

Acts 6:8–15 Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. ¹¹Then they **secretly persuaded** some men to say, "We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹²They **stirred up the people**, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin. ¹³They also presented **false witnesses** who said, "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the law. ¹⁴For we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

How do we handle being falsely accused?

In the middle east, 1 Christian is killed every 6 minutes. In those countries, like Iran, Jordan, Syria—Christians are routinely targeted by arson, terrorist bombings, murder and rape. **Their businesses, their homes—destroyed as believers in Christ are regularly thrown into prison for unjust causes.** And this anti-Christian sentiment is seeping into Israel—a nation formerly thought to be a safe-haven for free speech and freedom of religion in the middle east.

Since 2015, Christians have experienced similar acts of violence and persecution by radical Orthodox Jewish groups because the Church is growing among Israeli citizens. In 1980, there were fewer than a dozen Christian home churches in Israel. Today there are nearly 200,000 believers living in Israel. **Because these groups cannot withstand the wisdom nor the reasons why Jesus is the Messiah—they have turned to slander and violence.**

As the church grows so does the opposition to the gospel. Stephen's story reminds us that it has been this way from the beginning of the church's existence.

And this story about Stephen instructs us how, as believers, to handle false accusations in the name of Christ. How do we respond when the enemies of the cross falsely slander us and attack us?

The Cast of Characters:

Members of the freedmen's synagogue: Cyrenians and Alexandrians (**North Africa**), from Cilicia (**Turkey**) and Asia. These are imported Jews from Greek cities who feel a particular pressure to conform to Judaic norms. They are trying to demonstrate to their fellow native Jews that they are legit.

- Unable to stand up against the wisdom and the arguments Steven gave.
- Unable to refute the work of the Spirit in his ministry
- When they couldn't win the argument or repudiate the miracles—they turned to slander and false accusations.

"Are these things true?" the high priest asked.

The Narrative "Set up"

He makes his case biblically. (7:2) "brothers and fathers, listen...": Stephen begins to make a careful case beginning with their shared history. If we want to understand the Gospel's claims about Jesus, we must begin with Israel's story.

He recounts their Abrahamic lineage (7:4-8) "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham..." Now this for sure is what they want to hear—*THEY* are the children of God.

He recounts their time in Egypt, beginning with Jacob's family and Joseph (7:9-16). So far so good. He is telling the Jews the story they rehearse all the time.

He reminds them that Moses, the first prophet of Israel, God's chosen deliverer, was rejected by the people (7:17-35); sons of Abraham? Yes! Rebellious people who refused to obey. Yes! "Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him. Instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt."

He reminds them that Moses, this rejected deliverer, predicted a prophet like himself would someday come (7:37-43) "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers." **Moses is the archetype; prototype of a future rejected deliverer.**

Moses instituted the tabernacle based on the pattern he had seen—the heavenly sanctuary;

Now, it's a long story—all driving to this point right here...

1. The **true temple** is the **people** not the **building**.

(7:48-49). Just as Moses was God's rejected prophet who gave you the tabernacle (temple); so Jesus is God's rejected Son who now gives you the Spirit—God's restoring presence.

The entire recounting of their history crescendos—leads up to the fact that even after the temple was built, Solomon acknowledged that God does not dwell in temples or tabernacles made by human hands.

1 Kings 8:27 "But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built." Solomon knew that the physical temple was merely a symbol of God's manifest presence among his people.

Jesus declared himself to be the **fulfillment** of the **Temple** In 2:19, 21 "Jesus answered, 'Destroy **this temple**, and I will raise it up in three days...but he was speaking about **the temple of his body**.'" Paul picks up on this and realized that now that the Spirit has been poured out on humanity—every ethnic group all nations—the community of Spirit-filled believers *is the new temple of God*.

1 Cor 3:16 "Don't you yourselves know that **you [all]** are **God's temple** and that the **Spirit of God lives in you?**"¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is holy, and that is what you all are."

1 Cor 6:19 "Or do you not know that **your body** is a temple of **the Holy Spirit within** you, whom you have from God? You are not your own."

Eph 2:19-22 "The **household** of God [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the **whole structure**, being joined together, grows into a **holy temple** in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a **dwelling place** for God by the Spirit" The whole structure is the Spirit-filled community; God's people.

1 Pet 2:4-7 (Isa 28:16; Ps 118:22) "As you come to him, a **living stone—rejected by people** but chosen and **honored by God—**⁵ you yourselves, as **living stones, a spiritual house**, are being **built to be a holy priesthood** to offer **spiritual sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Jesus was rejected by the very people who are about to now leave Stephen him under a pile of rocks. Jesus is like Moses, the rejected deliverer—on whom the entire house of God—his holy, righteous temple is being built.

Stephen is trying to help them see that God has fulfilled the purpose of their physical temple—a signpost for God's permanent dwelling among his people. This is why John in Rev 21:22 says that when he saw the New Jerusalem—"I did not see a temple, because the Lord God Almighty and the lamb are its temple."

Why bring all this up?

Because this whole idea is *central—vital to his presentation of who Jesus is*.

Jesus has poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit—God's restoring presence among mankind. This is the promise we've been waiting for.

2. Stephen observes that there will always be **internal opposition** to God's plan.

There is a faction of rebels who have always resisted the work of the Spirit—beginning with Hebrew children in the wilderness all the way up to the modern day.

The wilderness generation opposing Moses.

The apostate and idolatrous generations that opposed the prophets.

And now, Stephen says, that's YOU! Opposing God's appointed Son and his mission to invite as many as possible into the fellowship; into God's family and his kingdom.

7:51-53 "You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. ⁵³ You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it."

They are the children of Abraham—but so was the generation that died due to rebellion in the wilderness.

They have received the Laws and covenant of Moses—but so were the rebels who stood against God when the Prophets called them back to faithfulness.

And now Stephen says—**"that's YOU!"** You are the descendants of those who opposed Moses and killed prophets.

God has fulfilled his promise to send us a deliverer. He has fulfilled his promise to dwell in the midst of his people. And you've rejected God's plan.

Listen I'm concerned about cultural opposition to the Gospel—as well we should be concerned about legislation that prohibits us from preaching our conscience on biblical matters. The gospel has flourished in lands where people are free to preach and practice the Christian faith. And mostly, it hasn't grown in nations where it was illegal to be a Christian.

If God has sovereignly chosen to use free societies—where any faith can be practiced or preached freely—to further the gospel and grow the church in the world—then who are we to oppose the sovereign God?

But I'm equally concerned about a religious opposition to the gospel—which usually comes from within the church.

We face several dangers as the church grows and we make inroads into the community and people lives.

- **The danger of becoming inflexible and unmovable.** “Stiff-necked” comes from Isaiah. And here, he intends to paint the picture of their obstinance—stubbornness, inflexibility. **Religious people are tempted to become intractable and stuck. They're unmovable because they can't accept that God is doing the “new thing” he promised in Isaiah.**
- **The danger of resisting the work of the Spirit.** Sinners resist the conviction of the Spirit who comes to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. Religious people resist the sovereign reign of Christ over areas they refuse to surrender. **He says right here, “this faction of rebels has always resisted and persecuted the messengers and the plan of God.”**
- **The danger of being rich in knowledge and poor in obedience.** 53 You **received the law** under the direction of angels and yet **you haven't kept it.** **Lavishly living in the abundance of biblical truth—an impoverished in obedience. An embarrassment of riches in terms of resources—but no corresponding life change through obedient faith.**

The opposition to the Christian church is from without—legislators want to take away our freedom of speech and religious liberty? You bet they do. Should we expect anything less from those who hate Jesus—who hate the Gospel—who hate YOU! Jesus said, they hated me they'll hate you.

Are you surprised at that?

But we are also guarded against opposition from within. These are the people of God—sons of Abraham, inheritors of the law and covenants. Clearly not open to the Good News.

3. Slanderous **accusations** turn into **outrage**.

54 “when they heard these things, they were **enraged** and **gnashed their teeth** at him.”

So, they're not quite ready for murder yet. But, they're most of the way there.

We live in an “Outrage” culture today. Say the wrong thing and the outrage mob will cancel you.

What is the source and root of all this cultural rage people have toward each other?

- **Conviction and guilt for the truth about ourselves.** When you are convicted by the truth you will either surrender to it—or you will gnash your teeth and clap back at it. Why? Because these folks cannot here the truth about themselves. They will shout it down, cancel it, because conviction brings either repentance or self-righteousness.

The second reason or source of the outrage culture—and the noise between factions...

- **Intolerance of the truth about Christ.** 55 “Stephen full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” He turns from the truth about them to the truth about Jesus—he’s exalted at the right hand of the majesty and power of heaven—and this is not a truth they’re willing to accept. It’s too radical! **Why is it so radical? Because the truth of this statement makes demands on me. It demands my repentance to the Lord who is exalted. It demands my allegiance—my obedience to his commands and his teachings.**

58 “They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

They literally cover their ears and rush toward him to stone him. Hollaring and screeching at the top of their lungs so they wouldn't have to hear this convicting message.

When they can't win the argument, they turn to slandering and falsely accusing Stephen's character turning to violent outrage.

But here now, we see the *Christian* response.

4. The proper response is **forgiveness** as we **entrust** ourselves to Christ.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And after saying this, he fell asleep.

What a tragedy.

Christianity is the only religious faith where forgiveness is the central, practiced ethic.

Illus. In Thomas Costains History “The Three Edwards”, he tells the story of Raynald the III, a fourteenth Century Duke who was grossly overweight.

His subjects nicknamed him Raynald the fat. His younger brother **Edward lead a successful revolt** against him. Instead of killing Duke Raynald – Edward built a room around him in **Newkirk Castle** and promised him he could have his Kingship back, when he was able to leave the room.

The room had no door, but a very narrow doorway and some smaller windows which a normal size person could fit through. The catch, is that Raynald would have to lose his weight.

Day after day King Edward fed him the most succulent delicious food. And each day Raynald got bigger and bigger.

When asked about his unusual cruelty Edward replied “My brother is not a my prisoner – he can leave that room whenever he chooses”—but he died in that room, a victim of his own appetite.

Unforgiveness is a self-made prison. And you can get out anytime you want. But you have to let go of your need to be right, and your appetite for payback and retribution.

Illus. An amish school shot up by some lunatic, nursing a 20 yr old grudge. Since the shooting, the Amish community responded in a way that many found unbelievable: They forgave the killer and have since grown close to his family.

Illus. Similarly, in Charleston, SC church study group was infiltrated by a racist crazy who sat through the Bible study, looked into the faces of his victims for an hour—then shot them to death. The few survivors, the families—they issued a statement of forgiveness.

Why would these two very different Christian communities do this? Because forgiveness remains the ***central, practiced ethic*** of the believer.

Stephen merely imitated his Lord. Just as Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who lashed him, mocked him, and crucified him—so too now Stephen—as the last brick is raining down on his skull—is breathing out words of forgiveness for his killers.

1. We listen to their case.

2. We bring our case, bringing conviction to those who oppose us.

3. And ultimately, we forgive. Somebody has to demonstrate the love and character of Jesus? Why not us?