

- A Study in Acts -

**Chapter Seven – Stephen’s Defense and Death.**

**ACTS 7:51-60:**

In our previous lesson, we concluded the summary history of Stephen’s defense to the leadership of the Jews. In this synopsis view, he has established that he has not spoken evil against God, Moses, the Law, or the temple, but in fact, it was the leaders themselves that had not heard God.

This brings us to the conclusion and final summary of Stephen’s defense and the subsequent reaction by these whom he will accuse.

**Text #1:**

**Acts 7:51-53** “*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.* <sup>52</sup> **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,** <sup>53</sup> **who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”**

**Stiff-necked + Uncircumcised:** Stephen, in his conclusion states two characteristics that these who have accused him are demonstrating. Truly, he could not have used harsher terms to describe their behavior towards the teaching of God.

“**Stiff-necked**” is a term that describes a hardness of heart, stubbornness of heart, and an unwilling nature to yield. It is a term from their own history, and it was given to them by God. It was when Moses was on the mount that the people demanded that Aaron make them gods to go before them, as they thought Moses had deserted them (**Exodus 32:1**). God had to command Moses to go to them in order to turn them back before He destroyed them, note:

**Exodus 32:9** “**And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!”**

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah was commissioned by God to go to the people of Judah during a time of apostasy and religious decadence against God. Note what God would tell Isaiah to go and tell the people:

**Isaiah 6:9-10** “**And He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’** <sup>10</sup> **“Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed.”**

Isaiah would ask, “Lord, how long?” God would tell him to continue to convict them of their stubbornness against Him until He judges them unworthy (**Vs. 11-13**).

**“Uncircumcised in heart and ears”** – is the understanding that circumcision was the act by which they entered into a covenant relationship with God. Their stubborn rejection of the instruction of God and Jesus Christ the chosen Messiah, Stephen is saying that this has put them outside the camp, or as an outsider to God. This also comes from their own history and is a description that God gave to their fathers (see **Leviticus 26:41**).

**You Always Resist the Holy Spirit:** As Stephen continues to pronounce an oral indictment of their disobedience, he will now demonstrate that their argument is not with Him, but that they are contesting with the Spirit of God! This is something they have in common with their fathers, as their fathers rejected the prophets of God universally (with the exception of remnants – example: **1 Kings 19:10, 14, 18**; Elijah).

**Notice:** the resisting of the Spirit is found in the abuse levied on the prophets of God (mouth pieces of God), demonstrating the vehicle by which the Spirit would use to reveal the word of God.

**Notice:** Stephen here denotes that when these at the present display the same traits as their fathers in the past, they are guilty in this respect of all the blood of those whom God has sent to direct them. This is the same thing that the Lord spoke to the leaders of the people when He was among them, note:

**Matthew 23:33-36** **“Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? <sup>34</sup> Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: *some* of them you will kill and crucify, and *some* of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, <sup>35</sup> that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. <sup>36</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”**

**The Just One:** Not only does Stephen condemn them for the blood of the prophets that spoke of the coming of the Messiah; he also condemns them for betraying and killing Him as well. Peter would likewise condemn them in the same fashion:

**Acts 3:14-15** **“But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, <sup>15</sup> and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.”**

**Direction of Angels:** As Stephen would point out in the last of the accusations brought against them; they have rejected the Law, which was brought to them by the direction of angels.

Angels are simply ministering servants of God (**Hebrews 1:14**). In this case, however, they are also credited for the delivery of the Old Law.

**Hebrews 2:2-3** **“For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we neglect**

**so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him*”**

This understanding helps us to understand the **first chapter** of **Hebrews** and the superiority of Christ over the angels (the Bible is always its own best commentary). It has nothing to do with Jesus Christ as if He were a created being, for we know in fact that He is God (**John 1:1; 17:5**; etc...). It does speak to the superiority of the word spoken to us through Him (**Hebrews 2:2**), as greater than that which was delivered to the children of Israel by angels!!!

**Text #2:**

**Acts 7:54-60** “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth. <sup>55</sup> 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, <sup>56</sup> and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

<sup>57</sup> Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; <sup>58</sup> 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. <sup>59</sup> And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> 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.”

**Cut to the Heart:** We have heard this term before – **Acts 2:37**. The two occurrences mark a unique understanding. The word of God has a universal effect on the hearts of men; it convicts them! This teaches us that conviction is not conversion!

As in the first case, they were convicted, but chose to seek out relief from the guilt of their godly sorrow. In this case they are also convicted, but to a completely different reaction, pure rage! We will also see in the book of Acts that conviction can also lead to indifference and apathy (**Acts 24:25; 26:28**).

Realization of one’s state in relation to God is not enough on its own. Just as the riotous son **realized** that the slaves of his father’s house had it better than he did in the pig pit, if he had stayed there, he would not have found redemption. He had to get up and go back to his father (**Luke 15:11-21**).

**Gnashed with Their Teeth:** This is intended by Luke to be an illustrative statement, more appropriately described as to grind their teeth in rage. It is illustrative of the boiling effect of their rage and extent of it.

Stephen is going to be Divinely comforted with a glimpse of his hope and the measure of his faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. It becomes for all of us an illustration of the awaited joy of the overcomers (those of us who can overcome all this world has to tempt us with – See: **Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21**).

**Saul:** We have our first introduction to Saul of Tarsus (whom we know better as the Apostle Paul), and his role in the death of Stephen. We can read his own version of his role this day in **Acts 22:20**. We will give an entire biography of Saul in **chapter nine**.

**Do Not Charge Them:** Our last thought to share is that as the followers of our Lord when we take up our crosses and follow after Him; as disciples we are to take on the constitution of our Master. To be transformed into His likeness in word and deed.

We see the distinct similarities between Stephen and our Lord. Both falsely charged with crimes, both rejected by their own, and finally both dying at the hands of those they are attempting to aid (see **Luke 23:34**).

As Jesus taught His disciples and the Jews concerning the attitudes of the kingdom of heaven, to come; He said:

**Matthew 5:10-11** “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”<sup>11</sup> “*Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*”

When Stephen was reviled, he did not revile in return. Note Peter’s words to Christians:

**1 Peter 2:21-23** “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

<sup>22</sup> “*Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth*” (Isaiah 53:9); <sup>23</sup> who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously”

Stephen becomes an example to all of us!