

We ended chapter six with an account of a group of Jews stirring up trouble for Stephen. Members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen, who were Grecian Jews, did not like Stephen, the things he said, or the things he did among the people. They tried to argue with him, to put him in his place, but they were no match for his wisdom, or the power of the spirit, that was in him.

Stephen's accusers were enraged by their ineffectiveness to stand against him, so they stirred up others, and persuaded them to lie against him. They accused Stephen of blasphemy against Moses, and God. They so stirred up, and unsettled, the people that as a result Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin. These were the exact set of circumstances that brought about Jesus' death. They are the same accusations brought first Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, and then Peter and the Apostles. By this time, the religious leaders were totally frustrated at their ineffectiveness at trying to stop this Jesus movement.

As the devil worked in the hearts of many of the Jews to stop the spread of the gospel, Stephen took his stand in face of the greatest opposition of his life. Tonight's passage records the content of his stand that led to Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr. Please read along with me, Acts 7:1-53.

Above all else, we must be honest with the scriptures. Many criticize this passage for not aligning perfectly with the history of Israel as it is recorded in the Old Testament. Skeptics point to this passage as proof that the scriptures are not accurate, and we who believe that the bible is the absolute truth, and the infallible word of God, must be able to defend our position.

There are several very logical explanations for these minor variations. Remember that Acts is the second volume of Luke's writings, with his gospel being volume one. The author reveals in his gospel that his method of research was to go, and interview eyewitnesses, and record their testimonies concerning all of the events that transpired. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he gave an accurate account of what the eyewitnesses reported to him.

This is not a quoted dialog, but a remembered synopsis of Stephen's defense. If the eyewitness misquoted some of the details, Luke still reported his or her testimony as accurately as possible. Since in the later chapters of Acts Luke reports as an eyewitness who traveled with Paul, and we learn that Paul was present, and giving his approval at Stephen's murder, it is possible that Paul was Luke's source for the events in this account.

Some of the supposed discrepancy in this passage may have come from the fact that, as a Grecian Jew, Stephen would have used the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as his bible. The Septuagint could be responsible for introducing some of the variances in the passage. Also it was common practice to round off the numbers when speaking of past events, rather than being concerned with exact figures.

The supposed differences between the Old Testament record and the New Testament account are minor, and in no way should distract us from the content, or the context, of the passage, or the lessons that may be learned. What is important for us is the fact that Stephen took his stand upon the gospel, in the face of life threatening opposition, and he used only the word of God for his defense.

This is the tool Jesus used when tempted by the devil, and it is central in every instance in the New Testament where someone had to defend his faith. The lesson for us today is that a thorough knowledge of God's word is our best defense against our opponents, whenever we are called upon to take a stand. Often when we stand upon the word of God, we may not quote it exactly as it appears in one translation or another, but we paraphrase, as the meaning of the

content of the scriptures comes from our hearts, as we are led by the Holy Spirit. As a mature Christian, Stephen had a thorough working knowledge of the scriptures, and he used that knowledge, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to make his case, and to bring conviction upon his accusers.

Stephen laid out Israel's history, as it is recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures, he legitimized his Christian faith in two ways. He showed there is a progression in God's plan for the ages, and he showed that God's blessings were not limited to, or automatic for, Israel and the Temple.

He begins with God's covenant with Abraham and continues with how God fulfilled all of his promises, in spite of Israel's continual opposition to God's plan, and his prophets. In verse 37 he recounts Moses's prophecy that points to the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, whom they murdered. In spite of all of the words God gave to the people through Moses, they turned to worship other Gods, and thus called down the Judgment of God upon themselves.

If they knew the scriptures, his accusers understood that everything Stephen said was true. They could not argue with the record of God's word. It just wasn't something they wanted to hear. They did not receive the conviction that the word of God brought on them, as they should, rather they were enraged against Stephen.

None of us have ever faced this depth of opposition, but the principles are the same for all who stand upon the gospel, and the truth of God's word. The word of God convicts everyone who reads it, of his or her sin. With the reality of personal sin comes a call for repentance, and faith. This can set up an all out spiritual war, with a person's soul hanging in the balance. The flesh, the sin nature, and the spiritual forces of evil conspire against the gospel message to keep lost people from receiving God's grace, and the forgiveness of their sins, in Jesus' name. The power of this spiritual darkness manifests itself in opposition to the witness for Jesus Christ, who takes a stand on the truth of God's word. If this opposition makes the witness back down, Satan wins the battle. If the witness continues to stand, the battle rages on, holding out the possibility for the lost person to find victory through faith in Christ.

Beginning in verse 51, Stephen concludes his recounting of Israel's history with harsh criticism of his accusers. He calls them stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears. He says they always resist the Holy Spirit, just like their fathers throughout Israel's history. Their fathers killed the prophets who told of the coming Messiah, and they murdered Jesus when He came. Outwardly they lived by the law, for appearance sake, but inwardly the law had no effect on their hearts, or their relationship with God.

Stephen's example here causes a dilemma within my heart. Most of the time, when I share my faith, I try to tell people about Jesus in the most loving of terms. Salvation requires conviction over sin, followed by repentance, and faith, but my emphasis is usually on the love of Christ, and God's offer of forgiveness and grace. I see none of that in this passage of scripture. I also cringe at those who shout from the street corners a message of hell and damnation rather than a message of God's love and grace, but in extreme cases, maybe that is what is needed.

If anything, this passage should wake us up to the fact that, sometimes, God requires a more direct, and in your face stand, in order to accomplish His purposes. It may be that God had already given Stephen's accusers over to a depraved mind. While the hope of the gospel remained open, these are the people who murdered Jesus, and there is judgment coming for those who refuse to repent and bow their knee to Him.

Everything Stephen said was true, but for the most part, his audience was not willing to receive the truth, and we will find out in the next passage, they murdered Stephen for his stand.

In our flesh we cry out, "That's not fair." Why did Stephen have to die, just for taking his stand, and speaking the truth? It is the same element of our flesh that asks, "Why should I have to suffer for taking my stand on the gospel, and my faith in the word of God.

There are certain promises in the New Testament that are contingent upon the phrase, "if we share in His sufferings." Jesus gave His life, so that an old sinner like me could be saved. If I am to follow Him, I must be willing to suffer any consequences that may come, in order to fulfill His will for my life, even to the point of death.

As we look ahead, we find out that as a direct result of Stephen's martyrdom, the opponents of Christ became emboldened, and persecution broke out against the whole church. Christian families fled for their lives, and resettled throughout the Roman Empire. Everywhere they went, they shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, and soon, the whole world had an opportunity to hear the truth, and come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

God has a plan, and if you are a born again believer, you have a place in His plan, to grow His kingdom, and spread His gospel. When we are faithful to God's plan we will face opposition from the world, but don't worry, Jesus has overcome the world, and God is in control. In our passage next time we will see Stephen joyously enter into the Lord's presence, even as he is being stoned to death, because of his faith.

The lesson we can take away from this passage is that there are times when we need to be loving, and gentle, in the presentation of the gospel to others, and there are times when we must be bold in our stand, and confront the enemies of God, head on. We must be bold in our stand upon the truth of God's word in the face of the demons of political correctness, and godlessness, in every area of government, and society, and at the same time be compassionate for all whose hearts are stirred by the message of hope, forgiveness, and God's grace.

Even tonight there may be some here whose hearts have been convicted by the word of God. If the Holy Spirit is stirring your heart, I encourage you to confess and repent of your sins to God, and receive Jesus Christ into your heart as Savior and Lord. For all of my brothers and sisters in Christ, let us commit anew our resolve to be bold in our witness, and strong in our stand.