

Act 7: 54-8:3 NIV
“A great view of heaven”

“When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

“Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

“And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were

scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

Once more, we deal with a Scripture reading that begins in an awkward place.

To understand it, we recall that Israel’s first century religious leaders falsely charged an innocent man.

When he rightly accused them of resisting God’s Holy Spirit, they reacted furiously.

When Norma and I moved back to L.A. in 1963, we lived a little south of Melrose Avenue (about 10



blocks from Paramount Pictures’ entrance). **Melrose Avenue** business people parked on nearby side streets. **A telephone answering service on Melrose**

was located just around the corner from us.

A curvaceous young woman employee often parked across the street from our house.

I’d noticed that she got off work at the same time each afternoon.

When home, I tended to look intently from our front window, when the young lady went to her car. **One day Norma said, “What, are you doing, Bob, watching that good-looking girl?”**

“No, I’m not!” I angrily retorted.

The level of my dander equaled my guilt, which was 100%.

I wasn’t clever enough to say I was watching a woodpecker or a hummingbird.

My wrath at being found out made me throw mental darts at Norma.

In Jesus’ time, fury filled the air as it does today. Governments taxed citizens heavily.

Large groups migrated in different directions.

Many people lost their personal freedom.

Most Jews thought their country’s best days were over.

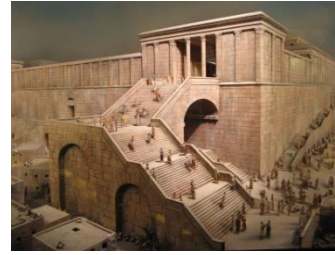
Anxious folks looked for a great leader, who would free them and restore the glory their nation once enjoyed.

Some first century customs differed from ours.

Most now ride to services in cars or pickups.

Then, only VIPs rode to religious services.

To avoid low-class, street-folks, VIPs rode from the west side of Jerusalem in their chariots.



King Herod built a huge archway overpass (Wilson’s Arch) so they could drive over the Tyropoeon Valley directly to one of two western gates of the temple.¹

The people hoped Jesus would be the new King.

Jesus met a paralyzed man, who’d been unable to walk a long time.

Everyone in town knew him and of his condition.

With one word, Jesus had him walking.

Jesus calmed a storm that nearly swamped the boat carrying him and the disciples.

You’ve probably met some who swear at storms.

Ever see anyone calm a storm by shouting at it?

From five small loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus fed more than 5000 people.

Skeptics claim Jesus knew beforehand and arranged to have food on hand out there in the wilderness.

I wonder which of the Jewish catering services he called to supply the food and how much hush money he paid in order to keep them quiet.

One fact alone would convince me that Jesus performed this feeding miracle.

¹ The photo shows a model of Robinson’s Arch, which the common people used to climb from the valley floor. Wilson’s Arch was built a few hundred feet south (left in the picture) much closer to the Temple. Members of the Sanhedrin likely rode to the Temple in chariots across Wilson’s Arch rather than mix with *common folks*.

I’ve met many imposters. One claimed he was God; another said he was Jesus Christ II.

Ever heard of an imposter, preacher, or politician generous enough to feed 5000 hungry people out of his/her own pocket?

When Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem from the eastern side on Palm Sunday, people had no doubts that he was the Messiah.

They weren’t bashful in their praise, not the timid stuff you usually hear in church.

They likely cheered as you’d hear at a ball game.

The jealous leaders said,

“Jesus, tell those people to stop doing that!”
Folks usually give orders like that out of weakness, laziness, or fear.

That was similar to a husband yelling at his wife to make the kids quiet down, or vice versa.

Why don’t they do it themselves?

Why did calling Jesus Messiah upset the leaders?

If they admitted that Jesus was God’s true guy, they’d have to change their lives.

We don’t like admitting that we are wrong.

Hate, jealousy, fear, and resentment cause most of our misery and mean actions.

It’s easier to criticize or belittle someone than to have to amend our behavior.



Our text describes that type of ugliness.

Stephen believed that Jesus was the Messiah-King and gave evidence for it at a worship meeting.

Often when people can’t refute facts, they angrily attack the presenter of the proof.

Many politicians do that on a regular basis—it’s known as the “politics of personal destruction.”

Stephen gave them facts; they threw tantrums.

The old ploy of protesting too much.

Proof positive Stephen said: “You have betrayed and murdered” the Messiah God sent.

Their anger equaled their guilt.

“When they heard this, they were furious (literally, “their hearts were sawed in two”) and gnashed their teeth at him.”

Ever been that angry?

Your heart pounds nearly out of your chest and your teeth soon need new enamel.

And what about Stephen?

“But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”

In most translations, the first Greek word in this sentence gets little attention.²

² ὑπάρχων pronounced *hoop ár cone*, which means “the possession of.”
C.f. *Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, Barclay M. Newman, Jr., p 187

Yet, as scholar F.F. Bruce noted: Stephen was not just full of, but submitted fully to the Holy Spirit.

And what controlled the most prominent and powerful religious leaders of the time?

Anger, rage, bitterness, brawling, greed and slander--qualities that grieve the Holy Spirit activated the bigwigs.



You see the contrast.

Fury and envy controlled the leaders.

Yet though they falsely accused Stephen, and he had right to be angry, he stayed calm.

In the Spirit, Stephen did what we should do.

He fixed on God's power and glory, not human evil.

When we do things God's way, he enables us.

The Holy Spirit reassured Stephen two ways:

One, Stephen saw God's glory, and two, he saw Jesus at God's right hand—the place of authority.

“‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’”

What did he mean “the Son of Man”?

In Daniel chapter 7, a scene describes God as the “Ancient of Days” seated as a king on his throne. Millions of people stood before God for Judgment.

Daniel then saw a vision in which someone “like a son of man” (in human form) comes in the clouds of heaven.

That “son of man” approaches the Ancient of Days (God) and God takes him into His presence.

Those leaders knew the *Book of Daniel: 7:14* NIV “He (that is, the son of man) was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away.”

Daniel prophesied about Jesus, God's Son, appearing in human flesh.

The Christ-son of man in human form would have all of God's authority and glory.

That's exactly what Stephen saw: the Son of Man at God's right hand.

Not many months before, Jesus stood on trial in front of Pilate and the same High Priest.

The High Priest solemnly asked Jesus:

“‘Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?’ ‘I am,’ said Jesus. ‘And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven,’” (Mk 14:61, 62).

Stephen saw the first phase of Jesus' prediction: “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

The leaders didn't want to hear or see that truth.

“They all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him,” a mob of priests and judges.

How does this event affect us?

We see terrible things happening now:

Corruption, lawlessness, persecution.

The Holy Spirit’s way is not reacting in anger, fear, or frustration.

To see Jesus as Stephen did, we think and act as he did:

“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Stephen didn’t die angry, afraid, or bitter.

Two points F.F. Bruce noted:

First, Jesus said he’d be sitting at God’s right hand, yet Stephen saw Jesus standing.

Jesus might have stood there as a witness to Stephen’s faith and trust as in **Matthew 10:32**.

“Whoever confesses me before men, I will also confess before my Father in heaven.”

I favor view two that Jesus stands as an encourager.

In tense moments, coaches rarely sit.

They’re on the sidelines urging their players.

Dr. Tom Stauch used to coach wrestling at Kingsley-Pierson (Iowa) High School.

His peers highly regarded him, and he helped produce many champion wrestlers.



I attended some matches Tom coached.

Always lively and spirited in his support, Tom stood and was animated.

Sometimes he was close, on his hands and knees, encouraging a struggling wrestler.

That’s likely why Stephen saw Jesus standing. Jesus stood pleading with him to hang in there.

“Love and forgive; don’t give in to fear or hate.”

If you trust Christ and forgive your enemies, you know he’s there standing and encouraging you, too.

“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. . . When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:19-25 NIV)

Things might get uglier, but if we trust Jesus and forgive, he’ll make things beautiful.

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”(Hebrews 12:1, 2 NIV)

“This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.”

Bob Blair

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