

As God's people, we want to be guided by His Word and empowered by His Spirit to look more like Jesus. This Scripture Guide is based on this morning's passage to further equip you with what God's Word says.

## Week 9 Acts 6-7

In these chapters we are introduced to Stephen who is used as the vehicle for several themes in the next few sessions of the book of Acts. Within these sections we will highlight 1. The Seven Servants (6:1-8) 2. The Trial of Stephen (6:9-15), 3. Stephen's Defense (7:1-53), 4. The Martyrdom of Stephen (7:54-60)

### Seven Servants

**6:1-8** In the first section we are introduced to an emergent problem within the church in Jerusalem concerning the Hebrews<sup>1</sup> and the Hellenists. The impoverished Hellenistic widows had been either intentionally or unintentionally overlooked when the church handed out food and money (see 4:34-35). So the twelve apostles commissioned the Hellenists to select seven men to be tasked with ensuring the distribution was taken to the marginalized widows in their community. Among this group of Greek speaking men is Stephen, who is described as being "of good reputation and full of the Holy Spirit".

### The Trial of Stephen

**6:9-15** As immediately as we meet Stephen, he is thrown into conflict with the synagogue<sup>2</sup> leaders. They bring false charges in an attempt to have him convicted of blasphemy by the Jewish council. Their false witnesses charged Stephen with blasphemy against Moses and God and the temple and the Law. These are nearly the same charges that were brought against Jesus who was condemned by the council (Mark 14:56-58). Though Jesus was almost completely silent before his accusers, Stephen gives a bold and theologically rich defense of the Gospel and the supremacy of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Temple.

### Stephen's Defense

**7:1-53** In Stephen's speech to defend himself against the charges of blasphemy, he recapitulates almost the entire Old Testament. He argues his innocence by teaching the truth about the temple and Moses. Stephen asserts that they have rejected God's purpose for the Law and the temple, which he ultimately meant to bring about in Jesus, who is the true temple of God's presence, and who is the fulfillment of Moses and the Law<sup>3</sup>. Then by paralleling the people of Israel to these Jewish leaders, Stephen makes the counter-charge that since they rejected Jesus, they -not him- are actually the ones under judgment for rejecting God.

Stephen begins with God's glory<sup>4</sup> appearing to Abraham when he calls him to leave Mesopotamia (read: Babylon, Gen 11:31, Eze 12:13) to go to the land he promised. He promises to give the land to his descendants (Gen 12:7), though Abraham himself would not own any of it as his home. Then his descendants will even be enslaved outside of the promised land, but God would be with them, and one day bring them to his holy mountain to worship in his presence (7:7). Along the way Stephen highlights how God was *with* Joseph in Egypt (7:9), and *with* Moses in the burning bush (7:30). In all this, Stephen is building the case that God is present with his people even though there is no fixed and physical place yet to dwell with him.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrews were presumably those who were primarily Aramaic-speaking and worshiped and read the Scriptures in the original Hebrew language. The others were Greek-speaking and had probably retained many cultural practices of the larger Greek-influenced culture (evidenced by naming children with Greek names).

<sup>2</sup> Acts 6:9 calls them members of the synagogue of Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicia, and Asia. Each of these regions would be predominantly gentile and Greek-speaking.

<sup>3</sup> For fuller treatment of the parallels between Jesus, Moses and Temple, see pp. 166-172 Thompson, Alan J. Carson, D.A. (Ed.), "The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus", IVP, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Greek: δόξα "doxa" and in Hebrew קָבוֹד "kabod" - meaning the presence of God manifested visually or physically as in fire, smoke, or cloud. Stephen using this word (though it doesn't occur in Gen 12, is an indirect reference to the dwelling place of God in the temple.

Stephen then cites Isaiah 66:1-2, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?”. This is to relativize<sup>5</sup> the temple of Stephen’s day as only one of the manifestations of God’s glory. Stephen’s purpose in all of this, as Thompson says, is to “point beyond the temple to Jesus,” and that a true “‘dwelling place’ for God [is] ultimately unable to be fulfilled in the temple built by Solomon.”<sup>6</sup>

Stephen goes on to make a theological case that Jesus is the fulfillment of Moses. Stephen highlights that within God’s promise to Abraham is a prophecy that his descendants would first be enslaved by another nation. After this God would judge them and rescue Abraham’s descendants so that they would finally have freedom to worship God in the promised land (Gen 15:13). To accomplish this and fulfill his promise, Stephen says that God raised up Moses. Though the Israelites initially reject Moses as “ruler and judge” (7:27, 35, 39; Exo 2:14), God calls him out of exile to be the “ruler and redeemer” for the nation - which is nearly the same title that Peter gives Jesus, “ruler and savior” (5:31). Moses leads the people out of slavery, and like Jesus, he performs signs and wonders (7:36) and gives the people God’s Law. Then Moses himself foretells Jesus’ coming saying, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers” (7:37; Deut 18:15). Thus, he foretells a greater Moses - a greater Law-giver, ruler and redeemer, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Stephen then highlights Israel’s response to God’s promises: they rejected Moses and turned “in their hearts” to Egypt and made idols to worship instead of God (Acts 7:39-41). He indirectly accuses the Jewish leaders of his day as having made an idol out of the temple, something “made by man’s hands”. Stephen parallels the Israelites of Exodus, who were guilty of worshiping the golden calf - made by hands - and the Judahites of Amos’ day, worshiping the Canaanite idols - made by hands - and accuses the leaders for doing the same thing. Then Stephen connects this to God’s warning of judgment (Amos 5:25-27). In this section of Amos, God rebukes the leaders in Zion (read: Jerusalem, Amos 6:1) for desiring the “day of the Lord” and hoping for peace and light though only judgment is coming for them (Amos 5:18-24).

### **The Martyrdom of Stephen**

**7:54-60** In response, the council is enraged, gnash their teeth, and attempt to stop themselves from hearing Stephen’s rebuke and condemnation. In that moment, Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit and sees a vision of Jesus in heaven. He proclaims to the council that he sees the glory of God, in the person of Jesus himself, “the Son of Man”, at the right hand of God on the throne (7:49, 55-56).

In this final scene, Stephen is vindicated by the Lord Jesus himself. His trial before the council was only the background of his *cosmic* defense before Jesus’ throne, where Stephen is Jesus’ witness on the stand. His witness is a powerful defense of the purposes and promises of God being fulfilled in Jesus. He shows himself to be a faithful and Spirit-filled servant - just like he was appointed to be (6:5). Ultimately, instead of ending within a pronouncement of judgment on the Jewish leaders, Stephen embodies his merciful Lord. He prays for mercy and forgiveness for their impending murder.

### **Application**

So far, in the book of Acts we have seen several amazing examples of the Holy Spirit being active in the lives of Jesus’ followers - great generosity, love, fellowship, and boldness. Now, through Stephen we see the amazing fruit of love for Jesus in the face of death. Stephen is the first martyr<sup>7</sup> for Jesus, who was murdered for faithfully witnessing to his kingdom and authority. In the rest of Acts and Church history there would be countless others. Stephen’s and their lives are precious to God (Ps 116:15), and they are

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson 2011, 169

<sup>6</sup> Thompson 2011, 170

<sup>7</sup> In English we commonly restrict the meaning to do those who voluntarily suffer death for witnessing to religion. However, in Greek, μάρτυς can have the same restricted meaning or a broader meaning of being a legal witness (Acts

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profound examples of faith for us (Heb 12:1). Our call then is to love the Lord Jesus with our whole lives like the rest of his faithful martyrs who, "did not love their life even when faced with death." (Rev 12:11).