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# **Crowned With Victory**

## **ACTS 6:8-7:60**

### **Introduction**

1. Have you ever stopped to ask yourself, "How is God using me in His kingdom?"
2. There are some whose names have been long remembered because of their great deeds (i.e., Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Hannah, David, Daniel)
3. There are others who appear for a brief moment of service, but then are forgotten:
  - a. Abraham's servant (Genesis 24)
  - b. The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15-21)
  - c. The unnamed servant girl of Naaman's wife (2 Kings 5)
4. Stephen is such an individual.
5. He was one of the seven chosen to serve the widows who were being neglected in the daily serving of food.
6. He would go on to preach Christ in a synagogue of Hellenistic Jews, but ultimately lose his life as a result.
7. Do you realize that God would use his death to bring about the spread of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem?
8. Today, as we look at the brief account of his service in our Lord's church, let us consider how God is using each of us in His service.

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## **I. Stephen and His Mission (6:8-12)**

### **A. STEPHEN, A MAN FILLED WITH ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD**

1. As you may remember, Stephen was one of seven men selected to take care of a special need within the church in Jerusalem — the daily distribution of food to the Hellenistic widows within the congregation.
2. According to what we see in verses 3 & 5 here in Acts chapter six, Stephen was a man who was full of . . .
  - a. Faith (v. 5)
  - b. Wisdom (v. 3)
  - c. The Holy Spirit (v. 5)
3. Now, here in verse 8, Luke adds two more characteristics for which Stephen was known — He was “full of grace and power.”
4. Simply put, Stephen was a man who was controlled by God.

**Slide 3****B. STEPHEN, A MAN PROCLAIMING THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION**

1. Originally, Stephen had been tasked with making sure the widows from among the Hellenistic Jews were receiving food each day.
2. Now, however, we find him using his other God-given gifts to perform “great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8).
3. Not only was he healing people, he was declaring the message of Jesus.
4. Some men from “the Synagogue of the Freedmen” (v. 9) took issue with him.
  - a. The men in this synagogue were from North Africa (Cyrene, Alexandria), Asia (western part of modern-day Turkey) and Cilicia.
  - b. Either they or their ancestors were at one time slaves, but had been set free.
5. The tactics they used against Stephen have been used by Satan over and over, even to the present day:
  - a. First, they began to argue with Stephen.
    - 1) However, they were “unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking” (v. 10, HCSB).

- 2) Just as Jesus had promised the twelve, so it was true with Stephen — “I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute” (Luke 21:15, NASB95).
- b. When argument didn’t work, they turned to slander.
  - 1) “Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God’” (v. 11, NASB95).
  - 2) In this way, “they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes” (v. 12).
- c. Finally, they resorted to violence — “they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council” (Acts 6:12b, NASB95).

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## **II. Stephen and His Message (6:13-7:53)**

### **A. STEPHEN IS ACCUSED (6:13-15)**

1. The rumor which the members of Synagogue had first circulated was that Stephen had spoken “blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (6:11).
2. Now that they had him before the Sanhedrin, the false witnesses elaborate their charge — “we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:14).
3. In regards to the temple, the witnesses against Jesus at His trial testified that He had said, “I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58).
  - a. John records the Jews saying to Jesus, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” (John 2:20, NASB95).
  - b. But John clarified on that occasion that Jesus “was speaking of the

temple of His body" (John 2:21, NASB95).

- c. On another occasion, Jesus told the Pharisees, "I say to you that something greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12:6, NASB95).
  - d. In the past, God's people met with Him at the Temple, but today we are His temple (1 Corinthians 6:19), and He meets with us wherever we gather.
4. In regards to the Law, the false witnesses accused Stephen of teaching that Jesus would "alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6:14).
- a. While Jesus corrected the misinterpretations of law of Moses, he was never disrespectful of it.
  - b. He Himself had said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17, NASB95)
  - c. By laying down His life on the cross, Jesus was the one perfect sacrifice necessary to fulfill the requirements of the law for our sin once for all time.
  - d. Jesus was and is Himself the replacement of the temple and the fulfillment of the Law.
5. It was at this point that "all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15, NIV84).
- a. This is exactly what happened to the face of Moses when he came down Mt. Sinai after receiving the law (cf. Exodus 34:29-33).
  - b. Is it not possible that God gave to Stephen the same radiant face when he was accused of opposing the law as He had given to Moses when he had received the law.
  - c. By this God was showing that both Moses' giving of the law and Stephen's interpretation of it had His approval.

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### **B. STEPHEN MAKES HIS DEFENSE (7:1-53)**

1. In making his defense, Stephen points to three ideas which ran throughout Israel's history.
2. First, *there is progress and change in God's program.*
  - a. Consider God's promise to Abraham (vv. 2-8).
    - 1) Out of all the human race, God chose Abraham to be the father of the Jews.
    - 2) He called him from Mesopotamia to the land of promise, and gave him 12 great grandsons who would become the ancestors of Israel's 12 tribes.
  - b. Consider also the sojourn of Joseph (vv. 9-16).
    - 1) His journey to Egypt was the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (vv. 6-7).
    - 2) This was a radical change for Jacob's descendants.
  - c. The deliverance under Moses (vv. 17-43)
    - 1) The protection of Moses following his birth.
    - 2) His preparation for his future mission (i.e., education in the Egyptian court, tending sheep in Midian)
    - 3) All of this resulted in a man who was able to make constant adjustments in the process of moving a nation of people from place to place for 40 years with the focus always upon the destination.
  - d. The building of the tabernacle (vv. 44-46).
    - 1) Constructing it so that it was portable implied it was temporary.
    - 2) It was "the tabernacle of Testimony" because it testified of God's presence among His people.
  - e. The construction of the temple (vv. 47-50).
    - 1) The temple was a symbol of God's presence, not His actual home.
    - 2) It was Solomon who said and the dedication of the temple, "But

will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27; cf. 2 Chronicles 6:18).

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3. *Second, the blessings of God are not limited to the land of Israel and the temple mount itself.*
  - a. Israel's patriarchs and leaders were blessed *outside* the land.
    - 1) Abraham was called in Mesopotamia and given promises before he lived in Haran (vv. 2-5).
    - 2) It was in Egypt that Joseph found favor with Pharaoh because God was with him (vv. 9-10).
    - 3) It was in Midian that God commissioned Moses to deliver His people (vv. 29-34).
  - b. The Law itself was given *outside* the land.
    - 1) Moses "was in the congregation in the desert" (v. 38).
  - c. The tabernacle itself was built in the desert (v. 44).
  - d. Even the temple, though in the land, did not limit God (v. 49; Isaiah 66:1).

"Thus says the Lord, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?" (Isaiah 66:1, NASB95)

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4. *Three, in its past, Israel always demonstrated an opposition to God's plans and His men.*
  - a. This theme is seen throughout Stephen's message.
  - b. Instead of going directly from Mesopotamia to Canaan, Abraham stopped for a while in Haran (vv. 2-4).

- c. Joseph's brothers demonstrated their hatred toward him by selling him into slavery in Egypt (v. 9).
- d. Moses was rejected by the Israelites (vv. 23-29).
- e. Israel rejected God by turning to idols (vv. 39-43).
- f. God judged His people by sending them into exile in Babylon (v. 43).
- g. The people of Israel missed the point of the temple (vv. 48-50).
  - 1) They believed it was God's dwelling place on earth (cf. v. 48).
  - 2) Instead it was to be a place for worship and prayer, not God's home (cf. 1 Kings 8:23-53).

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5. This last point served as the climax of Stephen's defense (cf. Acts 7:51-53).

"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it." (Acts 7:51-53, NASB95)

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### **III. Stephen and His Martyrdom**

#### **A. WHAT STEPHEN SAW (VV. 54-56)**

- 1. The religious authorities were filled with such intense anger at Stephen that they began "gnashing (grinding) their teeth at him" (v. 54).
- 2. Instead of being intimidated by them, Stephen, "being full of the Holy Spirit . . . gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (v. 55).

3. He then said to them, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56, NASB95)
  - a. Mark, at the end of his gospel, tells us Jesus following His ascension from the apostles, “was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19).
  - b. The writer of Hebrews states in the introduction to his letter that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3).
3. Why does Stephen see Jesus standing instead of sitting?
4. Could it be that because Stephen was confessing Christ before men, he now saw Christ confessing Stephen before His Father? (Cf. Matthew 10:32)
5. Stephen also referred to Jesus as “the Son of Man.”
  - a. This is the last time this term is used in the New Testament and the only time in the Gospels and Acts that it is not used by the Lord Himself.
  - b. This expression, “Son of Man”, comes from Daniel 7:13-14 in which Daniel has a vision of God giving to “one like a Son of Man . . . dominion, glory and a kingdom.”
  - c. It indicates that Jesus is the Messiah.

**Slide 10****B. WHAT THE COUNCIL DID (vv. 57-58)**

“But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (Acts 7:57–58, NASB95)

1. The members of the Sanhedrin were beside themselves — they didn’t want to hear anything else which Stephen might say.
2. They “covered their ears” and tried to drown out his voice by yelling.
3. So determined were they to silence him that they “rushed at him” (v. 57),



drove him out of the city, and “began stoning him” (v. 58a).

4. The law of Moses required the witnesses to be the first to throw the stones (Deuteronomy 17:7).
5. In order to be able to throw the stones, they first had to remove their robes.
6. They did so and laid them “at the feet of a young man named Saul” (v. 58b).
7. Saul, later the apostle Paul, would never forget the part he played in Stephen’s death (Acts 22:20).

“And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.” (Acts 22:20, NASB95)

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### C. WHAT STEPHEN PRAYED (VV. 59-60)

“They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:59–60, NASB95)

1. As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” (v. 59).
2. Just before Jesus died, He had prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46).
3. Stephen then fell to his knees and cried out a second time, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60).
4. Jesus first words from the cross were, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).
5. In both of these prayers, Stephen imitated his Lord.

6. After speaking these final words, Stephen “fell asleep” (he died).

## Conclusion

1. In chapters 2 & 3 of the book of Revelation we find seven letters which our glorified Lord instructs the apostle John to send to seven churches in Asia Minor.

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2. In His letter to the church at Smyrna, a church which is suffering for its faith, our Lord says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).
3. The word used here for “crown” is *stephanos* from which we obtain the name Stephen.
4. Because Stephen was faithful to his death, our Lord, the righteous judge will award him the *stephanos* (crown) of righteousness.
5. What about each of us here this morning? Are we living faithful lives? Have we begun to live faithful lives?
6. If your answer to either of these questions is no, what needs to change?