

1) Let's begin with a quick review of where Stephen is and how he got there...

Acts 6:8–10 (NIV)

- 2) As we begin this reading, we can see where and why Luke made the comment he did about Stephen.
- 3) There are some extraordinary characteristics given here regarding Stephen that we really need to look at.
 - a) Full of God's grace and power.
 - i) The assumption here is that he was extraordinary in his speaking and talking about the salvation offered through the Lord.
 - ii) I think we must assume that he was what we might call "a cut above" the average disciple (member).
 - b) Performed great wonders and signs among the people.
 - i) One would assume this meant healings and possibly other miraculous signs – perhaps not unlike the apostles themselves.
 - c) He was very much Greek speaking person in order to be able to dispute with:
 - i) Jews of Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia all of whom would be Greek speakers as well.
 - ii) Collectively, this was probably a group of Jewish slaves and children of Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome.
 - iii) They had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem.
- 4) Now, as to what their exact opposition was – we are not told any details.
 - a) We do know that it stemmed from the opposition these men had to Stephen's message.
 - b) Likely, it was concerning the teachings of Jesus, and/or Jesus himself as the Son of God and Messiah.
- 5) We also do not know exactly where and why these arguments started.
 - a) A possibility would be that Stephen was attempting to teach (not unlike the apostles) in this synagogue of the Freedmen
- 6) The major point is that Stephen basically out gunned them – they and their arguments were no match for his wisdom supplied by the Holy Spirit and by God – so...

Acts 6:11–15 (NIV)

- 1) Sound familiar? Same song second verse!
- 2) This is a situation where they made up everything they could and put it in front of the Sanhedrin to see if any of it would get Stephen in deep trouble.

- a) Blasphemous words against Moses – is that even a thing?
 - b) Blasphemous words against God – what words?
 - c) Oh yes, and the dead Jesus they are preaching is going to destroy the temple and change the customs of Moses
 - d) Not exactly a strong set of arguments.
 - i) The Sanhedrin for sure could and would NOT admit that Jesus was alive so that's a problem immediately.
- 3) Then, to make matters worse, ALL who were in the Sanhedrin saw that Stephen's face was like that of an angel.
- a) Not sure what that really meant and we are not told anything further.
 - b) However, N.T. Wright states what I think is probably a reasonable conclusion regarding this statement.

“Now I have no idea how you know, in advance as it were, what an angel's face looks like. I doubt if the Assembly could have told you, either. But perhaps what we are meant to understand is that there was a kind of light, illuminating Stephen from the inside. A kind of serenity, humble and unostentatious, but confident and assured. In the middle of arguments, controversies, false accusations, and now a serious charge before the highest court, he found himself standing, as the Temple claimed to stand, at the overlap of heaven and earth. The speech he was about to make, and the death he was about to suffer, were simply the final stages in his own travelling, his journey of witness to the risen Jesus, and to the word of God which provided the explanation of what Jesus was all about.”

Wright, N. T.. Acts for Everyone, Part One: 1 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 106). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

- 4) At any rate, the Sanhedrin at least had to hear what Stephen had to say so ...

Acts 7:1 (NIV)

- 5) This is a case where we might speculate that if Stephen had of said “No – of course not” the Sanhedrin might have simply let him go and nothing else would have happened.
- 6) However, that was not his reply – instead, he takes an opportunity to layout what will prove to be a simple history
- 7) The bottom line of this history is not the history as they know it but of the truth about the history as God brought it about culminating in the sending of His Son into the world.
- 8) NOTE – at this point, please read the entire section covering Stephen's speech paying particular attention to the closing verses. Keep that in mind as you read the rest of the notes.

Acts 7:2–7:53 (NIV)

9) I cannot help but think what Jesus told his disciples applies equally to Stephen in this very case:

Matthew 10:19–20 (NASB 2020)

10) Stephen has done the same thing Christ himself did on numerous occasions.

11) He took the sorted history and failings of the Jewish nation over the centuries and showed clearly that they had done the EXACT SAME THING in killing and rejecting Jesus that their ancestors had in killing and rejecting the prophets!

12) A true “point the finger directly in their face” moment!

13) Again, N.T. Wright’s commentary he says:

He (Stephen) could simply have waved the charges away ... Instead, he takes the bull by the horns and goes for the big picture. What you need, he says, is to rework your run-up. Tell the story again from the very beginning and get it right this time. Pace out the whole journey, from Abraham onwards, so that you arrive at the present moment at exactly the right speed and from exactly the right angle. Then, and only then, will you understand who Jesus is, and what I and my friends, who believe in him, have and haven’t been saying.

Wright, N. T.. Acts for Everyone, Part One: 1 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 108). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

14) That, of course, is exactly what Stephen has done!

15) Without hesitation, the Sanhedrin reacts ... Not to the history but the conclusion.

Acts 7:54–56 (NIV)

16) I really have to say I like Wright’s translation of vs. 54:

54 What Stephen said was a blow right to the heart. When they heard it, they gnashed their teeth against him.

Wright, N. T.. Acts for Everyone, Part One: 1 (The New Testament for Everyone) (p. 120). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

17) They were angry before but now Stephen really pushed the wrong button!

Acts 7:57–8:1 (NIV)

18) What happens here is a serious (to say the least) offence by the Sanhedrin.

19) This is in essence what they had wanted to do to Peter and John and the rest of the apostles when they captured them and threw them in jail.

20) Gamaliel’s logical assessment of the situation was the only thing that prevented them from doing just that.

21) He evidently was not there or was not able to prevail this time.

22) Bonnie brought up an interesting question regarding how the Sanhedrin got by with this.

23) There are several factors that may play into it.

- a) First, we don't really know if they did get by with this.
 - i) Annas was removed from the high priest position for murdering for cause without permission, and, also just generally being hard to get along with.

From Religion Wiki

Annas officially served as High Priest for ten years (6–15 AD), when at the age of 36 he was deposed by the procurator {Valerius} Gratus 'for imposing and executing capital sentences which had been forbidden by the imperial government.' [3]. Yet while having been officially removed from office, he remained as one of the nations most influential political & social individuals, aided greatly by the use of his five sons and his son-in-law as puppet High Priests [4] till his assassination in 66 AD for advocating peace with Rome.

in: Easton's Bible Dictionary, Articles with content from Wikipedia, High Priests of Israel, and 3 more

- b) This action took place outside the city so it may not have been so well known.
 - c) Second, the Romans may not have really wanted to do anything about it even if they knew it.
 - d) One other thought I had was that after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Romans may have, for whatever reason been a little more "hands off" in this area.
- 24) I guess the answer to Bonnie's question is honestly, we really don't know.
- a) As we just pointed out, there are several ways this could have gone.
- 25) If I ever found myself in a situation like Stephen is in here, I would hope and pray that I had his courage.
- a) Courage to look to the heavens and see what he saw and say it out loud and strong.
 - b) Courage to think of my attackers with love and ask for them to be forgiven.
- 26) The courage was not misplaced – he truly had that courage and did with it exactly as he should have.
- 27) How we get this is exactly and precisely the way Stephen did – he had learned it from the teachings of Jesus, who made loving one's enemies central and non-negotiable.
- 28) We know this not only by His teaching but from His example. On the cross Jesus himself prayed that those driving the nails might be forgiven.