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The Stoning of Stephen

7:54 to 8:4

31-33 AD

The events of Acts 3-8 transpire with mounting concern on the part of the Jews, and especially the Jewish authorities in Yerushalayim. The rising tension resulted in vigilante action taken against Stephen, and then an authorized effort under Rabbi Sha'ul to disrupt and destroy that new Messianic movement, involving persecution and even death of the believers. The persecution led various believers such as Philip to go to Samaria and bear witness of Yeshua.

The stoning of Stephen DIG: Why are Stephen's listeners so enraged? Stephen's death was illegal (John 18:31). What does that reveal about the desperation of the Great Sanhedrin? How is Stephen's death and Sha'ul's persecution an example of ADONAI using evil to fulfill His plan (1:8)? This begins a new phase in God's plan (1:8). How would you sum up the "Jerusalem phase" in Chapters 2 through 7?

REFLECT: What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you? Can you see now how God used it for good? Or, are you angry with Him? How is that working for you? It is best to understand who the enemy is, and it's not the Lord. It is the Adversary, the thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10a CSB). Peter's speech led to a mass conversion (2:14-41), while Stephen's led to his death. What does that teach us about success in your service of the Kosher King? What opportunities have you been given lately to profess the goodness and faithfulness of God? How have you handled these situations? How can you be better prepared next time to declare your witness of Him with more natural assurance?

The Sanhedrin no doubt listened to the earlier part of **Stephen's** speech with interest and agreement. After all, **he** was merely reciting the nation's history - a topic near and dear to **their hearts**. But as **his** meaning became increasingly clear, **they** began to grow more and more uncomfortable. **When they** heard **him** say that **they were stiff-necked and always resisting the Ruach ha-Kodesh (7:51), they were cut to the heart** (literally *sawed in half*). **And began gnashing their teeth at him (7:54)**. This foreshadows the stubborn generation of sinners to come. When **the fourth angel** pours out **his** bowl of wrath and

judgment during the Great Tribulation, sinners who **refuse to repent** will **gnaw their tongues in agony and curse God (Revelation 16:10b-11)**. Obviously **Stephen's** speech was designed to produce a reaction, as was **Peter's** speech when the crowd in the Temple compound was also **cut to the heart (2:37)**. **But** there the message produced repentance and faith, here it only produced rage and fury.¹⁵⁴ This was at least the third time **they** had heard the gospel presented (**4:8ff** and **5:27ff**), yet **their** anger only escalated and, like Pharaoh, **they** only continued to harden **their hearts**. People who reject **God's** grace and love will not feel remorse under **His** judgment. In fact, it will only make **them** angrier.

In contrast, the emphasis in **Stephen's** life was characterized **by fullness**. **He** was **full of the Ruach ha-Kodesh and wisdom (6:3 and 10)**, **full of faith (6:5)**, and **full of grace and power (6:8)**. In Scripture, to be **full of** means *to be controlled by*. **Stephen** was a **God-controlled man** yielded to **the Holy Spirit**, a **man** who sought to lead people to **Messiah**.¹⁵⁵

In the eye of the storm that was about to be unleashed, **he** remained calm, totally yielded to **the Spirit's** control. **The Ruach** produces the fruit of godly living in believer's daily lives. But, as **He** did for **Stephen**, **He** also provides a special grace and strength in times of crisis (**Luke 12:11-12; First Peter 4:14**). Believers, then, must not shy away from difficult situations. Like **Paul**, they can say: **I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong in Messiah (Second Corinthians 12:10)**. We must boldly acknowledge **Yeshua** in all situations and circumstances, knowing that **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** will grant us the grace to face the consequences with peace and joy.

In the midst of **his** circumstances, **Stephen gazed into heaven and saw God's Sh'khinah**, the visible manifestation of **God's** presence - **and Yeshua standing at the right hand of God (Psalm 110:1)**. Elsewhere in the B'rit Chadashah, **Yeshua** is described as being **seated at the right hand of God (Matthew 22:44, 24:64; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:11-12 and 12:2)**. **He** is **seated** in terms of **His** redemptive work, which is forever completed (**Hebrews 10:12**). **Stephen**, however, sees **Jesus** standing to show **His** concern for **him**. **He** also stands to welcome **Stephen** into **heaven**. **He** was one of only a few in Scripture blessed with a glimpse **into heaven**, along with **Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-3)**, **Ezeki'el (Ezeki'el 1:26-28)**, **Paul (Second Corinthians 12:2-4)**, and **John (Revelation 4:1ff)**.

As **Messiah** watched, **He** didn't miss a single nod of **Sha'ul's** head. **The Son of Man** was on **His** feet at the time. One can only imagine **His** mixed emotions as **He** looked at the two

key players in the Kingdom that day. **One** for **Him**; **one** against **Him**. **One** covered in blood; **the other** covered in a prayer shawl. **One** who could not save **himself** from men; **the other** who could not save **himself** from sin. **One** dead in the body but alive in spirit; **the other** alive in the body but dead in the spirit. **One** loved by **God**; and **the other** loved **God**.¹⁵⁶

And **he** said, “**Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God**” (7:55-56)! For **the Sanhedrin**, such a statement was the last straw, **their** tolerance for **the blasphemer** was exhausted. **Stephen’s** use of the phrase **Son of Man**, and it is used here for the last time in the B’rit Chadashah, may have been the sharpest dagger because it took **them** back to the trial of another prisoner. Like **Stephen**, false witnesses accused **Yeshua** of blasphemy, yet **He remained silent**. Finally in frustration, **the high priest** said to him, “**I charge you under oath by the living God; tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God. You have said so**, **Jesus replied. But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven** (Matthew 26:63-64). So for that so-called **blasphemy** of claiming to be **the Son of God** and **the Son of Man** who would **sit on God’s right hand**, **the** very same **Sanhedrin** members had crucified **Messiah**. **Stephen’s** vision and words describing who **he** saw threw the claim that **Yeshua** made right back in **their** faces. **Yeshua** claimed **He** would be at **the right hand of the Mighty One**; **Stephen** was asserting that **He** was there! Therefore, **the Sanhedrin** was once again on the horns of a dilemma. **They** had to either kill **Stephen** also, or admit that **they** were wrong and **Yeshua** wasn’t really demon possessed (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Ek - It is only by Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons, That This Fellow Drives Out Demons**). **The Sanhedrin** choose to silence the truth by killing **Stephen**.¹⁵⁷

They covered their ears; and crying out with a loud voice, they rushed at him like a mob **with one impulse** (7:57). This is hardly the behavior from **the Jewish Supreme Court**. It is not clear whether those who rushed at **Stephen** included some of **his** Greek-speaking accusers along with the angrier members of **the Sanhedrin** (which had not even delivered a verdict). In any chase, experienced jurists should have sensed the anger and taken steps to protect **Stephen** rather than joining in with the mob. Either **the Sanhedrin** had decided to get **Stephen** out of the way without an honest trial, or the judges allowed emotion to overrule reason after **his** inflammatory speech.



Driving him out of the city, they began stoning him (7:58a). Deuteronomy 17:2-7 states that **the stoning** was to take place **outside the city gates**, and **the witnesses** to the criminal act were to be **the first** to **stone** the convicted criminal. **Leviticus 24:24** makes the same point: **They took the blasphemer outside the camp and let all that heard him, lay their hands upon his head, and let all the congregation stone him.**¹⁵⁸

The Oral Law (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law](#)) deals with the punishment of **stoning**: **The place of stoning was as the height of two men. One of the witnesses pushed him down by his hips. If he turned over face forward, the witness should turn him on his back. If he died from the blow and the fall, that was enough. But if not, the second witness took a stone and dropped it on his chest. If he died from this, that was enough. But if not, his stoning had to be carried out by all Isra'el, as it is said: The hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death and afterward the hand of all the people (Deuteronomy 17:17) (Sanhedrin 6:4).**

And the witnesses laid down their cloaks to be able to throw **their stones** more effectively (7:58b). Compare what the Talmud says about carrying out the sentence of **stoning**: **When the trial is over, take him [the condemned person] out to be stoned. The place of the stoning was at a distance from the court, as it is said: Take out the one who is accursed (Leviticus 24:14). A man stands at the entrance of the court; in his hand is the signaling flag (Hebrew: *sudarin*). A horseman was stationed far away but within sight of him. If one [of the judges] says, "I have something [more] to say in his favor," the signaler waves the *sudarin*, and the horseman runs and stops the stoning. Even if the condemned person himself says, "I have something to say in my**

favor,” they must bring him back, even four or five times, only provided that there is some substance to what he is saying (Sanhedrin 42b). Even though there were these formal procedures for **stoning** laid down by **the Oral Law**, it seems unlikely that they were followed, just like **the Sanhedrin** failed to abide by **their** own rules in the execution of **Yeshua** (see **The Life of Christ Lh - The Laws of the Great Sanhedrin Regarding Trials**).

Sha’ul was probably disgusted over the way **the Pharisees** had mishandled the problem. If **he** wanted it done right, **he’d** probably have to do it **himself**. So **Sha’ul** packed up his things and headed for **Jerusalem**, salivating for the chance to be the hero. **He** arrived in **the Holy City** just in time to hear an infuriating speech from **Stephen**.¹⁵⁹

And the witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Sha’ul (7:58c). Once again we see **Luke’s** literary skill as **he** artfully introduces **Sha’ul** into the story, which **he** had already done with **Barnabas (4:36)**, **Stephen** and **Philip (6:5)**.

Despite **their** anger, **the Sanhedrin** apparently tried to give **Stephen’s** murder the appearance of formal justice. It is true that the Romans took the right of capital punishment away from the Jews about the time **Yeshua** was born. Pontius Pilate, however, was still the governor, and **the Sanhedrin** knew **they** had nothing to fear from him. He had proved his vacillating weakness in permitting the execution of **Messiah**, whom he knew to be innocent. But he had **Him** crucified anyway, because he feared **the Jews** would cause him to lose his position (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lq - Jesus Sentenced to Be Crucified**). In spite of his efforts, he was in serious trouble with Rome, which would shortly recall him as governor. Moreover, he normally lived in Caesarea, not in **Yerushalayim**, and hence, was probably nowhere near this scene. Besides, he had bigger problems to tend to.¹⁶⁰

They went on stoning Stephen as he was calling out, “Lord Yeshua, receive my spirit” (7:59)! Stephen’s last words were a prayer for **himself** and for **his** executioners. Like **Jesus**, **he** surrendered **his spirit**; but whereas the dying **Messiah** committed **Himself** to **God**, **“Into Your hands I commit My spirit; deliver Me, ADONAI, my faithful God” (Psalm 31:5 and Luke 23:46)**, **Stephen** committed **himself** to **his Lord** whom **he** had seen in **his** vision. This is a striking example of the words originally applied to **the Father** being addressed to **the Son**. It shows how the early **Messianic Community** viewed **Yeshua** as being equal with **YHVH**.¹⁶¹

In addition, this confession of **Stephen** shows that **he** expected to enter **the Lord’s** presence as soon as **he** died. The Scriptures don’t teach any delay at all between life here and life in heaven, either in some holding place such as purgatory or some unconscious

state called soul-sleep. Instead, the Bible teaches that believers enter **Messiah's** presence immediately following death (**Second Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23**). **Yeshua** promised the thief on the cross that **He** would take him to **Paradise** with Abraham (the abode of the righteous of the TaNaKh) that very **day** (**Luke 23:43**). **His** parable of **the rich man and Lazarus** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hx - The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus**) taught that the dead are never unconscious or unaware of their circumstances. The book of **Revelation** describes the Tribulation martyrs as being awake and in the presence of **God**, and able to plead with **the Lord** for vengeance on their murderers (see the commentary on **Revelation Cp - The Fifth Seal: I Saw Under the Altar Those Who Had Been Slain**).¹⁶²

The mob poured out all **their** bitterness on **Stephen** by **stoning Him** mercilessly. **Then he fell on his knees and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"** Echoing the words of **Yeshua** (**Luke 23-34**), **Stephen** prayed for the pardon of **his** executioners. **His** words were in striking contrast to **his** attitude of denunciation during **his** speech, and illustrates how a believer can love the sinner and hate the sin. **After he said this, he died (7:60).** **He** slipped into the presence of **his Lord**. And like **his** name **Stephanos**, meaning *crown*, **he** undoubtedly received **the crown of life** from **his** heavenly **Father** (see the commentary on **Revelation Cc - For We Must All Appear Before the Judgment Seat of Christ**). **Stephen** was a shooting star. **He** had one brief performance. One chance on stage. But it was absolutely unforgettable. As the curtain fell on **his** life, **he** received a standing ovation from **his** audience of **One**. How sweet to imagine the first heavenly words **he** heard that day, "Welcome **Stephanos**, My joy and My crown."¹⁶³

How were they legally able to stone **Stephen** under Roman law of that day that took away the right of capital punishment from **the Sanhedrin**? We have already seen this in the case of **Yeshua**. Now we don't know exactly when this event took place. But it could have very well happened in 35 AD. In that year, Vitellus became the new Roman general over all Syria, of which the land of Isra'el was a part as far as the Romans were concerned. It was Vitellus that deposed Pontius Pilate as procurator. But it took several months before the new procurator arrived and **Stephen's** stoning could have happened in the interim.

Below is a summary statement that prepares us for what is to follow. These summary statements in Acts can be seen in four places (2:43-47, 4:32-37; 5:12-16 and here). It is important to distinguish between summary statements and transition statements; the former only occur in the first eight chapters of Acts, and the latter occur in various places throughout the book.

Yet there was at least one **man** who remained unmoved and was not sorry to see **him** die. **Now Sha'ul was in agreement** (Greek: *suneudokon*, meaning *a degree of pleasure and satisfaction*) **with Stephen's execution (22:20). He** was pleased. The imperfect verb shows that he was virtually cheering throughout the entire ordeal. **He** just didn't give **his** approval when **Stephen** breathed **his** last breath. **He** cheered every blow, like points on a scoreboard. It wouldn't be easy to convert such a **man**. But **Stephen's** words of **forgiveness** were to have a permanent impact on **Sha'ul**. The seed might take a while to germinate, but **the rabbi from Tarsus** would never escape the witness of **Stephen**.¹⁶⁴

On that very day a great persecution arose against Messiah's community in Jerusalem. It was a **great persecution** because the previous two persecutions came only from the Sadducees, whereas now the Pharisees, who were by far the majority, had joined them. **Luke** wishes to emphasize that the successful attack on **Stephen** was the signal for a wider attack on the believers in **Tziyon**, no doubt instigated by **the Sanhedrin**. **And they were all scattered** (Greek: *diesparesan*, this is where we get the word *diaspora* from) **throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (8:1).** It was sufficient for **them** to flee to the countryside of **Judea and Samaria** to escape from danger. It is significant that some of **the believers** were prepared to stay in **Samaria** and that **they** did not experience opposition there from **the Samaritans**. It can be presumed that the opposition from **Jerusalem** came from **the Sanhedrin** and that it was directed primarily against **Stephen's** Hellenistic brethren in **Messiah's Community**. **The apostles** were left alone. The fact that **they** could stay in **Jerusalem** confirms the suspicion that it was mainly the Hellenistic believers that was being attacked.

Like faithful watchmen, **the apostles** remained at **their** posts, shepherding **their** flock. **Jerusalem** was still **their** mission field. Despite that it was dangerous to do so, **some devout men buried Stephen properly and mourned deeply for him (8:2).** **Their** act was both defiant public protest and a statement of **their** perception that **Stephen** was righteous. Such mourning often lasted from **thirty (Deuteronomy 34:8)** to **seventy (Genesis 50:3)** days. No doubt the Roman authorities connived at what was going on; in any cause the attack probably lasted only a short while (as most periods of persecution tend to be), and many believers may have slipped back into **Yerushalayim** once things cooled down.¹⁶⁵

A different kind of religious zeal was demonstrated by **Sha'ul** who took a leading role in the persecution of **the Messianic Community**. **But Sha'ul was continually destroying Messiah's community, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he was throwing them into prison (8:3).** Not content to harass the believers in

Jerusalem, he persecuted the followers of the Way to their death, arresting both men and women, dragging them out forcibly and continually throwing them into prison (Acts 22:4). He went from one synagogue to another to have them punished and tried to force them to blaspheme. He was so obsessed with persecuting them that he even hunted them down in foreign cities (26:11), with the permission of the Sanhedrin (22:5). In Rabbi Sha'ul's zeal for his beliefs (Galatians 1:13), he fulfilled the Lord's prediction in John 16:2: **They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.** He sincerely thought he was serving Ha'Shem by imprisoning and executing believers. And only a direct intervention with the Lord Yeshua Messiah would persuade him otherwise.¹⁶⁶

For Messiah's stated purposes (1:8) the scattering of believers, especially Hellenistic believers, which seemed like a disaster, proved to be a great blessing because **those who had been scattered**, like seed, and **went around**, like itinerant pastors, **proclaiming the Word (8:4)**. As Joseph said to his brothers after earlier persecution: **You meant it for evil, but God used it for good (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).**

*Lord Jesus, You have told us that our trying times of persecution are opportunities for us to bear witness to **Your** name. Fill us with faith to know that when these moments arise, You will give us such words and a wisdom that none of our adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. Even when betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends - hated because of **Your** name - we know that our salvation is secure in **You**.*¹⁶⁷