

THE WAY, SESSION 5

# I See the Heavens Opened

*The Acts of the Apostles 6:8-8:3, Stephen, the First Martyr, and the Prayer That Won a Persecutor*

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# Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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## Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** Participants discover that Stephen's long speech is not a history lecture but a prosecution brief with two arguments woven through Israel's whole story: God has never been confined to one land or one building, and Israel has always rejected the deliverers God sent, at first. They then watch the first martyr die in deliberate conformity to his Master, prayer answering prayer, and discover what the Fathers dared to see in his final prayer: a fruit the Church still lives on.

**Catholic Touchstone.** Martyrdom and the power of intercession. Stephen, a deacon ordained in last session's chapter, becomes the protomartyr, and martyrdom is the supreme witness to the truth of the faith, borne even unto death (CCC 2473). His dying prayers repeat his Lord's from the cross, and Augustine and Fulgentius both saw Paul's conversion as a fruit of that intercession for his killers, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60), offered over the young man minding the coats. St. Augustine preached the equation plainly: if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul.

## What You Need to Know

Stephen's speech is the longest in Acts, and many readers get lost in it, so give your group the key before they enter: it is a defense speech that becomes an indictment. Stephen is charged with speaking against the temple and the law (6:13-14). Instead of denying it, he retells Israel's story to prove two theses. First, God's presence has never been confined to the holy land or a building: He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, to Joseph in Egypt, to Moses in Midian at a bush of all things, and traveled with Israel in a tent. Second, Israel has consistently rejected the men God sent to save her, on the first encounter: Joseph sold by his brothers, Moses refused ("who made you a ruler and a judge?") before being sent back as ruler and deliverer. The pattern aims at one conclusion, which Stephen finally states out loud: you have now rejected and murdered the Righteous One Himself (7:52).

Note where Stephen becomes most delicate and most dangerous: the temple (7:44-50). The tabernacle was made at God's command, after God's own pattern; Solomon built the house; "yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," and Stephen seals it with Isaiah 66:1-2. Prepare the steelman here, because this text is regularly aimed at Catholic churches and tabernacles, and the honest answer is rich.

Luke frames Stephen with Jesus deliberately, and your group should find the parallels themselves: a trial before the council, false witnesses, a charge about destroying the temple, a Son of Man saying, a dying surrender of spirit, a dying plea for the killers' forgiveness, and burial by devout men. The disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when fully taught will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). Stephen is the first fully taught man in Acts.

The vision (7:55-56) deserves slow attention: Stephen sees the Son of Man *standing* at God's right hand, the one New Testament passage that explicitly depicts Jesus standing at God's right hand after the Ascension. The Dig Deeper box explores why. And do not let the group miss verse 58: the witnesses lay their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, who approves of the killing (8:1). The scattering that follows carries the seed of Sessions 6 and 7: "they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria" (8:1), the exact second circle of Acts 1:8. Persecution does not stop the map; it advances it.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

**Genesis 37 and 45 (Joseph).** Rejected and sold by his brothers, exalted among the Gentiles, and revealed to his brothers *the second time* as their savior (7:13). Stephen's first case study in the rejected deliverer, and a

quiet portrait of Christ: rejected by His own, exalted among the nations, to be recognized by Israel at the second encounter.

**Exodus 2-3 (Moses).** Refused by his own people on the first attempt ("who made you a ruler and a judge over us?"), then sent back by God as exactly that, "ruler and deliverer" (7:35). Stephen also quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, the prophet like Moses, tying his speech to Peter's sermon from Session 3.

**Isaiah 66:1-2.** "Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool; what house will you build for me?" Stephen's clinching citation, and words spoken over the temple by Israel's own prophet, not by Stephen. The critique of presumption about God's house is not Stephen's innovation; it is Israel's own Scripture.

**Daniel 7:13-14, again.** Stephen sees "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." This is the third time our study has stood before Daniel's throne vision, after the Ascension in Session 1 and Peter's Psalm 110 in Session 2. The enthroned Son of Man is not an idea for Stephen. He is looking at Him.

## VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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**St. Augustine of Hippo**, Sermon on St. Stephen (5th century)

Preaching on the feast of Stephen, St. Augustine drew a straight line from the martyr's last prayer to the Church's greatest missionary: if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul. The stones that struck Stephen were answered by the intercession he offered while they struck, and Augustine bids us see Paul's whole apostolate as the fruit of a dying man's prayer for his enemies.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. Fulgentius of Ruspe**, Sermon on St. Stephen (6th century, read in the Liturgy of the Hours for December 26)

St. Fulgentius says that love was Stephen's weapon, and by it he was everywhere victorious: love of God that did not yield to the raging council, and love of neighbor that interceded for the very men stoning him. Stephen went first, slain by the stones of Saul's helpers, and Paul followed after, helped on his way by Stephen's prayer, so that now, Fulgentius delights to say, the two rejoice together where there is no envy.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. John Chrysostom**, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles (4th century)

Chrysostom pauses over the detail Luke plants before the speech has even begun: the whole council looked hard at Stephen and saw his face "like the face of an angel" (6:15). Grace shone in the martyr's very countenance, and the men who would soon gnash their teeth at him (7:54) had to look at it first. Take from that what this guide asks you to take: rage can counterfeit conviction, but it cannot counterfeit peace, and the serenity of the martyr is the Spirit's own signature on his testimony.

## Catechism Connection

**CCC 2473-2474.** Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith; the martyr bears witness to Christ, who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity, enduring death through an act of fortitude. The Church has painstakingly collected the records of the martyrs from the beginning.

**CCC 2844.** Christian prayer extends to the forgiveness of enemies; the martyrs of yesterday and today bear this witness to Jesus. Forgiveness is the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father.

**CCC 659-664, revisited.** Stephen's vision confirms what we discovered in Session 1: the Ascension placed the Son of Man at the right hand of God in Daniel's sense, reigning. The first martyr dies gazing at the enthronement the first session discovered.

## Thread Watch

### THREAD WATCH

**Thread 1, The Name.** Hold steady. Something happens to this thread in two sessions that you must not spoil. Tonight the movement is still nameless, and its first member dies for the Name he confesses.

**Thread 2, The Map.** The hinge turns tonight: "they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria" (8:1). Read Acts 1:8 aloud beside it and let the group see the second circle open, driven not by a mission strategy but by persecution. God steers even the storm.

**Thread 3, Peter First.** Notably quiet tonight: for the first time, the stage belongs to someone outside the Twelve, a deacon ordained last session. Note the silence in your own preparation; the structure of chapter 6 is already bearing fruit beyond the apostles.

**Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread.** Quiet. Let it rest.

**New name to file: Saul.** Introduced with terrible economy at 7:58 and 8:1-3, consenting, coat-minding, then ravaging the church house by house. Say nothing about his future. If anyone connects him to Gamaliel's student from last session's Dig Deeper, smile and move on.

## Session Goals

1. Participants can state the two theses of Stephen's speech and trace each through his Joseph and Moses case studies.
2. Participants discover the deliberate parallels between Stephen's death and Christ's, and can articulate martyrdom as conformity to Christ.
3. Participants can answer the strongest use of Acts 7:48 against Catholic churches, tabernacles, and the Eucharistic presence.
4. Participants discover the causal line the Fathers drew from Stephen's dying intercession to Saul, and can explain what it teaches about praying for enemies.
5. Participants each name one persecutor or difficult person for whom they will pray daily this week.

## Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. The speech is long; do not read all of Acts 7 aloud in the meeting. Assign the survey reading as marked in question 2 and trust the take-home reading they did this week. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the church in the wilderness, (3) compress question 3 (Joseph) and let question 4 (Moses) carry the rejected-deliverer pattern alone. Do not cut the steelman or questions 8 through 10; the death scene is the session.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, you gave your first martyr a face like an angel and a heart that prayed for his killers while they killed him. Open the heavens over this table tonight. Teach us Israel's story as Stephen told it, give us his sight, and if we cannot yet love our enemies, give us at least the desire to pray for them. Amen.

### Win (15 minutes)

1. Who is the most peaceful person you have ever seen under pressure, and what did their calm do to everyone around them?
2. Have you ever rejected something or someone at first that you later recognized as exactly what you needed? What blinded you the first time?

### Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 6:8-15. What is Stephen doing when the trouble starts, what are the charges against him, and what one detail does Luke give us about his face? Where have we heard charges like these before?

#### ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Stephen, full of grace and power, is working wonders and winning disputes; his opponents, unable to withstand his wisdom and the Spirit, arrange false witnesses. The charges: he speaks against this holy place and the law, and claims Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs. These are almost exactly the false charges brought against Jesus (Mark 14:57-58). And in the middle of it, the council sees his face "like the face of an angel": the serenity of a man full of the Spirit, which no amount of rage can counterfeit. Luke is already telling us this trial will run parallel to another one.

2. Stephen answers with the longest speech in Acts, a guided tour of Israel's story. Here is the key before we enter: it is a defense that becomes an indictment, built on two repeated arguments. As we survey it, hunt for them. Skim Acts 7:2-8 (Abraham) and 7:9-16 (Joseph) now. Where is God when He appears to Abraham? What happens to Joseph, and when do his brothers finally recognize him?

#### ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God appears to Abraham in Mesopotamia, before he ever set foot in the holy land, and Abraham dies owning not a foot of it. Joseph is rejected and sold by his own brothers, and God is "with him" in Egypt, of all places, exalting him among the Gentiles; his brothers recognize him only "at the second visit" (7:13). Both of Stephen's theses are already running: God's presence is not confined to the land or any building, and the deliverer is rejected by his own at the first encounter, recognized at the second. Keep both running as the speech continues.

3. Read Acts 7:23-29 and 7:35-38, the Moses section. How is Moses received the first time he tries to help his people, and how does Stephen describe his second coming to them? What title does Stephen quote from Deuteronomy?

#### ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The first time, Moses is refused: "who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" Forty years later God sends him

back as exactly that, "ruler and deliverer," by the hand of the angel in the bush. Stephen then quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, the prophet like Moses whom God will raise up, the same text Peter preached in Session 3. The pattern has a name now: Israel rejects her God-sent deliverer at the first encounter and receives him at the second. Stephen is one step from saying the quiet part aloud: you have just done it again, to the Deliverer Himself.

4. Read Acts 7:44-50. Stephen finally reaches the temple, the subject of the charges. Trace his logic: tent, house, and then the Isaiah quotation. What exactly is Stephen saying about the temple, and what is he not saying?

**ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

He honors the tabernacle as made at God's command, after the pattern God showed Moses, and he reports Solomon's house without a word against it. Then the turn: "yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," sealed with Isaiah 66:1-2, heaven is my throne, earth my footstool, what house will you build for me? Stephen is not condemning the temple God commanded; he is condemning the presumption that God is contained by it, owned through it, or bound to defend it regardless of Israel's heart. Isaiah said it about the very house God had commanded, and Israel kept the words in her own Scripture. The building was always a gift and a sign, never a cage for God or a talisman for men.

**Build the steelman.** This text has a long career in arguments against Catholicism, and the strong form deserves a fair hearing: if "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," what are Catholics doing building sanctuaries, consecrating altars, and above all keeping a tabernacle with a burning lamp and claiming that Christ is *there*, localized, in the Blessed Sacrament? Does not the Catholic tabernacle repeat the exact mistake Stephen died correcting, shrinking the God whom heaven cannot contain into a gold box? Jesus Himself said true worshipers worship in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24). Let the objection stand at full strength before pressing.

5. Press question one. Solomon himself, dedicating the first temple, faced this exact question. Read 1 Kings 8:10-11 and 8:27-30. How does Solomon hold together "heaven cannot contain you" with "my eyes will be open toward this house"? What does that tell us about how Israel always understood God's dwelling?

**ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Solomon says both truths in one breath: "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house," and yet he begs God to set His name and His eyes there and to hear the prayers offered toward it, and he prays it in a house God had already filled with His glory, the cloud so thick the priests could not stand to minister (8:10-11). Israel never believed the temple contained God the way a jar contains water; she believed God freely chose to be *findable* there, really present in a place, without ceasing to fill heaven and earth. Presence by gift, not by containment. Stephen's target is the presumption that reverses the gift into a possession, not the gift itself, which God commanded.

6. Press question two. Now bring the question forward. Read John 1:14 and John 2:19-21. What did God do with the whole logic of the tabernacle in the Incarnation, and what does that mean for the Catholic tabernacle?

**ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and John's verb is literally *tabernacled* among us; and Jesus called His own body the temple. God's definitive answer to "what house will you build for me?" was to build one Himself, out of our humanity. A real, substantial, sacramental presence is not paganism; it is the

Incarnation's own logic, God freely making Himself findable in our world without ceasing to be infinite. And note precisely what the Church does and does not claim. She does not claim that Christ is shut into the tabernacle the way a body fills a space; that is the objector's word, "localized," and it is not ours. Christ is present by way of substance, whole and entire under the sacramental signs, whole under each species and whole in every fragment, which is exactly why He is not divided by being present on ten thousand altars at once. He is not contained; He is given. The Eucharistic presence continues exactly that logic: not the Church trapping God in a box, but God extending the gift of His findable presence, under signs He chose, until He comes. The lamp by the tabernacle confesses the same two truths Solomon did: heaven cannot contain Him, and He is here. An honest concession completes the answer: Stephen's warning still binds Catholics. Any church, devotion, or tabernacle treated as a talisman while the heart resists the Holy Spirit falls under his indictment, as Israel's temple did (Jeremiah 7:4-11). The cure for superstition is not absence but reverence.

7. Read Acts 7:51-53, the moment the defense becomes the verdict. What does Stephen finally accuse the council of, and how does his accusation complete the pattern his whole speech was building?

**ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

"You stiff-necked people... you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you." Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who announced the Righteous One, "whom you have now betrayed and murdered." The Joseph pattern and the Moses pattern land on the present tense: Israel has rejected the Deliverer at the first encounter. And remember where the pattern points: the rejected one is recognized at the second visit. Stephen's indictment carries, hidden inside it, Israel's hope.

8. Read Acts 7:54-56. As the council rages, what does Stephen see, and what does he say? One detail of his vision is described this way nowhere else in the New Testament. Find it.

**ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Full of the Holy Spirit, he gazes into heaven and sees the glory of God, and Jesus at God's right hand, and he announces it by fusing Daniel's Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) with the Psalm's right hand (Psalm 110:1): "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." The unique detail: Jesus is *standing*. This is the one New Testament passage that explicitly shows Him standing at the right hand of God; everywhere else that scene is described, He is seated, enthroned. (Revelation does see the Lamb standing, Revelation 5:6 and 14:1, but never at the right hand.) For His first martyr, the King rises. The Dig Deeper box gathers the traditional readings of why, but let the group feel it first: the court below condemns Stephen; the Judge above stands for him.

9. Live discovery. Read Acts 7:57-60, then turn back to Luke 23:34 and 23:46. Set Stephen's two dying sentences beside his Master's. What do you find, and what is the one difference?

**ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION**

Jesus: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," and "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Stephen: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The martyr dies in striking verbal and spiritual conformity to his Master. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith, borne even unto death (CCC 2473), and here you can watch that witness take the shape of the disciple fully taught who has become like his teacher (Luke 6:40): not merely dying for Christ but dying like Him. The two prayers are parallel rather than identical, and the differences are worth naming. Jesus commits His spirit to the Father; Stephen asks *Jesus* to receive his. Jesus asks the Father to forgive; Stephen asks the Lord not to

hold the sin against them. The deepest change is the address. The first martyr's last breath is a prayer addressed to Christ as God. And Luke adds the gentlest verb in the chapter: "he fell asleep." For those in Christ, even a death by stoning has become sleep.

10. Look hard at Acts 7:58 and 8:1-3. Who is standing at the edge of this scene, what is his role, and what does he do next? Now hold this man in one hand and Stephen's final prayer in the other. What did the Fathers of the Church dare to conclude?

#### ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A young man named Saul, minding the witnesses' garments, consenting to the death, and then ravaging the church house by house, dragging off men and women to prison. The Fathers put the two facts together and drew the line without blinking: Stephen prayed, "do not hold this sin against them," and the most visible sinner present became the apostle to the nations. As St. Augustine preached, if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul. Intercession for enemies is not a beautiful sentiment; in Acts it is the most consequential prayer in the book. And notice the last verse of the scene (8:1): the persecution scatters the believers throughout Judea and Samaria, the exact second circle of Acts 1:8. The blood of the first martyr does not halt the mission. It ships it.

#### DIG DEEPER: WHY IS JESUS STANDING?

Christian tradition offers converging answers, all worth savoring. Jesus stands as a witness rises in court: the earthly tribunal condemns Stephen, and the heavenly Advocate rises to testify for him (cf. Luke 12:8, "every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God"). He stands as one rises to welcome an arriving guest: the King on His feet to receive the first of the martyrs home. And He stands as a champion stirred to act, the Head who feels the wounds of His members. Every reading says the same thing: heaven is not neutral about what happens to Christ's witnesses.

#### DIG DEEPER: THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

In 7:38 Stephen calls Israel at Sinai "the *ekklēsia* in the wilderness," the assembly, the same word the New Testament uses for the Church. The people of God gathered at the mountain, receiving living oracles through a mediator, is already, in seed, what Pentecost brought to flower. The Church did not begin as a rupture with Israel; she is Israel's own assembly, gathered now around the prophet like Moses.

### Send (15 minutes)

1. Stephen prayed aloud for his killers, in the moment, at full cost. Who is your Saul, the person who has genuinely wounded you or who most opposes your faith? Are you willing to pray for that person daily this week, by name, using Stephen's own words?
2. The council could not answer Stephen's peace. When people watch you under pressure, criticism, or unfair treatment, what do they see, and what would need to change in your prayer for them to see "the face of an angel"?

### Live It This Week

One assignment, and it is the hardest one this study will ever give you. Choose your Saul: the person who has hurt you, mocked your faith, or stands furthest from God among the people you know. Every day this week, pray Stephen's prayer for that person by name: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," adding one sentence asking God to do for them what He did for the coat-minder. Do not tell them. Do not expect to feel warm. Stephen felt stones. Pray anyway, and let Augustine's arithmetic encourage you: one dying man's prayer for his enemies gave the Church thirteen epistles and half the book of Acts. Heaven has done more with less.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord Jesus, Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, receive our spirits as you received Stephen's: our fears, our grudges, our unfinished forgiveness. Give us love as our weapon, gentleness as our argument, and the stubborn hope that the people who wound your Church today may be her apostles tomorrow. St. Stephen, first of the martyrs, pray for us, and pray for those we named tonight. Amen.

### **Scripture Memory Verse**

"And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" (Acts 7:60)

## Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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Every passage used in Session 5, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

### PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 6:8-15 (charges; the face of an angel)
2. Acts 7:2-8 (Abraham); 7:9-16 (Joseph); 7:23-29, 35-38 (Moses)
3. Acts 7:44-50 (tent, house, Isaiah 66)
4. Acts 7:51-53 (the indictment)
5. Acts 7:54-60 (the vision and the stoning)
6. Acts 8:1-3 (Saul; the scattering)

### OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

7. Genesis 37; 45 (Joseph rejected, then recognized)
8. Exodus 2:11-15; 3:1-10 (Moses refused, then sent)
9. Deuteronomy 18:15 (the prophet like Moses)
10. Isaiah 66:1-2 (heaven is my throne)
11. 1 Kings 8:10-11, 27-30 (the glory fills the house; Solomon's both-and)
12. Jeremiah 7:4-11 (the temple as talisman)
13. Daniel 7:13-14 (the Son of Man, third visit)

### NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

14. Mark 14:57-58 (false witnesses against Jesus)
15. John 1:14; 2:19-21 (the Word tabernacled; the temple of His body)
16. John 4:21-24 (spirit and truth, steelman)
17. Luke 23:34, 46; Luke 6:40; Luke 12:8 (the Master's dying words; the fully taught disciple; the Son of Man acknowledges)

### CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 2473-2474; CCC 2844; CCC 659-664