

A RELIABLE, FAITHFUL AND GODLY WITNESS!
ACTS CH6:8-CH7:1

ILLUSTRATION

On April 9, 1945, Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is hanged at Flossenburg, only days before the American liberation of the POW camp. The last words of the brilliant and courageous 39-year-old opponent of Nazism were “This is the end—for me, the beginning of life.”

STEPHEN! V8

Stephen, one of the seven (Ch6:3), a Greek speaking Jew, a man “full faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Ch6:5) and having been prayed for and appointed and commissioned by the apostles (Ch6:3+6) to serve fairly the daily distribution of food to the Hellenist widows is busy undertaking that work.

But Luke also reports that Stephen “full of grace and power” (Ch6:8) was chosen because he was “..... full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Ch6:3) uses his God-given grace gifts, not just to serve tables (Ch6:2 diakonia – deacon) **but to also speak the Gospel (Ch6:10, 11 + 13)** to people who are part of a synagogue, made up of Greek speaking Jews from North Africa and Turkey. Along with performing “great signs and wonders” (Ch6:8), as did Jesus (Ch2:22) and the apostles (Ch2:43; Ch5:12), Stephen continues with the prophetic gifting that is available to all believers (**Acts Ch2:28-29 – DJ translation!**)

Stephen is able to be involved in this ministry because, as Luke writes, “And Stephen full of grace and power” God has granted Stephen with divine favour (the grace of God) for ministry. The divine favour that God has shown Stephen ultimately vindicates his speaking out in-spite of him being rejected and having to suffer! Campbell Morgan sees this combination as “sweetness and strength” merged in one personality (John Stott pg 126).

SYNAGOGUE! V9-11

There were Hellenistic synagogues in Jerusalem and Hebraic synagogues (Acts Ch6:9). The synagogue is called “The Freedmen Synagogue” which is a Greek translation, set up for Jews who were once slaves but now free, Jewish people who through the diaspora from North Africa and Turkey, Acts Ch6:9. **This could have included Paul of Tarsus!**

So what is the strategy of these men from “The Freedmen Synagogue?”

1. V9a – They rose up and disputed or tried to argue with Stephen.
2. V10 – But when that was unsuccessful because Stephen was favoured by God, what did those men do (**Luke Ch21:15**)?
3. V11 – They started a smear campaign! Secretly instigating other men to tell lies about him!
4. V12 – Then, with the people now on their side through the smear campaign, unlike Ch4:21 + Ch5:26, they seized him and brought him to the Council

John Stott says **“Thus the opposition degenerated from theology through slander to violence. The same order of events has often been repeated. At first there is**

serious theological debate. When this fails, people start a personal campaign of lies. Finally, they resort to legal or quasi-legal action in an attempt to rid themselves of their adversary by force. Let others use these weapons against us; may we be delivered from resorting to, them ourselves (John Stott, Commentary on Acts, pg127)!"

SANHEDRIN! V12-CH7:1

It is like a "Star Wars" trilogy! The Sanhedrin are back **for a third time!** They did not listen to Gamaliel (Ch5:38-39) and the Sanhedrin get involved!

It takes us back to Luke Ch23:2 and the false charges against Jesus! What are the false witnesses falsely saying?

1. That Stephen was speaking falsely against the Temple!
2. That Stephen was speaking falsely against the Law!

There could not be a more extremely serious double accusation! The Temple and the Law! For nothing was more sacred for the Jew, than the Temple and the Law! The Temple was the Holy Place, representing God's presence and the Law was the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God!

V14 – Highlights for the readers what the specificity of the accusations were:

1. **That this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple**
2. **That this Jesus of Nazareth will change the law, provided by Moses!**

But is that what Jesus said? **According to the Gospel of John Ch2:19 - "Jesus answered them `Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.'" However, the false witnesses testified falsely that Jesus had said "We heard him say `I will destroy this temple that is made with hands and in three days I will build another'" (Matthew Ch26:61 + Mark Ch15:58).** When Jesus was dying on the cross people hurled insults at Him, and misquoted Him regarding the destruction of the Temple **(Matt Ch27:40; Mark Ch15:29).** When it came to the Law, Jesus stated that "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Matt Ch5:17). **See how the pattern of falsity repeats itself, from Jesus to Stephen?**

V15 – Whilst all of this is happening, Stephen face is radiant, a face like an angel! It reminds us of **Exodus Ch34:29**, when Moses' face shone because of the time he had spent with God! And in particular when Jesus was transfigured on the Mountain of Transfiguration, **Matthew Ch17:2!** See what happens when we spend time in God's presence, we can shine!

APPLICATION

Stephen's Christ-likeness in the face of false witnesses', their charges and unjust treatment of him, **portrays him as a reliable, faithful and godly witness** and an encouragement to those who may be in the midst of similar opposition and suffering!