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, indeed it's the norm to be misunderstood and rejected. Stephen just told us about Joseph. He was misunderstood and rejected. So was Moses. So was Jesus. And so now was Stephen.

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. There always has been.

William Tyndale was burned at the stake. Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, and their three partners, were speared by the Aucas. Roni Bowers was shot down over Peru. And on and on the list goes.

We may experience the fury of people. *We may*. But here's a guarantee.

B. We will experience the fellowship of Christ (55-60). 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."

He saw Jesus. He saw the One he lived to please.

³ Kent Hughes, p. 106.

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

But Stephen wasn't alone, and he knew it. His Lord was more real to him than ever before. In his final moments...

2. *Stephen talked to Jesus (59)*. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," he prayed. That's what he wanted more than anything else, to be with the One who is beautiful beyond all description, who loves as none has ever loved, who delights the soul with joy that will never end. That's the One to whom Stephen prayed. That's the One he longed to behold, and be with, and honor forever.

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

Again, amazing. In his death...

3. *Stephen modeled Jesus (60)*. He died as his Master had died, requesting forgiveness for those taking his life. That's the last thing they heard from him, and they never forgot it. Particularly a young man by the name of Saul who was there holding the cloaks of the killers.

Brothers and sisters, we need Stephen. Some of us are coasting right now. We need Stephen. Stephen reminds us by his example what this life is all about.

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."⁴

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

Take Inventory: It boils down to two questions...

1. *Do you know Christ?* As did Whitefield, I ask again. Have *you* been born again? Do *you* know Christ? "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31)."

2. *Is it your passion to make Him known to others?* May God help us to do so boldly. And when our time comes to be placed on trial for Christ, let's do three things, as did Stephen.

- I. Use the platform to tell God's story (1-50).
- II. Put the spotlight on Christ (51-53).
- III. Be prepared for the consequences (54-60).

⁴ Joseph Stowell, *Through The Fire*, Victor Books, 1988, p. 150.

⁵ Maude Royden