

Martyrdom of Stephen

Acts 6:8, 9, 12, 15 and Acts 7:2 (to :), 52, 54–57, 59, 60

8And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

“And Stephen, full of faith] grace.

“and power] i.e. of working miracles. He at least among the seven appears almost as largely gifted by the Holy Ghost, as were the twelve” (Cambridge Bible).

“And Stephen - The remarkable death of this first Christian martyr, which soon occurred, gave occasion to the sacred writer to give a detailed account of his character, and of the causes which led to his death. Hitherto the opposition of the Jews had been confined to threats and imprisonment; but it was now to burst forth with furious rage and madness, that could be satisfied only with blood. This was the first in a series of persecutions against Christians which filled the church with blood, and which closed the lives of thousands, perhaps a million, in the great work of establishing the gospel on the earth.

“Full of faith - Full of "confidence" in God or trusting entirely to his promises.

“And power - The power which was evinced in working miracles.

“Wonders - This is one of the words commonly used in the New Testament to denote miracles” (Barnes’ Notes).

9Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

“Then there arose - That is, they stood up against him, or they opposed him.

“The Jews were scattered in all parts of the world. In every place they would have synagogues. But it is also probable that there would be enough foreign Jews residing at Jerusalem from each of those places to maintain the worship of the synagogue; and at the great feasts, those synagogues adapted to Jewish people of different nations would be attended by those who came up to attend the great feasts. It is certain that there was a large number of synagogues in Jerusalem. The common estimate is, that there were four hundred and eighty in the city

“The word is Latin, and means properly a "freedman," a man who had been a slave and was set at liberty. Many have supposed that these persons were manumitted slaves of Roman origin, but who had become proselyted to the Jewish religion, and who had a synagogue in Jerusalem.

“A second opinion is, that these persons were Jews by birth, and had been taken captives by the Romans, and then set at liberty, and were thus called "freedmen" or "liberties."

“Cyrenians - Jews who dwelt at "Cyrene" in Africa.

“Alexandrians - Inhabitants of Alexandria in Egypt.

“Cilicia - This was a province of Asia Minor, on the seacoast, at the north of Cyprus. The capital of this province was Tarsus, the native place of Paul,

“Disputing with Stephen - Doubtless on the question whether Jesus was the Messiah. This word does not denote "angry disputing," but is commonly used to denote "fair and impartial inquiry"; and it is probable that the discussion began in this way, and when they were overcome by "argument," they resorted, as disputants are apt to do, to angry criminations and violence” (Barnes’ Notes).

12And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

“When they could not answer Stephen's arguments as a disputant, they prosecuted him as a criminal, and brought false witnesses against him.” (Matthew Henry’s Commentary).

“And the elders and the Scribes; who belonged to the sanhedrim, to whom they reported these things, as persons, under whose cognizance they properly came:

“and came upon him; at an unawares, and in an hostile way:

“and caught him; seized him with violence:

“and brought him to the council; the great Sanhedrim” (Gill’s Exposition).

15And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

“*saw his face as it had been the face of an angel* — Covered with a supernatural lustre, like that which appeared on the face of our Lord when he was transfigured, or at least that of Moses’s face, when he came down from the mount” (Benson Commentary)

“The expression is used to denote the impression produced on the countenance by communion with God; the calm serenity and composure which follow a confident committing of all into his hands. It is not meant that there was anything "miraculous" in the case of Stephen, but it is language that denotes calmness, dignity, and confidence in God, all of which were so marked on his countenance that it impressed them with clear proofs of his innocence and piety” (Barnes’ Notes).

“... his gaze soon afterwards ([Acts 7:56](#)) beheld the open heavens and the glory of Christ enthroned on high, it may be that the sense in this verse is also supernatural, and that the face of Stephen was already illumined with the radiancy of the new Jerusalem” (Cambridge Bible).

Acts 7:2 (to :), 52, 54–57, 59, 60

2And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken;

“Men, brethren, and fathers - These were the usual titles by which the Sanhedrin was addressed. In all this Stephen was perfectly respectful and showed that he was disposed to render due honor to the institutions of the nation” (Barnes’ Notes).

52Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:

“Which of the prophets ... - The interrogative form here is a strong mode of saying that they had persecuted "all" the prophets. It was "the characteristic of the nation" to persecute the messengers of God.

“And they have slain them ... - That is, they have slain the prophets, whose main message was that the Messiah was to come. It was a great aggravation of their offence that they put to death the messengers which foretold the greatest blessing that the nation could receive.

“The Just One - The Messiah.

“The betrayers - They are called "betrayers" here because they employed Judas to betray him - agreeable to the maxim in law, "He who does anything by another is held to have done it himself." (Barnes’ Notes).

54When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

“They were cut to the heart - They were exceedingly enraged and indignant. The whole course of the speech had been such as to excite their anger, and now they could restrain themselves no longer.

“They gnashed on him ... - Expressive of the bitterness and malignity of their feeling” (Barnes’ Notes).

55But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

“Looked up stedfastly - Fixed his eyes intently on heaven. Foreseeing his danger, and the effect his speech had produced; seeing that there was no safety in the Great Council of the nation, and no prospect of justice at their hands, he cast his eyes to heaven and sought protection there.

“It means some magnificent representation; a splendor, or light, that is the appropriate exhibition of the presence of God,

“On the right hand of God - That is, exalted to a place of honor and power in the heavens” (Barnes’ Notes).

56And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

“I see the heavens opened - A figurative expression, denoting that he was permitted to see "into" heaven, or to see what was there, as if the firmament was divided, and the eye was permitted to penetrate the eternal world.” (Barnes’ Notes)

57Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

“*Then they cried out with a loud voice* — Being provoked to such a degree that they could not contain themselves, and meaning to drown the voice of Stephen; *and stopped their ears* — As if they could not bear to hear such blasphemy as they wished to have it thought he had spoken. *And ran upon him* — *rushed on him with one accord*, before any sentence was regularly passed; *and cast* — *casting him out of the city* — It seems by a gate near the place where the sanhedrim sat; and as soon as they had got without the boundaries of that sacred place, of which they judged it would be a profanation to stain it with human blood, *they stoned him* — This, like the stoning of Paul at Lystra, seems to have been an act of popular fury, exceeding the power which the Jews regularly had; which, though it might have extended to passing a capital sentence, was certainly not sufficient for carrying it into execution, without the consent of the Romans” (Benson Commentary).

58And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit—In presenting to Jesus the identical prayer which He Himself had on the cross offered to His Father, Stephen renders to his glorified Lord absolute divine worship, in the most sublime form, and at the most solemn moment of his life.” (Jamieson-Faucett-Brown).

60And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

“And he kneeled down - This seems to have been a "voluntary" kneeling; a placing himself in this position for the purpose of "prayer," choosing to die in this attitude.

“Lord - That is, Lord Jesus. See the notes on [Acts 1:24](#).

“Lay not ... - Forgive them. This passage strikingly resembles the dying prayer of the Lord Jesus, [Luke 23:34](#). Nothing but the Christian religion will enable a man to utter such sentiments in his dying moments.

“He fell asleep - This is the usual mode of describing the death of saints in the Bible” (Barnes’ Notes).