

Acts chapter 7 records the longest sermon in the book of Acts—and it comes from a man who was not an apostle, but a servant who started out “*waiting tables*.” Stephen was chosen to help oversee food distribution, but God was also preparing him to bear powerful witness to Jesus, even to the point of death.

This chapter is not just history; it is a warning, a model of courage, and an invitation. Stephen shows us how easy it is to resist God while thinking we are defending Him, and how a believer can face opposition with a Spirit-filled, Christlike heart.

1. Stephen’s setting: from serving tables to standing on trial

In Acts chapter 6 we learned that a dispute arose in the early church. Greek-speaking Jewish believers felt their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The apostles wisely asked the church to select seven men:

- Of good reputation
- Full of the Holy Spirit
- Full of wisdom

Stephen was one of these seven (Acts 6:3–5). He began in what many would consider a “practical” ministry—serving food and caring for widows. But he was also:

“full of faith and power, [and] did great wonders and signs among the people.” (Acts 6:8)

Opposition came from members of a synagogue who could not “*resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke*” (Acts 6:10), so they resorted to lies. They accused Stephen of:

- Blaspheming God
- Speaking against Moses
- Speaking against the temple and the law
- Saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change their customs

Stephen is brought before the council, and everyone there sees “his face as the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). That is where Acts chapter 7 begins:

“Then the high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’” (Acts 7:1)

2. Stephen’s review of Israel’s history (Acts 7:2–50)

Instead of defending himself point by point, Stephen walks them through their own story. He shows them that their problem with Jesus is not new; it fits a pattern in their history.

a. Abraham: God’s call and promise (Acts 7:2–8)

Stephen starts with Abraham, the father of their nation:

- God appeared to Abraham and called him to leave his country and family.

- God promised to give his descendants the land, even though Abraham himself owned only a burial cave in it.
- God told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land, oppressed for four hundred years, and then God would bring them out.

Stephen reminds them that God's presence and promises were never tied to a building. God met Abraham before there was a temple, before there was even a land in their possession.

b. Joseph: the rejected brother whom God exalted (Acts 7:9–16)

Next Stephen speaks of Joseph:

“And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt; but God was with him.” (Acts 7:9)

- Joseph's brothers, their “fathers,” rejected him because of jealousy.
- They sold him as a slave into Egypt.
- But God was with Joseph, delivered him from his troubles, and made him ruler under Pharaoh.
- During the famine, Jacob and the rest of the family eventually came to Egypt and were saved through the very brother they had rejected.

Stephen's point is clear: their fathers rejected the one whom God had chosen and later had to bow before him to receive life.

c. Moses: rejected twice by the people he came to deliver (Acts 7:17–43)

Then Stephen moves to Moses, whom they claim to revere:

- Moses was miraculously preserved at birth and raised in Pharaoh's household.
- At forty years old he visited his fellow Israelites and saw one being oppressed by an Egyptian. Moses defended him and killed the Egyptian.
- Stephen says Moses “supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand” (Acts 7:25).

The next day Moses tried to reconcile two Israelites who were fighting, but the guilty man pushed him away:

“Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” (Acts 7:27)

Moses fled to Midian, lived there forty years, and then God appeared to him in the burning bush:

“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.” (Acts 7:34)

Stephen emphasizes:

“This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer.” (Acts 7:35)

Their fathers rejected the very man God chose to deliver them—twice. First when he was forty, and even later in the wilderness:

- They refused to obey Moses.
- In their hearts they turned back to Egypt.
- They asked Aaron to make idols and rejoiced in the work of their own hands (Acts 7:39–41).
- God gave them over to idolatry, and they carried idols like Molech and Remphan (Acts 7:42–43).

Stephen is quietly but firmly showing a pattern: God raises a deliverer, and the people resist him.

d. The tabernacle and the temple: God is bigger than buildings (Acts 7:44–50)

Stephen then addresses the tabernacle and temple:

- Their fathers had the tabernacle in the wilderness, made according to the pattern God showed Moses (Acts 7:44).
- Joshua brought it into the land.
- David desired to build a house for God.
- Solomon built the temple.

Then Stephen quotes Scripture to show that God is not confined to a building:

*“However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:
‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool.
What house will you build for Me? says the Lord,
Or what is the place of My rest?
Has My hand not made all these things?’”* (Acts 7:48–50)

Stephen is not despising the temple; he is saying what their own Scriptures say: God is greater than any building. His presence cannot be contained by stone walls or religious structures.

Application for believers:

It is easy to honor our religious history, buildings, and traditions, yet miss what God is doing right in front of us. We can cling to forms and miss the living God those forms were meant to point to. Ask yourself:

- Do I value my church’s traditions more than I value obeying the Lord today?
- Do I equate buildings and programs with God’s presence, or do I remember that He dwells in His people by the Holy Spirit?
- Am I open to God confronting my heart even if it makes me uncomfortable?

3. Stephen's bold indictment (Acts 7:51–53)

After patiently telling their story, Stephen brings the application home:

“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.” (Acts 7:51)

They boast in their circumcision and their fathers, but Stephen says their hearts and ears are uncircumcised. They resist the Holy Spirit just like their ancestors did.

He continues:

“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, who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.” (Acts 7:52–53)

In other words:

- Their fathers persecuted and killed the prophets who announced the coming of the Messiah.
- Now they have gone even further—they betrayed and killed the Messiah Himself, Jesus, the “Just One.”
- They boast in receiving the law, but they have not kept it.

Stephen, the one on trial, has now become the accuser—lovingly but truthfully exposing their guilt before God.

Challenge for believers:

Before we shake our heads at the council, we need to ask:

- Where am I resisting the Holy Spirit?
- Where am I reading Scripture but refusing to obey it?
- Do I defend my traditions and personal preferences more fiercely than I defend the truth about Jesus?

God is not impressed by religious traditions, the theology of men, or pride. He is looking for hearts that are humble, responsive, and willing to repent when His Word confronts us.

4. Stephen's vision and martyrdom (Acts 7:54–59)

The council's response is intense:

“When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.” (Acts 7:54)

Instead of repenting when they are convicted, they harden their hearts.

Stephen's response is entirely different:

“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.” (Acts 7:55)

He says:

“Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56)

This is the final straw. They shout, stop their ears, rush at him, and drag him out of the city to stone him (Acts 7:57–58). The witnesses lay their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul—who will later meet the risen Christ and become the apostle Paul.

As the stones strike Stephen, he prays:

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” (Acts 7:59)

Then, kneeling down:

“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” (Acts 7:60)

Luke says, “And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). That is how the Bible sometimes describes the death of a believer—falling asleep in Christ, because death is not the end.

In Stephen’s death we clearly see the life of Jesus reflected:

- Like Jesus, he entrusts his spirit to God.
- Like Jesus, he prays for those who are killing him.
- Like Jesus, he bears witness to the truth even when it costs him his life.

Application for believers:

Stephen’s example presses some searching questions:

- Am I willing to speak truth even when it is unpopular or costly?
- When I am mistreated, do I respond with bitterness or with forgiveness?
- Do I see my life and my death as belonging to Jesus?

The courage Stephen shows did not come from natural boldness. It came from being “full of the Holy Spirit,” rooted in the story of God’s Word, and utterly convinced that Jesus is alive and reigning at the right hand of God.

A challenge for believers

Acts chapter 7 calls believers to examine ourselves honestly:

1. Be faithful in “small” things.

Stephen did not start as a famous preacher. He started by serving widows. Are you willing to serve in quiet, hidden ways, trusting God to use you as He sees fit?

2. **Let Scripture shape your perspective.**

Stephen read Israel's history through the lens of God's heart and God's promises. Do you let the Bible interpret your life, or do you twist it to fit your preferences?

3. **Do not resist the Holy Spirit.**

When God convicts you through His Word, do you harden your heart like the council, or humble yourself and repent?

4. **Be ready to suffer with a Christlike spirit.**

Not every believer will face martyrdom, but all who follow Jesus will face some form of opposition. Will you respond like Stephen—with your eyes on Jesus, your heart free from hate, and your lips ready to pray even for your enemies?

Ask the Lord to fill you with the same Spirit, courage, and grace that Stephen displayed.

An invitation to those who do not yet know Christ

Stephen's message, and his death, confront us with a crucial truth: it is possible to be religious, informed, and proud of your spiritual heritage—and still be resisting God.

The leaders who condemned Stephen knew the Scriptures. They honored Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the prophets. But when the One the prophets announced finally came—Jesus of Nazareth—they rejected Him.

The good news is that Jesus came precisely because we have resisted God and have broken His law. He took our sins upon Himself and went to the cross. There He shed His blood for you—for every careless word, every selfish choice, every hidden sin. On the third day God raised Him from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

Now God calls all people everywhere to repent and believe the good news:

- To turn from sin and self-rule
- To trust in Jesus and what He did on the cross
- To receive forgiveness, a new heart, and the gift of the Holy Spirit

You do not have to clean yourself up first. You come as you are, but you do not stay as you are. When you trust in Jesus, He begins a real work of transformation in your life.

If you sense God tugging at your heart, you can respond to Him right now. Your own words are best, but you might pray along these lines:

"Lord God, I see that I have resisted You and gone my own way. I confess that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins, shedding His blood for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I confess that He is Lord. I turn from my sin and ask You to forgive me. Please take my life, change my heart, and teach me to follow You. I place my trust in Jesus Christ alone as my Savior and Lord."

If you truly turn to Him, He will not turn you away. The risen Lord who stood to receive Stephen will receive you, forgive you, and make you His own.