



**Message #17**  
**“STICKS AND STONES”**  
**Acts 7:1-54-60**

Stephen has just finished his lengthy response to the inquisition by the Sanhedrin. He is accused of two major charges...blasphemy against the Temple and against the Law. Such charges carry a penalty of death. However, rather than try to defend himself, or seek his acquittal, Stephen has counter-charged the Sanhedrin (and, hence, the Jewish authorities/leadership and people) of hard-heartedness and of the murder of the Messiah, Jesus.

Having heard the gospel with hard hearts, their murderous response validated Stephen's indictment that they were "uncircumcised in heart". Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. (7:58).

**Stephen's presentation of the gospel to the Jews might be labelled bold, even blunt. When is it appropriate to speak hard words to the lost and to be more confrontational regarding sin? Who in your life might benefit from such tough love?**

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This account of Stephen and his interrogation by the Sanhedrin, and ultimate execution, present several compelling contrasts.

**CONTRAST #1: BEING FILLED WITH HATE vs BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT (7:54-55a)**

"When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him." (7:54)

- The term "gnashed their teeth" indicates either an extreme anguish, or an extreme anger and hate.
- In this case, the Sanhedrin SHOULD have been filled with remorse, anguish and conviction.
- Instead, they were filled with rage and hate.
- This was (at least) the third time the Sanhedrin had heard the Gospel fearlessly presented (see Acts 4:8ff and 5:27ff). Yet they are still hard-hearted.

In contrast with the hate-filled Sanhedrin, Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit (7:55).

Being filled with the Spirit was a way of life for Stephen (see Acts 6:5), so this added reference to it at this particular time perhaps indicates that it was intensified into a special anointing. *F.F. Bruce says, "It was the Spirit of prophecy that took possession of him now."*

**Throughout this whole passage we see in Stephen the evidence of being full of the Spirit and wisdom. What are the evidences today of being full of the Spirit and wisdom?**

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**CONTRAST #2: SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS vs SPIRITUAL SIGHT (7:55b-57)**

"Set your heart on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." (Colossians 3:1)

Paul wrote these words some years after the stoning of Stephen – but it is possible his thoughts travelled back in time to when he stood at the edge of the crowd and heard Stephen declare what he could see just before he was killed.

Stephen joined a very small and select group who were blessed with a glimpse into heaven....

The others were: **Isaiah** (Isaiah 6:1-3), **Ezekiel** (Ezekiel 1:26-28), **Paul** (2 Cor. 12:2-4), **John** (Rev. 4:1ff).

God opened Stephen's eyes so he could see Jesus standing in glory, at the right hand of God. (Stephen had the privilege of being the first to see Jesus in His glorified state after the ascension.)

**The "Son of Man"**. Stephen's use of this term (7:56) is the only time it is used in the New Testament outside

of the Gospels. In fact, it is the only time it is used by anyone, other than Jesus, Himself. Stephen's use of this term is the final straw for the Sanhedrin.

For a bit of background here, in Matthew 26:63-64 the High Priest asked Jesus....*"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus replied, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

For this 'blasphemy' Jesus was executed. Stephen's vision throws it all back in their faces.

The Sanhedrin now has two choices:

1. Admit they were wrong when they had Jesus murdered.
2. Also execute Stephen.

They choose to silence the truth (or try to) by killing Stephen.

*"They refused to listen, they blocked their ears, started yelling as loudly as they could and rushed at Stephen."*

**FUN FACT:** The word "rushed" (hormao) is the same word used to describe their mad rush of demon-possessed swine into the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:13). The Sanhedrin cast aside all dignity and propriety. They were reduced to a howling, murderous mob.



### **CONTRAST #3: DEATH vs LIFE (7:58-59)**

Was Stephen's execution a legal act, or a "mob lynching"? There is some dispute amongst scholars on this point. The requirements/regulations for a "legal" stoning are set out in Leviticus 24. Some points seem to be followed, others maybe not. In spite of how the stoning was carried out, there is a huge contrast between the agents of death and the life of the one being killed.

In **verse 58** we are introduced, for the first time, to Saul, a young Jewish man who, obviously, had some involvement in what was going on. It is only a small cameo appearance here, but it is interesting to ponder what impact this episode had on his later conversion and life of faith and ministry.

**Verse 59:** Stephen, like Jesus before him, committed his spirit to the Lord.

*However....Jesus had committed Himself to the Father. Stephen here commits himself to Jesus.*

This is another evidence of Stephen proclaiming the deity of Christ...further infuriating the Sanhedrin. Stephen may have been facing death....but he was seeing life.

**Do you think Stephen's example played a part in Saul's conversion? Think about the people who played a part in yours and thank God for them.**

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### **CONTRAST #4: HATE vs LOVE (7:60 – 8:1a)**

The mob were filled with hate, Stephen was filled with love: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* (6:60) Then "he fell asleep"...what a wonderfully peaceful contrast to the brutality of his death. Stephen was joined with Christ in the "fellowship of His sufferings and becoming like Him in death." (Phil.3:10)

Stephen dies as he has lived, filled with the Holy Spirit, with a prayer on his lips for his killers and a commitment of himself back to God. In many ways he reminds us of Jesus: his lack of resistance, his serene spirit and his dying words (cf. Luke 23:34,46). He is the first Christian martyr, but he will not be the last. His courage and bearing have strengthened millions down through the centuries.

Stephen's persecution, pain, suffering and death were used greatly by God. Our modern society (and church) would avoid such things. Yet the thing we would reject may be the thing that God wants to work through.

**How can we learn to forgive our enemies, when we feel more like taking revenge?**

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**How would you answer the person who says "I don't see any way that any good can come from the suffering and persecution of Christians."**

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**How would you like the way you follow Jesus to be influenced by Stephen's example?**

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**Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit and wisdom.**