

Sermon Number: 12

**“The First Christian Martyr”**  
Or,  
True Worship in the Temple is Over!  
Acts 6:8-8:1

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In our last study of the Book of Acts {6:1-7}, six Sunday’s ago, we saw how the early church was organized for service. A problem came up with the daily distribution of food and the accusation was made that the Greek widows were being neglected in favor of the Hebrew widows.

The solution to the matter ordered by the apostles was to seek out seven men of good reputation and full of the Holy Spirit who would take over the distribution of food and free up the preachers to better minister the Word of God. Although these seven men are not called deacons in Acts 6 it is generally accepted that this was the institution of the office of deacon in the church.

In the wisdom of God the church is supposed to recognize those who have spiritual gifts and set them aside to serve the church.

An interesting note here is that all seven of the men so chosen had Greek names which indicate a willingness to deal with any lingering prejudice between the Jewish Christians and Christians who were Gentiles. However, we will see in a later lesson that Peter had not yet fully dealt with his own prejudices. But Peter was teachable and he later becomes a champion for Gentile evangelism.

Now one of the seven men who so chosen to serve was a man named Stephen. The lesson today is about Stephen, the “First Christian Martyr.”

The Greek word “martyr” means “witness.” As a result of the martyrs {witnesses} being persecuted because of their witnessing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Greek word “martyr” was brought over as an English word that means someone who suffers persecution for the Gospel; a martyr for the Gospel.

The story of Stephen is about how he martyred {witnessed} before the Council {Sanhedrin} that throughout the entire history of the Jews they persecuted the prophets and how they followed their fathers and did the same thing to Jesus of Nazareth.

Peter quoted Moses {Deut 18:15} saying that Jesus is the prophet that God would raise up {3:23}.

Deut 18:15

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, ...."

The result of Stephen's witnessing is that he would be stoned to death by the Jews.

A man was watching the stoning of Stephen, approved of it, and that man was Saul of Tarsus who would himself become the Apostle to the Gentiles.

The mercy and grace of God is amazing and beyond human understanding. Why would God choose a murdering Pharisee to become an apostle and then use him to write a large portion of the New Testament?

Why would God have mercy on this wretched man who stands before you now?

Until you can correctly answer that question; viz., why does God show mercy to men like Saul and Jim Gunn; I seriously doubt that you have understood what grace means!

Well let's get on with the story of Stephen.

What do you think would happen if a preacher of the grace of God stood up in one of the most successful churches in America today and told them how far they had moved away from the Gospel? By successful, in this context, I mean the number of people that come to hear how much God wants their daddy's to be rich and their momma's to be good looking. And after the preacher has said his 15 to 20 minutes of feel-good fluff, there has been no mention of sin or anything close to a call to repentance, and everyone has been told how hard God has been trying to get them to like Him, and no one is offended by being called a guilty sinner and they leave and go home just as lost as they were before they came in.

Stephen was stoned to death because he told a bunch of lost religious people that they were following the pattern of their fathers and that God was judging their nation.

Let's put the witness of Stephen in its broader context.  
My sub-title is: "True Worship in the Temple is Over!"

Stephen is setting the stage for God to put an end to the false religion of Judaism that the worship in the temple had become. The Jews had corrupted the Hebrew system of worship to the point that Jesus said they had made His Father's house a den of thieves.

Matt 21:12-13

<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. <sup>13</sup> And He said to them, "It is written, '*My house shall be called a house of prayer,*' but you have made it a '*den of thieves.*'"

The Jewish leaders crucified the Messiah and are now persecuting those who have confessed that Jesus is Lord!

A prophecy made by Jesus is being fulfilled. That prophecy was that the Jewish nation was going to be abolished and it would never be restored.

Matt 21:42-44

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

*'The stone which the builders rejected  
Has become the chief cornerstone.  
This was the LORD 's doing,  
And it is marvelous in our eyes?'*

<sup>43</sup> "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.

Peter tells us that the "nation" bearing the fruits of the Kingdom of God is the church.

1 Peter 2:9-10

<sup>9</sup> But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; <sup>10</sup> who once *were* not a people but *are* now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

The proclamation made by John the Baptist after the baptism of Jesus is pregnant with meaning!

John 1:29

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Jesus is the Lamb {singular} of God; there will no longer be any need for the blood of bulls and goats and lambs to be offered; the true worship in the temple is about to end!

Jesus told the woman at the well in Samaria the same thing.

John 4:19-24

<sup>19</sup> The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.

True Worship in the Temple is Over!

There are several ways that this passage can be preached. My usual method would be to take Stephen's speech and bring out the historical background as he talks about Abraham, Joseph, Jacob, and Moses. What I decided to do is to do a summary view and trust that you will study the Old Testament passages that Stephen talks about.

All we know about Stephen is what is recorded by Luke here in Acts 6 and 7.

Not many people in the Bible are described with such qualities as Stephen.

Acts 6:1-11

**6** Now in those days, when *the number of* the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; <sup>4</sup> but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

<sup>5</sup> And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, <sup>6</sup> whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

### Stephen is a preacher [6:9-10]

Stephen not only served tables, but became a preacher. He went to the Synagogue of the Freedmen and preached Jesus as the Christ. A synagogue is where Jews assembled.

The Synagogue of the Freedmen was where emancipated slaves who were Greek-speaking Jews would assemble. They came from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and other places in Asia.

Stephen, being full of the Holy Spirit, could not be refuted because he spoke the truth {6:10}.

Stephen debated with these men and the text indicates that although they knew that what he said was true yet they refused to accept it.

We can see similarities between Stephen and the Lord Jesus Christ. Stephen is falsely accused by liars; Stephen is unjustly murdered; and Stephen prays for his enemies.

### If you can't win; cheat [6:11-14]

The Freedmen made up false charges against Stephen and got some men to say that Stephen had spoken blasphemy against Moses and God.

The worst charge that they could bring against Stephen was that he was hurting their source of revenue. If the temple is destroyed the tithes given to support the temple would cease.

Stephen already knew what the Book of Hebrews would later explain. Christ is a better sacrifice and a better temple.

Jesus prophesied that the temple would be destroyed.

Mark 13:1-2

Then as He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings *are here!*"

<sup>2</sup> And Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not *one* stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Like the face of an angel [6:15]

We do not know what the face of an angel looks like. It is likely that Stephen's face appeared like the face of Moses after he met God.

Ex 34:29-35

<sup>29</sup> Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony *were* in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him. <sup>30</sup> So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. <sup>31</sup> Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them. <sup>32</sup> Afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them as commandments all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. <sup>33</sup> And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. <sup>34</sup> But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. <sup>35</sup> And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him.

Stephen before the Council [7:1-53]

In Chapter 7 we have the longest speech in Acts and it is extremely important if we are to understand the church. The Hebrew form of worship is ended and true worship of God will be through Jesus. And true worship cannot be confined to a building.

Stephen is forthright but he is respectful; "Men and brethren, fathers...." [7:1]

Although it is Stephen who is on trial he becomes the judge and makes charges against his accusers.

They accused him of blaspheming Moses and God; Stephen reminds them that it was the Jews who have a history of rejecting Moses and God.

They accused him of speaking against the temple because he said that God could be worshipped in other places; Stephen points out that God Himself said that He is not limited to a house built with human hands and that He has always met men wherever they are.

### Let's start with Abraham [7:2-8]

Abraham is always first with the Jews.

When Jesus confronted the Pharisees they claimed their descent from Abraham.

John 8:37-41

<sup>37</sup> "I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. <sup>38</sup> I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father."

<sup>39</sup> They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."

Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. <sup>40</sup> But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. <sup>41</sup> You do the deeds of your father."

Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father — God."

God called Abraham [Abram] out of idolatry in the Ur of the Chaldees a long way from where the Jews said was the place to worship God.

Abraham never owned any part of the Promised Land but he believed God and God kept His promise.

Heb 11:8-10

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; <sup>10</sup> for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.

The point that Stephen makes is that men worshipped God long before Moses and the Law or the temple or any such "holy place."

What about a man that our fathers rejected who became their deliverer [7:9-16]

Joseph's brothers, our very patriarchs, were jealous of him and sold him into slavery. But God had purposed to use the wickedness of men to bring about their deliverance.

Gen 50:15-21

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "Perhaps Joseph will hate us, and may actually repay us for all the evil which we did to him."

<sup>16</sup> So they sent *messengers* to Joseph, saying, "Before your father died he commanded, saying, <sup>17</sup> 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: "I beg you, please forgive the trespass of your brothers and their sin; for they did evil to you.'" Now, please, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

<sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, "Behold, we *are* your servants."

<sup>19</sup> Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for *am* I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. <sup>21</sup> Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph was rejected by his brothers and became their savior.

Jesus was rejected by the Jews and is the Savior of sinners.

God uses the wickedness of men to bring about the salvation of His people.

Acts 2:22-24

<sup>22</sup> "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know — <sup>23</sup> Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; <sup>24</sup> whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

The Holy Spirit gives Stephen perhaps what is the best survey of the history of the Jews in the Bible.



Moses is rejected and he is Israel's Lawgiver and Deliverer [7:17-43]

God sent Moses to be a deliverer but he was rejected by the Hebrews.

Even after Moses delivers the Hebrews out of Egypt they continue to reject God.

Stephen reminds them of how Moses was kept by God from being killed. A pharaoh who did not know Joseph ordered that all the baby Hebrew boys be killed. But Moses is placed in an ark and put in the river. You know the story; Moses is "drawn out" of the water and is adopted as the son of pharaoh's daughter. Again the one who was rejected becomes the deliverer!

The history of the Jews is rejection of those sent by God to deliver them.

Idolatry is defined in 7:41 as worshipping what our hands have made.

David on idolatry:

Ps 115:1-8

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake.

<sup>2</sup> Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God?

<sup>3</sup> But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.

<sup>4</sup> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.

<sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not:

<sup>6</sup> They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not:

<sup>7</sup> They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat.

<sup>8</sup> They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.

One preacher defined idolatry as being able to control your God.

That is the essence of "decisionism." Man is in control and God is helpless!

You worship God wherever you are [7:44-50]

The Jews were angry at Stephen because, according to them, he spoke against the temple. Then Stephen reminds them that God gave Moses the design for a movable place of worship, a tabernacle [tent]. The book of Hebrews instructs us that the tabernacle was a type of the spiritual reality.

The people were on the move and they carried their place of worship with them. Not only that, but David wanted to build a house for God. But God built a “house” for David, a royal dynasty to be fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

#### 1 Chron 17:1-15

Now it came to pass, when David was dwelling in his house, that David said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of the covenant of the LORD *is* under tent curtains."

<sup>2</sup> Then Nathan said to David, "Do all that *is* in your heart, for God *is* with you."

<sup>3</sup> But it happened that night that the word of God came to Nathan, saying, <sup>4</sup> "Go and tell My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: "You shall not build Me a house to dwell in. <sup>5</sup> For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought up Israel, even to this day, but have gone from tent to tent, and from *one* tabernacle *to another*. <sup>6</sup> Wherever I have moved about with all Israel, have I ever spoken a word to any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'" <sup>7</sup> Now therefore, thus shall you say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "I took you from the sheepfold, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. <sup>8</sup> And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies from before you, and have made you a name like the name of the great men who *are* on the earth. <sup>9</sup> Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously, <sup>10</sup> since the time that I commanded judges *to be* over My people Israel. Also I will subdue all your enemies. Furthermore I tell you that the LORD will build you a house. <sup>11</sup> And it shall be, when your days are fulfilled, when you must go *to be* with your fathers, that I will set up your seed after you, who will be of your sons; and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>12</sup> He shall build Me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. <sup>13</sup> I will be his Father, and he shall be My son; and I will not take My mercy away from him, as I took *it* from *him* who was before you. <sup>14</sup> And I will establish him in My house and in My kingdom forever; and his throne shall be established forever.'"

<sup>15</sup> According to all these words and according to all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David.

Stephen understood that the temple built by Solomon was not the final fulfillment of God's promise to David. That temple is going to be destroyed and Christ will be the Temple where God meets with man.

Here is a no-cost extra for everyone who loves to sing “Amazing Grace.” John Newton got the inspiration for “Faith’s Review and Expectation” and someone changed the name of the poem to Amazing Grace from:

1 Chron 17:16-17

<sup>16</sup> Then King David went in and sat before the LORD; and he said: "Who *am* I, O LORD God? And what is my house, that You have brought me this far? <sup>17</sup> And *yet* this was a small thing in Your sight, O God; and You have *also* spoken of Your servant's house for a great while to come, and have regarded me according to the rank of a man of high degree, O LORD God.

After Stephen the death of Christ was explained by the apostles.

1 Cor 3:16-17

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are.

Eph 2:19-22

<sup>19</sup> Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

1 Peter 2:4-5

<sup>4</sup> Coming to Him *as to* a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God *and* precious, <sup>5</sup> you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

God lives in the believers in Jesus Christ.

Christ is our Temple and we are in Christ and we are a living temple.

The church, the body of Christ, is the temple; not a building of stone.

You people never learn [7:51-53]

Stephen is the model for “seeker-sensitive” preachers.

Stephen has proven his case. Not a one of these men can miss the point.

They follow in the footsteps of their fathers and are guilty of:

Always resisting the Holy Spirit;

Persecuting the prophets;

Betrayal and murder of Messiah;

Disobedience to the Law they claim to honor.

My theme for “What the Prophets Had to Say” is Revelation 19:10:

“...For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

They have heard enough [7:54]

The Jews are filled with rage and are determined to get rid of this troublemaker.

Ps 35:16

With ungodly mockers at feasts

They gnashed at me with their teeth.

Stephen sees Jesus [7:55-56]

The Holy Spirit is with Stephen and prepares him for what is about to happen. Stephen is given a glimpse of heaven and sees Jesus at the place of power, “standing at the right hand of God.”

Justice denied [7:57-60]

Stephen has uttered the ultimate blasphemy; Jesus is God!

The Council which was supposed to uphold justice; hold a fair trial; deliberate charges; examine witnesses; and arrive at a just punishment becomes a lynch mob.

They put their fingers in their ears and are yelling to drown out Stephen’s voice.

They cast him out of the city and stone him to death.

Just before Stephen dies he asks God to forgive his murderers just as Jesus did before He gave up His spirit.

Say welcome to Paul [8:1]

“Now Saul was consenting to his death...”

A young protégée of Gamaliel, a pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, begins his career by holding the clothes of the killers. He approves of the stoning.

A great persecution against the church is led by Saul.

We will see more of the grace of God in later studies.

My sub-title is: “True Worship in the Temple is Over!”

Stephen is setting the stage for God to put an end to the false religion of Judaism that the worship in the temple had become.

The church will prevail against the gates of hell!

Matt 16:13-18

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”

<sup>14</sup> So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

<sup>15</sup> He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

<sup>17</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Do you know the Jesus that Stephen believed was worthy to worship even to death?

Repent and believe in the gospel!