



ACTS 6-8 DEATH OF STEPHEN: SIMON MAGUS

After the apostles ordained the first seven deacons, Stephen, one of the seven that were chosen, received great spiritual power from God.

Luke mentions, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, 'This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.' And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel" (Acts 6:7-15).

So Stephen was the first leader that was not an apostle who was arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin, or the council of priests and elders.

One source notes, "The name Stephen means 'victor's crown,' and certainly he earned a crown by being faithful unto death (see Rev. 2:10).

"There were hundreds of synagogues in Jerusalem, many of them established by Jews from other lands. The synagogue of the Libertines was made up of Roman Jews who were descendants of Hebrew slaves who had been set free. ('Libertines' in Acts 6:9 could be translated 'freedmen.')

"The enemy is always at work, and before long Stephen was arrested. They accused him of blaspheming Moses and the Law and charged him with saying that the temple would be destroyed; this may be a reference to Christ's words in John 2:19-21. The Jews treated Stephen the way they treated Christ: they hired false witnesses, made dubious accusations, and did not give him the benefit of a fair trial (*Wiersbe's Expository Outlines*).

Expositor's Commentary adds, "From the accusations and from his defense, it is clear that Stephen had begun to apply his Christian convictions regarding the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth in God's redemptive program to such issues as the significance of the land, the law, and the temple for Jewish Christians, in view of the advent of the Messiah. This, however, was a dangerous path to tread, particularly for Hellenistic Jewish Christians! It was one that the apostles themselves seem to have been unwilling to explore. And it was a path that Jews who had lately returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora would view with reticence.

"Having originally immigrated to the homeland out of a desire to be more faithful Jews, and having come under some suspicion of an inbred liberalism by the native-born populace, the Hellenistic Jewish community in Jerusalem undoubtedly had a vested interest in keeping deviations among its members to a minimum, or else exposing them as outside its own commitments, lest its synagogues fall under further suspicion. Thus the Hellenistic members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen were probably quite eager to bait Stephen in order to root out such a threat from their midst--though it is evident from the record that Stephen welcomed the challenge. But as Luke tells us, 'they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke.' This fulfills Jesus' promise of the gift of 'words and wisdom' in the time of persecution (cf. Luke 21:15). The rumors had to do with Stephen being 'against Moses and against God'--'against Moses' because his arguments appeared to challenge the eternal validity of the Mosaic law, and 'against God' because he appeared to be setting aside that which was taken to be the foundation and focus of national worship--the Jerusalem temple. In so doing, the rumors struck at the heart of both Pharisaic and Sadducean interests" (Comment on Acts 6:10).

The high priest, probably still Caiaphas, asked Stephen to defend himself from those charges. He did so by reminding them of the stubbornness of their set ways, many times opposing the very law they said they upheld by "straining the 'technical' gnat and swallowing the 'spiritual' camel."

Stephen then recounts the history of the Jewish people from Abraham, Moses, and down to David. He shows how rebellious they had been throughout most of their history, and after mentioning David and Solomon, he denounces their hard heartedness.

He said, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it. When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" (Acts 7:51-56).

Stephen was taking up the baton that Christ had left when He was tried by the same group, and the two trials are strikingly similar.

As *Expositor's Commentary* brings out, "Stephen's message was, for his hearers, flagrant apostasy--in both its content and its tone. While his purpose was to denounce the status quo mentality that had grown up around the land, the law, and the temple, thereby clearing a path for a positive response to Jesus as Israel's Messiah, this was undoubtedly taken as a frontal attack against the Jewish religion in its official and popular forms. And in the council's eyes, its assumed prophetic stance together with its obnoxious liberal spirit must have represented the worst of both Jewish Hellenism and the beginning Christian movement. So, Luke tells us, 'they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.'

"While the content and tone of his address infuriated the council, Stephen's solemn pronouncement raised again the specter of blasphemy and brought his hearers to a frenzied pitch: 'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' Only a few years before, Jesus had stood before this same tribunal and had been condemned for answering affirmatively the high priest's question as to his being Israel's Messiah and for saying of himself:

'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14:62). Now Stephen was saying, in effect, that his vision confirmed Jesus' claim and condemned the council for having rejected him. Unless the council members were prepared to repent and admit their awful error, they had no option but to find Stephen also guilty of blasphemy. Had he been judged only an impertinent apostate, the thirty-nine lashes of Jewish punishment would have been appropriate. To be openly blasphemous before the council as well was a matter demanding death" (notes on Acts 7:45).

These unconverted Jewish leaders felt they had to protect their coveted positions and traditions and so condemned Stephen to death by stoning.

Luke writes, "Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:57-60).

Barclay states, "It is to be noted that this was no judicial trial. It was a lynching, because the Sanhedrin had no right to put anyone to death. The method of stoning was as follows. The criminal was taken to a height and thrown down. The witnesses had to do the actual throwing down. If the fall killed the man, good and well; if not, great boulders were hurled down upon him until he died" (notes on Acts 7:57).

One factor infuriating the Sanhedrin was the mention of Jesus as standing at the right side of God (probably out of concern), and defying their notion that God is only one instead of two Beings who have a special oneness of spirit and thought. Yet Stephen, filled with God's spirit, had love in his heart for his cruel adversaries and asked God not to punish them for this sin. Just as Jesus predicted, they would kill His followers thinking they were doing God a service (John 16:2).

Also mentioned here was Saul, a young Jewish leader, who would become the apostle Paul. He later recounts, "And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by

consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him" (Acts 22:20).

By guarding the clothes, Paul meant keeping the outer garments of those who would stone Stephen so they could more freely cast the stones.

Expositor's Commentary says about Saul, "This suggests that Saul had some official part in the execution. 'Young man' is used in Greek writings of the day for those from about twenty-four to forty years old. Some have argued from the action of the witnesses and from Saul's age that he was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin at the time, though he may also have been exercising only delegated authority" (Notes on Acts 7:58).

After Stephen's death, Saul leads a severe Jewish persecution against the Christians. Luke writes, "Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:1-4).

Notice the courage of the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem despite the dangers.

Paul later adds more details about his involvement in this persecution, "This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:10-11).

One result of this incident was that other cities became acquainted with the Christian message. The gospel in Samaria was taken there by another of the seven original deacons, Philip, another who received great power from God, including healings.

Luke says, "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud

voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:5-8).

This was quite unexpected, because the Jews held the Samaritans in contempt considering they were half-breeds (being a mixture of Babylonians and Jews) and practicing a paganized version of Judaism. Yet Jesus told His disciples before ascending to heaven, "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and *Samaria*, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Just as it seemed unlikely for the people of Niniveh to have repented at the preaching of Jonah, now Samaria, of all places, had been receptive to the gospel.

It is in Samaria that we come across the story of Simon the sorcerer, known in history as Simon Magus, since "Magus" simply means a magician.

The Bible says, "But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is the great power of God.' And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done" (Acts 8:9-13).

We thus see that God doesn't want to whitewash the Church in the Bible by only recording righteous people, but instead also shows that not everyone in the Church is of the faith.

As we have seen in chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira conspired to do evil and paid this deceit with their lives. Now in chap. 8 we have Simon Magus, who would become a false convert and eventually, according to most Church historians of the day, an arch-heretic. Truly, as Jesus had predicted, the Church from the start would be a mixture of wheat and tares, with Satan sowing the false seed to deceive many, as the apostles would denounce (Acts 20:29; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 1:4).