

“Thieves' cant” was a lingo used by thieves in long ago England. For example, “bob ken” referred to a house that could easily be robbed. A “cully” was a victim of robbery. Though “thieves' cant” is obsolete, some terms continue to be used. For example, a “fence” is someone who will purchase stolen goods. [read more](#) Now, we should expect thieves to speak in a way that reflects their values.

Similarly, for the person in relationship with Jesus, and enroute to eternity with Him, we should expect to hear “the language of heaven”! I believe we hear a little bit of such language in Acts 7.

Proposition

Last Sunday we saw how Stephen embodied the characteristics of one who was called to the “service of tables”. And we saw a very practical, yet spiritual strategy for **teamwork** in the Church. Also, we saw trouble stirred up against Stephen. We continue our journey through Acts tracking how God’s Good News **rippled** out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth.

Chapter 7 concludes the first 1/3 of Acts. Next week we will depart from our study of Acts for three shared sermons called “**More Precious Than Gold**”. John Lalonde will join me to discuss the value of God’s Word and there will be homework. Using the **YouVersion** app we will launch a Bible reading plan for the church family. Today, as we look at the story of Stephen, to three important tensions that all believers must deal with when our faith is challenged.

[A] Defending but not defensive – vv. 1-50

In response to trumped-up charges (6:11-14) Stephen was not personally defensive but gave a **Christocentric** defense of the Gospel. This leads into yet another ripple of the Gospel as it extended. In this case, we observe the progressive revealing of the Gospel through the Old Testament story.

In his book *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1991,43) Walter Kaiser writes, “*All of God’s previous saving activity had to be acknowledged and confessed before one could see more steadily and more holistically the further revelation of God.*” What was Stephen’s argument?

- **Abraham and patriarchs – vv. 2-17** – chosen to be in the land of promise but ended up in captivity (vv.15-17)
- **Moses and the Law – vv. 18-50** – redeemed to be God’s people but rebelled (v.39) and were exiled (v.43)

Peter (Acts 2, 3) and Paul (Acts 13) also preached the “Gospel according to the OT”. Here, Stephen also addressed the **charge** of 6:13-14, as it related to the Temple. God has always longed for relationship with His chosen and called people. He rejects mere religion. God does not dwell in a physical house (v.48) but in the hearts of believers (see Ephesians 2:21-22). Walter Kaiser also writes,

Amidst all the multiplexity and variety of materials, events, and issues...there does exist an eye to this storm of [OT] activity...While the NT eventually referred to this focal point of the OT teaching as the promise, the OT knew it under a constellation of such words as promise, oath, blessing, rest, and seed....It could also be seen as a divine plan in history which promised to bring a universal blessing through the agency of an unmerited, divine choice of human offspring: “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). 12-13

Stephen gave a **reason** (apologian) for his hope, as Peter taught persecuted believers to do in I Peter 3:14-16. “*Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”* (John 1:45)

[B] Challenging but with compassion – vv. 51-53 and 60

Stephen pulled no punches in challenging the Sanhedrin with the same failure to obey God as their ancestors displayed. The accused became accuser. Just listen to the four-fold indictment against them!

- **Outward religion without inward transformation – v. 51** (Jerimiah 9:26; Ezekiel 44:7)
- **Unresponsive to the authority of the Holy Spirit – v. 51b**
- **Condemning God’s messengers and God’s Son – v. 52** (Matthew 23:37, “O, Jerusalem”)
- **Receiving the Law, but rejecting it – v. 53**

The 17th-century novelist John Donne wrote of early Spanish sailors who reached South America and sailed into the Amazon River. It was so immense they thought they were still on the ocean. It never occurred to them to taste the fresh water. As a result, some sailors died of dehydration. Like their forefathers, those who listened to Stephen didn’t see the salvation that had been right in front of them!

How did Stephen’s listeners react to his challenge? They were (lit.) “cut to the heart” (v.54, διεπριοντο ταις καρδιαις). But Stephen, “*being full of the Holy Spirit*” (v. 55) responded to conflict with godly composure. Stephen remained focused on “*the above things*” (Colossians 3:1-4). He was heavenly minded, and this gave him glorious composure even at the point of death.

Not only did Stephen challenge. He was also **compassionate** – see verse 60. His desire for God to forgive his attackers reflected the same words of Jesus Christ on the cross – see Luke 23:34.

[C] Rejected but with reward – vv. 54-60

During the Great Schism the Roman Church was in turmoil, with competing Popes and pagan priests. Jan Hus shared the Gospel at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague but his criticism of corruption leaders brought anger from church authorities. He was taken to the Council of Constance to answer charges. Despite a pledge of safety, he was tried without a defense. Declared a heretic, on July 6, 1415, Hus was burned at the stake. His final words? “*Lord Jesus Christ, gladly and in humility will I bear this shameful and cruel death for the sake Thy holy Gospel. Forgive my enemies....Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy upon me.*” (**Heroes Of The Faith**, James C. Hefley, Moody Press, 1963, 74)

What were Stephen’s last words? They convey the “language of heaven” which is common to martyrs.

- **Eyes upon eternity:** “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” – v. 56
- **Rest in Redeemer:** “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit – v. 59
- **Concern for captors:** “Do not hold this sin against them” – v. 60

Though Stephen was the first Christian martyr, his experience is similar through centuries of Church history. There are similarities in the unjust punishment. And there are similarities in the way godly people have shown such unimaginable calm in the face of death. What accounts for this?

The presence and power of the Holy Spirit is the answer. What did we learn about Stephen in Acts 6:8? He was “a man full of God’s grace and power.” The same indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit completely transforms the ultimate human rejection into the greatest divine reward. For Stephen, this was foreshadowed at the close of Acts 6 – “*they saw that his face was like the face of an angel*” (v.15).

Conclusion - see Digging Deeper
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According to Acts 8:1-3, not only was Stephen’s death mourned, but it proved to be a pivot point for the Church. His martyrdom launched a persecution of believers, and the followers of Jesus were scattered. Where? To Judea and Samaria! This is the point at which the **ripples** are moving beyond Jerusalem.

Church historian Donald Durnbaugh notes that when corrupt church leaders in Constance executed Jan Hus, “*they ignited a fuse which set off repeated explosions throughout Central Europe.*” (**The Believers’ Church**, Herald Press, 1985, 52) God’s plan of redemption has always been under attack. But Jesus has set the pattern – suffering turns to victory. He has promised upon the truth of who He is and His work, “*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” (Matthew 16:18)