

# The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Stephen's Response to the Council

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### Stephen's Response to the Council

#### God's promise to Abraham

The high priest here was probably still Caiaphas, the same one who presided over Jesus' trial (Matthew 26:57).

Stephen was accused to speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God, and against the temple and the law. In response, Stephen offered a survey of Old Testament history, not because the Sanhedrin were ignorant of these points, but instead to emphasize aspects of their own history that they may not have considered, i.e. that God never confined Himself to one place (like the temple), and that Israel in fact had a habit of rejecting those that God sent to them.

This really was not a defense; Stephen doesn't seem interested in defending himself. He wanted to proclaim the truth about Jesus in a way people could understand.

#### God's faithfulness through Joseph

Joseph was rejected by his own people as a foreshadowing of Jesus being rejected by the Jews.

Stephen emphasized the presence of God with Joseph all the time. Joseph did not need to go to the temple to be close to God – there was no temple in Joseph's world!

Seventy-five people: Genesis 46:27 says there were 70 in the family of Israel, but Stephen here says 75. Stephen was quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which says 75. The number in the Septuagint is not wrong, just arrived at in a different way, specifically adding five more sons (or grandsons) of Joseph born in Egypt.

### **The story of Israel from the time of Moses**

Moses was also like Jesus in that he was favored by God from birth and preserved in childhood. As well, he was well pleasing to God without the temple or the customs of institutional religion.

When Moses offered deliverance to Israel, he too was rejected (are you detecting a trend?!) Israel denied that he had any right to be a ruler and a judge over them.

Stephen's message was plain: "You have rejected Jesus, who was like Moses yet greater than him, and you deny that Jesus has any right to be a ruler and a judge over you."

Yet Moses was Israel's deliverer, despite Israel's rejection(s).

### **The Spirit's response to Israel's rejection**

In their rejection of Moses and the God who sent him, Israel turned instead to corrupt idols, bringing upon themselves the judgment described in the passage quoted from Amos 5:25-27. Stephen took a bit of license in his quote, changing "beyond Damascus" to "beyond Babylon." Stephen is not talking to the people of the northern kingdom as Amos was, but to the leaders of Israel in the south.

Our fathers had the tabernacle... Solomon built Him a house: Stephen's point was that even the presence of the tabernacle -- or the temple -- did not prevent Israel from rejecting God and His prophets.

### **Stephen applies the sermon to his listeners**

You always resist the Holy Spirit.... One can imagine the angry whispering among the Sanhedrin as Stephen's history lesson began to sink in. Stephen saw this and knew they were once again rejecting the One God sent (Jesus), just as before. This offended the council (they gnashed their teeth at him), but Stephen's message was true.

The idea of gnashing at him with their teeth can't help but remind us of the imagery of Hell. Jesus described Hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12). These men were prominent, successful, and appeared to be religious; yet they were rejecting God and associating themselves with hell, not heaven.

### **Stephen's execution and final witness**

...Being full of the Holy Spirit... This was in contrast to the behavior of the council. The fact that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit shows the source of his courage, wisdom, and power in preaching.

Saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God: It is difficult to describe exactly what Stephen saw. We can't say if this was a personal vision or if some sort of "window to heaven" was opened, but going beyond the plain description of the text is pure speculation. It is interesting to note that Jesus is *standing* here, as opposed to the more common description of Him sitting in heaven, at the right hand of God the Father (e.g. Matthew 26:64, Colossians 3:1).

Then they cried out with a loud voice: When Stephen declared that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, it was too much. The Sanhedrin reacted quickly, violently, and together. When Jesus, before this same body of men, declared that He would sit at the right hand of God, they had the same reaction and sealed his death as a blasphemer (Matthew 26:64-66).

It is a dangerous thing it is to be religious apart from a real relationship with Jesus Christ. This fulfills what Jesus warned about in John 16:2-3.

Ran at him: This uses the ancient Greek word *hormao*, the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea (Mark 5:13).

The Mishnah describes the practice of stoning: "When the trial is finished, the man convicted is brought out to be stoned...When ten cubits from the place of stoning they say to him, 'Confess, for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and every one who confesses has a share in the age to come'...Four cubits from the place of stoning the criminal is stripped...The drop from the place of stoning was twice the height of a man. One of the witnesses pushes the criminal from behind, so that he falls face downward. He is then turned over on his back. If he dies from this fall, that is sufficient. If not, the second witness takes the stone and drops it on his heart. If this causes death, that

is sufficient; if not, he is stoned by all the congregation of Israel.” (cited by F.F. Bruce)

Saul stood there as the supervisor of the operation. As a member of the Sanhedrin, he had also approved of Stephen’s execution. “Young man” literally means, “a man in his prime.” It certainly does not mean that Saul wasn’t old enough to be a member of the Sanhedrin. In Acts 26:10, Paul says “I cast my vote against them”, implying that he had a vote as a member of the Sanhedrin.

They stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen’s life ended in the same way it had been lived: In complete trust in God, believing that Jesus would take care of him in the life to come.

Lord, do not charge them with this sin: God answered Stephen’s prayer, and used it to touch the heart of a man who energetically agreed with his stoning – even though the man didn’t know the prayer was being answered.

Augustine said, “If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul.” When we get to heaven, we should thank Stephen for every blessing brought through the ministry of Saul of Tarsus!

Stephen wasn’t a superman, but he was a man filled through all his being with the Holy Spirit.

How many of us have yet to discover just how mightily we can be used of God as we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit?