

# The Acts of the Holy Spirit and the early church

## June 29<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 Stephen's message, Part 14

### Angelic delivery of the law & the stoning of Stephen



**Acts 7:53-57a, New Living Trans.**  
*You deliberately disobeyed God's law, even though you received it from the hands of angels." The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage.*

*But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus*

*standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand! "Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting.*

The message of Stephen has reached its climax along with the patience of the members of the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin. Stephen has defended himself with the assistance of the Holy Spirit in defeating the claims that he spoke against either the Temple of God, or of Moses, or of the Holy city of Jerusalem. After going through the basic history of the Jewish people, Stephen literally puts the death of Jesus and of the Prophets of God on their heads.

And so the thing climaxes out in a fantastic indictment where they are the blasphemers, not Stephen. And it's a masterpiece of a sermon. And by the time that comes out, they are in fury. They are in frenzy. And contrasted to their fury and their rage and their frenzy is the majestic calm of Stephen. He stands there serene, absolutely in control, sustained by the Lord, while they are torn into shreds.

And really what it boils down to, in a general sense, is the contrast between a hostile, Christ-hating world and the gentle, loving, Spirit-filled servant of God who confronts that world. The world gives its worst, while the Christian shows his best. Stephen had confronted the world boldly, dynamically. He said the things that needed to be said, even though they were painful to the Jewish leadership. Although Stephen might have suspected this speech was going to cost him his life, he nevertheless said it because he was firmly under the control of the Holy Spirit.

## Receiving the law from Angels:

**Acts 7:53 King James Version**

*Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.*

There has been much diversity of opinion in regard to this phrase, the disposition of Angels. The word translated "disposition" does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament, however here it properly means the **"constituting" or "arranging" of an army; disposing it into ranks and proper divisions.** Hence, it has been supposed to mean that the Law was given **"amidst" the various ranks of angels, being present to witness its promulgation.** Not that it was physically given through the voice of any Angelic beings.

### **Galatians 3:19 (NLT)**

*Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised. God gave his law through angels to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people.*

All that the expression fairly implies is that the Law was given amidst the attending ranks of angels, as if they were summoned to witness the pomp and ceremony of giving "law" to an entire people, and through them to an entire world.

### **Deuteronomy 33:1-2 (NASB)**

*Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death. He said, "The Lord came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.*

It should be added, moreover, that the Jews applied the word "angels" to any messengers of God; to fire, and tempest, and wind, etc. as noted in Scripture:

### **Psalms 104:1-4 (NLT)**

*Let all that I am praise the Lord. O Lord my God, how great you are! You are robed with honor and majesty. You are dressed in a robe of light. You stretch out the starry curtain of the heavens; You lay out the rafters of your home in the rain clouds. You make the clouds your chariot; you ride upon the wings of the wind. The winds are your messengers; flames of fire are your servants.*

And all that Stephen means here may be to express the common Jewish opinion that God was attended on this occasion by the heavenly hosts, and by the symbols of his presence, fire, and smoke, and tempest. Now there are other places which the Bible declares that the Law was spoken by an angel, one eminent above all attending angels, the special messenger of God.

### **Acts 7:38 (NLT)**

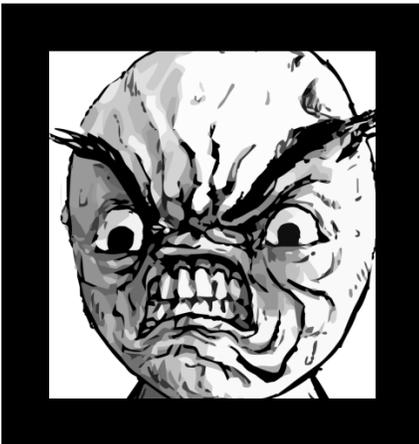
*Moses was with our ancestors, the Assembly of God's people in the wilderness, when the angel spoke to him at Mount Sinai. And there Moses received life-giving words to pass on to us.*

We see that Stephen spoke only the common sentiment of what the Jews had grown up believing. It justly gave increased majesty and solemnity to the Law that it had been given in so grand and imposing circumstances as how God had given it to the world. But we see from their actions and attitudes against Stephen that they understood exactly what he was saying, that even

though God gave the law to all and it was witnessed by myriads of Angelic beings, they the ones given to protect the law, were specifically the ones who had not kept it! The late great theological mind of **John Calvin** writes the following on these Angels:

**And his meaning is, that the angels were the messengers of God, and his witnesses in publishing the law, that the authority thereof might be firm and stable. Therefore, forasmuch as God did call the angels to be, as it were, solemn witnesses when he gave the Jews his law, the same angels shall be witnesses of their unfaithfulness.**

## **Anger beyond measure:**



The message was too much to bear. Just as they had done before with God's prophets of the past, they once again rejected God's spokesman. They would do away with him in an effort to do away with his message and His so called Messiah.

The description of the crowds is one of near insanity. They were quite literally out of their minds. Logic and reason would have agreed with Stephen, for his message was merely a recitation of the Old Testament. But they would have none of it nor of him, it was time to put an end to this man's accusation of us as being murders! Look at how the descriptions vary between some of the

translators:

### **New International Version**

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were **furious** and gnashed their teeth at him.

### **New Living Translation**

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they **shook their fists at him in rage.**

### **English Standard Version**

Now when they heard these things they were **enraged**, and they ground their teeth at him.

### **New American Standard Bible**

Now when they heard this, they were **cut to the quick**, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

### **King James Bible**

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

You see, at first when they listened to him, "Oh, yeah, he's right, sure," and they were nodding, probably, because all he was doing was reciting their history, and they had to agree. And he did that purposely, to keep their attention. But then as the drift of the argument became clear, their interest began to change, and pretty soon it turned into horror, and then it turned into fury.

And they were cut to the heart by now. They were visibly shaken and metaphorically they were sawn in half in their heart. The great saw of conviction had ripped them right through the middle, and they knew everything he said was true, and they were ripped apart.

Grinding your teeth at someone is the picture of rage mixed with frustration. They didn't know how to give vent to their wrath. And so they just stood there and ground their teeth at him. And, you know, I couldn't help but read that, "they gnashed on him with their teeth," and think they were already in a little bit of hell. Because that's how many people are going to spend forever, just grinding their teeth in fury at God. Although that sounds harsh, look what the Bible says about it:

**Luke 13:23-28 (NASB)**

*And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.'*

*Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.' In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out.*

The Jewish nation had waited all along for the kingdom. They had dreamed of the kingdom. The King came, offered them the kingdom, and what did they do to the King? They killed the King. They forfeited the kingdom. Jesus says, "You're going to spend forever grinding your teeth at God when you see you didn't get into the kingdom."

Hell is going to be full of people forever gnashing their teeth at God in fury. And these people were already so hell-oriented that they were already that far along that when they faced the truth of Christ again, they got mad. And you know something? This tells us a little bit about the kind of anger it is, because they could've repented. But they didn't. It's not the kind of anger that leads to repentance. It's the kind of anger that remains bitter and hateful.

Jesus had offered grace upon grace upon grace. Stephen came along and said, "You've rejected it so long, you've had it." And that only made them all the more furious, and so they began to grind their teeth. Hell is going to be full of people who are very, very angry. These people had heard the truth. They had heard Jesus. They had seen His miracles. They had heard the apostles. They'd seen their miracles.

They'd heard the witness of the early church, the message and the miracles of Peter and John, the message, the miracles of Stephen. They had seen it all, and they had rejected and rejected and rejected. And Stephen here is simply now not inviting them anymore, but indicting them. And the point of his sermon here is to bring about judgment. That's why you don't hear any invitation in it. It's indictment. It's giving a basis for judgment.

In their madness, they were speechless with rage. They couldn't even find words to give vent to their burning hatred. All they could do in their frenzy was grind their teeth, an expression of impotent rage, of inexpressible frustration. And I don't think this was a sudden outburst. I think it was a growing thing that gradually grew higher and higher as Stephen continued to speak, and actually it never died away until Stephen lay before them, horribly mangled, blood-spattered and dead. And Stephen being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven." Isn't it a beautiful contrast! They were completely ripped apart & torn up, while Stephen was all together peaceful, for he was full of the Holy Spirit.

## Seeing Jesus at the right hand of God the Father:



### Acts 7:55 (NLT)

*But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand.*

And to be filled with the Spirit simply means to be controlled by the Spirit, yielded to Him. That's all it means. And Stephen was controlled by the Spirit. And because the Spirit was in control, you see, the normal reactions didn't take over. You and I might have felt extreme fear and trepidation, but not him.

Since the Spirit was in control of his life Stephen responded in a godly, trusting, faithful fashion.

**Albert Barnes**, the noted theologian from the mid 1800's, residing in New York, published his notes and commentary on the Bible, of which the following is taken from:

**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. When dangers threaten us, our hope of**

**safety lies in heaven. When people threaten our persons, reputation, or lives, it becomes us to fix our eyes on the heavenly world; and we shall not look in vain.**

Even though the surroundings and the circumstances were violent and chaotic, it was a time of great intimacy and communion with God. Stephen was enabled to see the heavens opened and to see the Savior standing at God's right hand, ready to receive him into His presence. The grim scene around Stephen faded away in the light of the glory of God before him. As Stephen spoke of these things, the crowds went wild. All pretenses of "due process" and of a "legal trial" were swept aside.

### **1 Peter 4:12-14 (NASB)**

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

We see that the situation got tough, so he looked to the Lord. That's the only place to look. He had sight, but he'd always had pretty good spiritual sight ever since he met Christ, but this was something like he'd never had before. There are only a few in Scripture that actually got a glimpse right into heaven.

### **Ezekiel 1:1 (NASB)**

*Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.*

### **Isaiah 6:1-3 (NASB)**

*In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."*

Now the great apostle Paul, John, the disciple that Jesus loved, so there've been a few that saw the glory of God, and now here's Stephen. And he looks up, and he sees the glory of God. You see, God only manifests Himself in His glory, light, the Shekinah Glory of God. He saw that Shekinah Glory, and to the right of the Shekinah was Jesus, standing.

He saw what he wanted to see. He didn't look in vain. God gave him a glorious revelation. Now there is something interesting about the position of Christ at the time of this vision. Notice what the book of Hebrews states:

### **Hebrews 1:1-4 New American Standard Bible**

*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, **He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.*

Notice that something is interesting here. When Jesus went to heaven, to the right of the Father, and He sat down." So one must ask the question, "What's He doing standing up?" Well, He sat down in terms of redemption, but He always gets up when His children get in trouble. The commentaries of **Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset & David Brown** were originally published in 1871 and contain some great understanding and insight on the Holy Scriptures, here is there take on Stephen noticing Jesus Standing:

**Why "standing," and not sitting, the posture in which the glorified Savior is elsewhere represented? Clearly, to express the eager interest with which He watched from the skies the scene in that council chamber, and the full tide of His Spirit which He was at that moment engaged in pouring into the heart of His heroic witness, till it beamed in radiance from his very countenance.**

Somebody said He stands up to help the saints and welcome them home. Maybe He was standing up ready to greet Stephen, as well as help him. **Dr. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in California as well as head of the (Grace to You radio and print ministries)** writes:

**Jesus is seated in terms of His redemptive work. It is accomplished. He is standing in the sense of His sustaining high priestly work. That's still going on, you see? So He gets up to help His own. Stephen looks up and He's standing up. That indicates action, doesn't it? He didn't look up and see Him sitting there resting. He saw Him standing up. "Stephen, I'm coming to your rescue."**