

Remembering God's Faithfulness

Acts 7:2-4, 8-10, 17, 33-34, 45-47, 52-53, 55
SS Lesson for 09/27/2015

Devotional Scripture: Ps 89:1-15

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson shows us how and why we should consistently be **Remembering God's Faithfulness**. The **study's aim** is to recognize the value of rehearsing God's faithfulness to others. The **study's application** is to share testimonies of God's faithfulness with our family and friends.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 7:55

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,

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

THE ADDRESS OF STEPHEN (7:2-53)

This is the longest recorded message in Acts, which shows the importance Luke attached to it. Stephen, a Grecian Jew, by his life and words prepared the way for the gospel to reach outside the pale of Judaism. But what did Stephen say in this powerful discourse that resulted in his death? Though he touched on the accusations made against him, Stephen did not give a legal defense of himself. Rather, he set forth Israel's past history and God's past workings in order to vindicate Christianity.

In this discourse three ideas run like cords through its fabric:

1. *There is progress and change in God's program.* God was creative and innovative in His dealings with humans and particularly with Israel. Stephen developed this thought in five points: (a) The promise to **Abraham** (vv. 2-8). From working with the entire human race, the Lord sovereignly called Abraham, father of the Jews, from **Mesopotamia** to the land of promise, and gave him **12** great-grandsons who became the progenitors of Israel's 12 tribes. (b) The sojourn of **Joseph** (vv. 9-16). This move to **Egypt** was the fulfillment of God's prediction recorded in verses 6-7. It too was a radical change for Jacob's descendants. (c) The deliverance under **Moses** (vv. 17-43). A major portion of Stephen's discourse pertained to **Moses** and the Exodus, another important aspect of Israel's history. (d) The building of **the tabernacle** (vv. 44-46). Constructing the tabernacle so that it was portable implied it was temporary. (It was called **the tabernacle of Testimony** because it testified to God's presence among them.) (e) The construction of the temple (vv. 47-50). Even the temple was to be a symbol of God's presence and not the very home of God.

In God's workings with the nation from Abraham to Solomon there was innovation and change. The point is clear: If God changed so many things in Israel's history, who is to say that the Law and the temple were permanent?

2. *The blessings of God are not limited to the land of Israel and the temple area.* Some of Israel's greatest favors were bestowed apart from the temple and the land.

Stephen gave four examples: (a) Israel's patriarchs and leaders were blessed *outside* the land. **Abraham** was called in Mesopotamia and given promises **before he lived in Haran** (vv. 2-5). In **Egypt... Joseph** found favor with **Pharaoh** because **God was with him** (vv. 9-10). **Moses** was commissioned by God in **Midian** (vv. 29-34). To substantiate the fact that God blessed Moses while he was in Midian, Stephen carefully recounted that **two sons** were born to Moses there. (b) The Law itself was given outside the land: **Moses was in the congregation in the desert** (v. 38). (c) The tabernacle was built in the desert. The tabernacle was **with them in the desert** (v. 44). In fact the Jews **brought it with them when they took the land** (v. 45). (d) Even the temple, though in the land, was not to be limited in its theology. How could the temple be God's dwelling place when the Scripture declares, **Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool?** (v. 49; Isa. 66:1)

3. *Israel in its past always evidenced a pattern of opposition to God's plans and His men.* This is the main point of Stephen's discourse, as its climax affirms (Acts 7:51-53). **You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!** This theme is seen throughout the message, but there are some definite specifics. (a) Instead of going directly from Mesopotamia to the Promised Land, **Abraham** tarried **in Haran** (vv. 2-4). (b) **Joseph** was **sold** by his brothers into slavery in **Egypt** (v. 9). (c) **Moses** was rejected by the **Israelites** (vv. 23-29). It is highly significant that both Joseph and Moses were not accepted until their **second** appearances (vv. 13, 35-36). The parallel with Christ could not have escaped Stephen's hearers. (d) Israel rejected true worship by turning to idols (vv. 39-43). Her blatant unbelief was seen in idolatry, a sin which the Jews of the Apostolic Age particularly abhorred. As a result God judged the nation by sending her **into Exile** in **Babylon** (v. 43). (e) The people of Israel missed the point of the temple (vv. 48-50). The strong and clear assertion of Stephen (v. 48) implies that the Jews believed the temple was God's dwelling place on earth, the Jewish counterpart to Mount Olympia. Indeed the temple was to be a place of worship and prayer; but it was not God's home (cf. 1 Kings 8:23-53). Stephen's three main points in this discourse fit together. Since there is progression in God's program and since His blessings are not limited to the temple, Israel had better be careful not to "resist" (Acts 7:51) His workings as they had in the past. They would withstand God's purpose by refusing to see His work in the church and His blessing outside the borders of Israel. This defense related specifically to the accusation made against Stephen in 6:11-14.

A chronological problem exists in 7:6, where Stephen said Israel would be **enslaved and mistreated 400 years**. For in Galatians 3:17 Paul implied that the period of time from the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 15:13-16 to Mount Sinai was 430 years. The difference between the 400 and 430 years can easily be accounted for by understanding that Stephen used round numbers. Another explanation is that the 400 years was the actual time of bondage whereas the 430 years described the time from the confirming of the covenant in Genesis 35:9-15 to the Exodus, which occurred in 1446 B.C. The main problem, however, is the time Israel spent in bondage in Egypt. If Galatians 3:17 means it was 430 years from the promise given to Abraham (Gen. 15) to the Exodus, the time in Egypt would then be 215 years. However, if Acts 7:6 is taken at face value the bondage was 400 years. Perhaps the best solution is to say Paul was looking at **periods** of time. The promises were given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These three patriarchs were all recipients of God's promise. The promise was reconfirmed in Genesis 46:1-4 to Jacob at Beersheba as he was on his way to Egypt. From that point (the end of God's giving promises to the patriarchs) to the Exodus was 400 years. (Cf. Harold W. Hoehner, "The Duration of the Egyptian Bondage," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126. October-December 1969:306-16.)

Another apparent discrepancy in Stephen's discourse is in Acts 7:14. Stephen stated that **75** persons were in Jacob's **family**, but the Hebrew text has "70" in both Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5. In both places the Septuagint has 75. It is commonly said that Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, would have used the Septuagint and therefore was making only an "honest" mistake. This difficulty, however, can be resolved in other ways. One of the most widely accepted solutions is to recognize that the Hebrew text includes Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (a total of 70), but that the Septuagint omits Jacob and Joseph but includes Joseph's seven grandchildren (mentioned in 1 Chron. 7:14-15, 20-25). This is supported by the Hebrew in Genesis 46:8-26 which enumerates 66 names, omitting Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's two sons. Another solution is that the Septuagint's 75 includes the 66 plus the 9 wives of Jacob's 12 sons (Judah's and Simeon's wives had died and Joseph's wife was in Egypt).

Acts 7:16 contains another apparent discrepancy. Stephen's words imply that **Jacob** was buried at **Shechem** whereas the Old Testament clearly affirms that he and his wife Leah (and his parents Isaac and Rebekah and his grandparents Abraham and Sarah) were interred in the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron (Gen. 49:29-50:13). However, the bodies buried at Shechem did not include Jacob but did include those of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was buried first in Egypt but was reburied in Shechem (Gen. 50:26; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32). True, Joshua 24:32 refers only to Joseph's bones, but evidently his brothers were also buried at Shechem (though Josephus states otherwise). The pronoun **their** (Acts 7:16), then, does not include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but looks back to the words **our fathers** in verse 15 and refers to Joseph and his brothers.

Stephen's phrase, **the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem** (v. 16), presents another problem. Actually Jacob, not Abraham, bought the plot of ground (Gen. 33:19). This may be explained by saying that Abraham in a sense did purchase the property in the person of his grandson. Abraham would be given title to Shechem through Jacob.

This favorable allusion to Shechem, the "capital" of the Samaritans, would not please Stephen's audience. But his reference to Samaria prepares readers for the next step in the outreach of the gospel (Acts 8).

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Each of us has a story. That story explains who we are and how we came to be who we are. The story includes the tragedies and victories that have shaped us. Perhaps you can trace your story back through many generations. Parts of your story may make you swell with pride (whether of the godly or ungodly kind); parts of your story may make you cringe with shame. But whatever the details, your story makes you who you are. As Christians, the most important part of our story is that we have chosen to follow Jesus. We remember that our sins have been forgiven; we realize that we have a future in Heaven. Our individual stories are chapters within the greater story of all the people of God. Part of our chapter is the call to stand firm. Today's lesson involves an example of one who did just that.

As today's text opens, thousands already had become followers of Christ in the earliest days of the church (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Even many Jewish priests had become believers (6:7). The first-century church had taken seriously the call to be a genuine fellowship (2:42, 46) and to share with those in need (2:45; 4:32). Caring for widows was part of this; one of the seven men chosen to serve the church in that regard was Stephen (6:1-6). Stephen was involved not only in the church's benevolence ministry, he also "performed great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). He spoke out boldly for Christ, so much so that unbelievers became hostile. A source of this hostility was "the Synagogue of the Freedmen" (6:9). There were more than 400 synagogues in Jerusalem at that time, and the membership of this one was made up largely of former slaves who had gained their freedom. False accusations began to flow when Stephen's opponents were unable to refute the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke. Ultimately, Stephen found himself being hauled up before the Sanhedrin (the ruling Jewish council) to answer these (Acts 6:11-14).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

God's Faithfulness in Establishing His Kingdom (Acts 7:2-4)

2 And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran,
3 and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.'
4 Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.

Establishment through revelation (2)

Revelation of God's will (Eph 1:9)

9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,

Revelation through the prophets (Rom 16:25-26)

25 Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him

Revelation through the Church (Eph 3:10)

10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,

Establishment through guidance (3)

Guidance that is part of God's plan for our lives (Jer 29:11)

11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Guidance into truth (John 16:13-15)

13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

Guidance that represents I am a child of God (Rom 8:14)

14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Establishment through obedience (4)

Obedience that leads to righteousness (Rom 6:16)

16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Obedience that delights God (1 Sam 15:22)

22 But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Obedience in love (2 John 1:6)

6 And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

God's Faithfulness During Betrayals (Acts 7:9-10)

8 Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.

9 "And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him

10 and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

Betrayal of covenant (8)

Betrayal through idolatry (Deut 32:21-23)

21 They made me jealous by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols. I will make them envious by those who are not a people; I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding. 22 For a fire has been kindled by my wrath, one that burns to the realm of death below. It will devour the earth and its harvests and set afire the foundations of the mountains. 23 "I will heap calamities upon them and spend my arrows against them.

Betrayal through serving other gods (Josh 23:16)

16 If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you."

Betrayal through violating a vow (Josh 24:19-22)

19 Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." 21 But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the Lord." 22 Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord." "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.

Betrayal because of envy (9)

Envy that makes a man unclean (Mark 7:20-23)

20 He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' 21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"

Envy that rots the bones (Prov 14:30)

30 A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

Envy is manifested in jealousy of other's blessings (Matt 20:9-16)

9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Betrayal ending in deliverance (10)

Deliverance from all troubles (Ps 34:19)

19 A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all;

Deliverance from trials (2 Peter 2:9)

9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Deliverance that is part of the new covenant (Heb 9:15)

15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance — now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

God's Faithfulness in Deliverance (Acts 7:17, 33-34)

17 "But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt

33 "Then the Lord said to him, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

34 I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt."

Deliverance through a promise (17)

Promises of peace (Ps 85:8)

8 I will listen to what God the Lord will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints — but let them not return to folly.

Promises that have been tested (Ps 119:140)

140 Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.

Promises made "Yes" in Jesus (2 Cor 1:20)

20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

Deliverance through God's Holiness (33)

Holiness because of its justice and goodness (Rom 7:12)

12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Holiness through living in peace (Heb 12:14-15)

14 Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Holiness that produces righteousness (Heb 12:10-11)

10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Deliverance through God's knowledge (34)

Because God sees man's ways (Job 31:4)

4 Does he not see my ways and count my every step?

Because God formed us (Isa 29:15-16)

15 Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?" 16 You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"?

Because there is nothing hidden from God (Jer 23:24)

24 Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" declares the Lord. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the Lord.

God's Faithfulness That Leads to Victory (Acts 7:45-47)

45 which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David,

46 who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.

47 But Solomon built Him a house.

Victory over enemies (45)

Victory over enemies because God goes with those who belong to Him (Deut 20:4)

4 For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory."

Victory over enemies because the victory rests with God (Prov 21:31)

31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord.

Victory over enemies through Jesus (1 Cor 15:57)

57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Victory over enemies so that we may overcome the world (1 John 5:4)

4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

Victory found in God's House (46-47)

Victory because Jesus is faithful over God's house (Heb 3:6)

6 But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

Victory because God is greater than all (1 John 4:4)

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

Victory through God's love (Rom 8:37)

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

God's Faithfulness in Sending a Savior (Acts 7:52-53, 55)

52 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,
53 who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."
55 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,

A Savior that was foretold (52)

Prophesied to bring hope (Rom 15:12)

12 And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him."

Prophesied to fulfill promises (Jer 33:14-15)

14 "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. 15 "'In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

Prophesied to remove sin (Zech 3:8-9)

8 "'Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. 9 See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

A Savior that will judge (53)

Jesus is the judge of the nations (Matt 25:31-33)

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42)

42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

Jesus is the judge at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10)

10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

A Savior that is the Glory of God (55)

At the transfiguration Jesus physically showed God's glory (Matt 17:2)

2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

Jesus' first sign revealed His glory (John 2:11)

11 This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

God gave us His glory through Jesus (2 Cor 4:6)

6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Consider some of the ways that this text speaks to us.

*First, when Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, it is as though our Lord were on trial a second time. One of my favorite commentators on the Book of Acts observed that Stephen's sermon in our text was quite different from the earlier sermons of Peter in Acts. Specifically, he observed that Stephen hardly mentioned Jesus, while Peter spoke plainly of Him. The more I have thought about this text, the more I am inclined to differ with this assessment. I believe that the reason we hardly find Jesus mentioned is that while Peter spoke *of* Jesus, Stephen spoke *for* Jesus. The last two verses of chapter 7 make this point clearly enough to convince me at least. Stephen was being accused of teaching what Jesus taught, and by and large, I believe this to be correct.*

I think this overlapping of Jesus' and Stephen's teaching may be significant. Let me try to explain why. I believe that Joseph's dealings with his brothers in [Genesis 42-45](#) help us understand the concept of repentance. To make a long story short, Joseph virtually reconstructed the circumstances of his own betrayal by his brothers. Now, rather than having the opportunity to make Joseph a slave, his brothers had the opportunity to make Benjamin a slave. At the beginning of Joseph's dealings with his brothers, it was obvious that they regretted their cruelty to Joseph ([Genesis 42:21-22](#)). But regret is not the same as repentance. It was only after Joseph's brothers faced the same temptation (to forsake their youngest brother and thus make him a slave) and responded differently that Joseph recognized true repentance in his brothers, and thereafter disclosed his identity to his brothers.

From the story of Joseph, we may derive this simple definition of repentance:

TRUE REPENTANCE IS DOING IT DIFFERENTLY WHEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO RELIEVE THE SITUATION.

I am suggesting that in Stephen, God offers the Sanhedrin a second chance. When he stands on trial before the Sanhedrin, he is being accused of the very things which were the *real* reasons for Jesus' rejection and execution by the Jewish religious leaders. This was their golden opportunity to confess their sin with regard to Jesus, and to acknowledge Him as Israel's Messiah. Instead, they even more strongly rejected the gospel. They turned into primitive savages, becoming like a pack of wolves. And in so doing, they reaffirmed their sin and their guilt in rejecting and crucifying Jesus. This was a dark day indeed for Israel's religious leaders. The irony of all this is that because they rejected Jesus once again (so to speak), they not only confirmed their guilt; they brought on the very destruction they opposed in the preaching of Jesus and the apostles.

In the early verses of chapter 8, we read that the death of Stephen triggered a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. I have always looked at this in a positive light. The death of Stephen brought about the persecution of the church. The persecution of the church brought about the scattering of the church to "**all Judea and Samaria**" ([Acts 8:1](#)). Thus, God was fulfilling the Great Commission as the gospel was being spread abroad. This is a very positive message.

But there is a dark side to this that I had previously overlooked. The church is scattered, leaving Jerusalem with a mere handful of believers. Only the apostles remain behind ([Acts 8:1](#)). Never again will we read encouraging reports about a large number of conversions in Jerusalem and of phenomenal growth in the church. When the church fled from Jerusalem, it was something like Noah and his family entering the ark, or like Lot and his family fleeing from Sodom and Gomorrah – it closed the door to repentance and salvation and opened the door for God's judgment to fall upon this wicked city. What a tragedy for the great city of

Jerusalem to be forsaken by God's people. Jerusalem's Day of Judgment was surely drawing near, even as they killed Stephen for warning them about it.

Second, I believe that the death of Stephen had a profound impact on Saul (Paul), one that served to prepare him for his day of salvation, and more. We know that Stephen's preaching was so powerful and persuasive that no one could successfully refute it – even Saul (who I believe engaged in the debate with Stephen). I believe that Stephen's sermon haunted Saul, until the day of his conversion.

I am even tempted to speculate further that Stephen's sermon provided the rough outline for Paul's later theology, after his conversion. As I was reading in F. F. Bruce's commentary on the Book of Acts,²⁵ I noticed he suggested that there are some strong similarities between the teaching and theology of the Book of Hebrews and Stephen's sermon. Stephen's sermon suggests that his thinking was ahead of its time – farther, for example, than Peter's theology at this point in time. If Paul were the author of the Book of Hebrews (as I am tempted to think), then it would not be surprising to find Stephen's theology (as found in his sermon) played out in greater detail in Hebrews. I cannot help but think of Paul as Stephen's successor. Paul finished what Stephen started.

One more thing occurred to me regarding the relationship between Stephen and Saul/Paul. The next person (in Acts) to stand before the Sanhedrin is Paul. How different his trial turned out ([Acts 23:1-10](#)).

Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, no doubt knowing that they wanted blood. He did not hold back; instead he delivered a blistering indictment against his accusers, which led to his death. Paul likewise later stood before the Sanhedrin. He recognized that he would not receive a fair trial either (like Stephen). He may even have discerned that they fully intended to execute him, as they had killed Stephen. Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee and causes the members of the Sanhedrin to turn on one another, like a pack of angry dogs. This turns out to be Paul's deliverance, for the trial is aborted by the violence Paul's words triggered.

I am not faulting Paul at all. I believe that Stephen sensed that his mission was accomplished, and that he would most glorify God by speaking plainly and by dying well. That he did. I believe that Paul realized his mission (as described in [Acts 9:15-16](#)) was not yet fulfilled. Thus, he responded in a way that gave him additional days to fulfill his calling. He, too, would die a martyr's death, but later. This leads me to my next point, the sovereignty of God.

Third, we are once again reminded that God is sovereign in this world and over His church. God sovereignly purposes the death of Stephen, while He will spare Paul when he stands before the Sanhedrin (see above). Some of the Greek-speaking Jews seek to silence the gospel by stoning Stephen, but the end result is that the gospel is proclaimed before the Sanhedrin, and now by the scattering of the church, it is proclaimed world-wide. Greek-speaking Jews oppose the gospel, yet their opposition only serves to spread the gospel abroad to Greek-speaking people. The very thing these enemies of the gospel oppose, they end up inadvertently promoting. God uses those who obey Him to advance His gospel – men like Peter and Barnabas and Stephen. Likewise, God uses those who oppose Him to advance His gospel – men like Pharaoh of old, like Judas, and like these Greek-speaking Jews. The Book of Acts is the record of God's sovereign work through His church, and through those who oppose His church. As our Lord will later say to Saul, “**It is futile to kick against the goads**” ([Acts 26:14](#)).

Fourth, we should learn from Stephen's knowledge and use of the Old Testament Scriptures. We should learn from Stephen the value of history and its lessons for later generations. The Bible frequently takes us back to “ancient history” to teach us important lessons ([Romans 15:4](#); [1 Corinthians 9:8-10](#)). From Noah's flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we learn of man's sin and of God's judgment on sinners (see, for example, [2 Peter 2:1-9](#)). [Nehemiah 9](#) and [Daniel 9](#) review Israel's history as a reminder of this nation's sins. [Psalm 78](#) is a review of history to recall the sinfulness of man and the faithfulness of God. Paul turns to Old Testament history to instruct the Corinthian saints about the dangers of self-indulgence ([1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#)).

We live in a day when history is not merely disdained; it is rewritten to justify crooked thinking and rotten living. We should learn from history so that we do not perpetuate the sins of the past. Let us learn from Stephen the value of history.

Beyond this, we learn from Stephen the difference between “camels” and “gnats.” Few people today preach the way Stephen did, using large portions of Scripture and drawing from them the overall, dominant themes. As a preacher I knew used to say of many other preachers, “They go down deeper and stay down longer than anyone I know.” Details are important at times, but we sometimes tend to focus on the minute details of biblical texts, rather than on the broad, sweeping themes of Scripture. How many of us can take a theme and trace it through the Scriptures as Stephen has done? Our devotional books dwell on a verse of Scripture, and sometimes less. Our daily Bible readings (even systematic Bible reading) are scattered across the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms, and a New Testament text. Why not read larger doses of Scripture, and seek to discern the broader themes of the Scriptures? Why not work at tracing themes and doctrines through the Scriptures? We need the “Vitamin C” approach to the Scriptures – we need massive doses, not a dab here and a dab there.

Fifth, our text encourages missions. You may wonder how a passage that ends in the murder of a Christian can encourage anyone to consider missions as a calling. It really does, however. The principle which Stephen was seeking to demonstrate from Old Testament history is that God is not restricted to a particular place. Stephen reminded his listeners that God was with Abram in Mesopotamia, in Haran, in Egypt, and in Canaan. God was with Moses in Egypt, in Midian, and in the wilderness. Thus, Abram was able to leave his homeland and family and depart for an unnamed destination. Wherever a believer may be, God is with him (Psalm 139:7-10).

Men and women, we can be assured of God’s presence, power, and protection wherever His will takes us. Parents, we can release our children to serve God wherever He may lead, knowing that God is with them. God’s presence is not limited to any one place; He is with His people wherever they may be. Now here is a truth that inspires those who would seek to serve God in distant or remote places. This leads to our next point.

Sixth, our text informs us that martyrdom can glorify God, build up the church, and can be a blessing and a privilege to those who die well for the Lord Jesus. Tertullian once said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Luke would surely agree with this statement. Stephen’s martyrdom launched an ever expanding missionary movement. The gospel spread from Jerusalem to “**all Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.**” To follow up on our last point, God is not only with us wherever we are on earth. He will also be with us in death, to take us to heaven (Psalm 23:4-6; Psalm 73:23-26).

Not long ago we prayed for missionaries who were returning to a dangerous part of the world. As we were preparing to pray, I called attention to (Philippians 1:19-21).

I don’t think that Paul is asking the Philippians to pray for his safety or for a life free from suffering and persecution. Paul’s desire is to glorify God by advancing the gospel, whether this is by his life, or by his death. Paul does not dread death; he dreads living – or dying – in a way that would dishonor the Savior. Seeing Stephen’s entrance into heaven, looking into the face of His Lord, who could wish some other fate upon Stephen?

I was at a lunch some time ago with a man who is in charge of a ministry where missionaries are in grave danger. Someone suggested that there might be ways to proclaim the gospel that would minimize the risk of martyrdom. This man hesitated, and then replied that he had just told those serving under him that what the cause of Christ might need is a few more martyrs.

I don’t remember exactly when or where he said it, but I recall John Piper saying, “There is no closed country to those who are willing to die for the sake of the gospel.” Once one is committed to die (if need be) for the cause of Christ, there is nothing that can hold him (or her) back. In some parts of the world where I have ministered, missionaries seem to be the first to leave when the going gets tough. “Safety first!” seems to be the motto. That was not Stephen’s motto. He faithfully proclaimed the truth of God’s Word, knowing it would

likely lead to his death. But what a triumphant death it was, even as our Lord's death was triumphant. The same faith that enabled Abram to leave his homeland and his relatives and go to an unknown country, the same faith that enabled Abraham to offer up his only son (if need be), is the faith that enables us to live dangerously for the sake of our Lord, whose death ended once and for all the fear of death for those who trust in Him (Hebrews 2:14-15; Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 15:55-58; 2 Corinthians 5:6-9).

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/12-first-martyr-or-taking-god-granite-acts-71-60>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Many of us can remember from childhood the parental caution Always remember who you are! The same imperative applies to us as Christians as we face the daily challenges and temptations of life. And just who are we as Christians? Being of Christ, we are children of Abraham, the man of faith (see Galatians 3:29). As we cherish the story of Moses, we pledge our lives to the greater prophet Jesus (Acts 7:37), the Son of God who leads us in our exodus from sin-slavery. We know that the story of God's people has not always been an easy one. We know that we do not wrestle against mere flesh and blood, but "against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). We win the ultimate victory in this battle as we stand firm. We resist the devil, not God's Spirit. As we do, we join our story to the story of Christians through the centuries. The challenge is to recognize that we must stand firm in all occasions of life. Think of opposition to God in government, rejection of God in academia, or when acquaintances want to relax the standards of what is right. Whatever difficulty may arise, we are to be ready to take part in the age-old story of standing firm. There will be opposition, but standing firm for God is always the right thing to do.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. God's plan to change the world initially focused on one man (Acts 7:2-4)
2. God gives signs to remind His people of His covenants (vss. 8-10)
3. We know that God is faithful, for He made Abraham into a large nation as He had promised (vs. 17)
4. God cares for His people in their suffering (vss. 33-34)
5. God dwells with His people and defends them (vss. 45-47)
6. The very people who enjoy God's blessings often turn against Him (vss. 52-53)
7. Christ is on His throne and has sovereign control over every situation (vs. 55)