**Round Top Church Christian Fellowship**

Eighteenth Week Since the Resurrection

 ***Acts 6:8-15 & Acts 7***

 ***Stephen’s Witness***

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August 16th In the Year of Our Lord 2020

(Unless otherwise noted, NAS is quoted.)

**Seismic Shift**

Beginning in Acts 6:8, there is a shift in the outcome of preaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and John had been arrested, flogged, and released. Starting with Stephen, things changed. Many of the Jewish religious authorities wanted to execute Peter and John. There were reasons Peter and John were released.

1. God’s plan was working in their lives.
2. In God’s plan – the counsel of Gamliel was received with Peter and John’s release. God moved in the hearts and minds of Gamliel (Acts 5:34) and Nicodemus (John 3, 7:50) who were both members of the Jewish religious hagiarchy.
3. In contrast to the newcomer Stephen - Peter and John were known by the public. The fact that thousands of people converted to the Gospel Message, and some physically healed, tells us that Peter and John were well-known. These factors influenced the religious leaders.
4. Stephen was of Greek origin in a Jewish town.
5. God had a plan for Stephen to speak the Truth,

 regardless of the consequences.

Scripture tells us Stephen, like Peter and John, was empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, being full of grace and power. God’s power, working in Stephen, manifested in performing wonders and signs among the people.

**God’s grace and power performs**

**Acts 6:8**

And Stephen, full of grace and power,

was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

**Evil challenges God’s grace and power**

**v. 9** But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians,

and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

**Greek Jews?**

 There were several synagogues around Jerusalem in addition to the Temple. Historians tell us that the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” were Jews who spoke Greek. These people, from the Greek culture, had once been slaves who had attained their freedom and moved to Jerusalem. Stephen, too, came from a Greek culture and converted to be a follower of Jesus (who is God in the flesh, crucified for our sins, rose from the tomb defeating sin and death, and ascended to heaven). But not leaving the disciples alone, Jesus ascends giving His Holy Spirit indwelled in their hearts to empower them through a lifetime of witnessing.

**Why Did the Jews Reject Jesus as Messiah?**

 Why do we need to make these points that I just made? When I grew-up, I was told by Christians that the Jews believed in the same God as we did but did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. I was told that the Jews were still looking for the future coming of the Messiah. Sounds simple enough, but I sensed there was more to this explanation. Why was the Jesus in the New Testament, who matched all the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah, not accepted by the Jews?

It is because, the reality of Jesus, as the Messiah, going to the Cross to pay the price for our sins is not the definition of the Messiah for whom the Jews are looking.

The Jews are looking for a deliverer, like Moses or David, who will militarily defeat the enemies of Israel. Their version of the Messiah will lead Jerusalem to become the political capital of the world with the whole human population recognizing their Messiah as the one to come under and accept His rule. There are other distinct differences in the Jewish Messiah as opposed to the Jesus of the New Testament. See web site link: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism>

Here is an excerpt from Wikipedia.

**Pre-exile Jewish eschatology (8th–6th cent. BCE)**[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Messiah_in_Judaism&action=edit&section=3)]

*Main articles:*[*Jewish eschatology*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_eschatology)*and*[*Babylonian captivity*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity)

The roots of Jewish eschatology are to be found in the pre-exile prophets, including [Isaiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah) and [Jeremiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremiah), and the exile prophets [Ezekiel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezekiel) and [Deutero-Isaiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutero-Isaiah%22%20%5Co%20%22Deutero-Isaiah).[[web 4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism#cite_note-JVL.Echatology-18) The main tenets of Jewish eschatology are the following, in no particular order, elaborated in the books of [Isaiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Isaiah), [Jeremiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Jeremiah) and [Ezekiel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Ezekiel):[[web 5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism#cite_note-JE.Jewish_Eschatology-19)

* End of world (before everything as follows).
* God redeems the Jewish people from the captivity that began during the [Babylonian Exile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_Exile), in a new [Exodus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus)
* God returns the Jewish people to the [Land of Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_of_Israel)
* God restores the [House of David](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Davidic_line) and the [Temple in Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_Temple)
* God creates a regent from the House of David (i.e. the Jewish Messiah) to lead the Jewish people and the world and usher in an [age of justice and peace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messianic_Age)
* All nations recognize that the [God of Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Judaism) is the only true God
* God [resurrects the dead](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resurrection_of_the_Dead)
* God creates a [new heaven and a new earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_to_Come#Judaism)

 This is a partial list. A more detailed study is advised. However, it is true that the “Second Coming” of the Messiah will encompass many of the above elements. It is noted that Judaism’s Messiah does not include the Messiah going to the Cross to pay the price for the sins of the world. Old Testament Scriptures like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 are ignored.

 After understanding the difference in Jesus of the New Testament, prophesied by the Old Testament, in contrast to the anticipated Jewish Messiah, we can see why the Jews in Jesus’ day rejected His teaching.

 Where else do we see a religion who claims to have a prophet from God who the whole world needs to come under his rule, and that their religious capital will be the political and religious center of the world? This is an easy question to answer - Islam.

 Regarding Judaism and Islam - they not only rejected Jesus’ teachings and claims, they were radical and militant in their response. My observation is that the Jewish response, in the first century, is similar to the Muslim response today when someone claims to be a prophet or messiah from God that replaced or competes with the Islamic messenger called Muhammad. They both used execution to silence the person(s).

 Obviously, today, Judaism does not carry-out, teach or promote a violent response to anyone’s claim to be a messenger or messiah from God. Judaism never had a call to conquer the whole world by the sword for God. The Hebrews were directed to overthrow the pagan societies of the Promised Land who had rejected the Truth of God. Remember that God has revealed Himself to every person from the beginning of the creation and they are without excuse (Romans 1:18ff). These societies were wicked to the core as the Nazis under Hitler were in Germany, and the Japanese under Emperor Worship in Japan. The world’s response to Japan and Germany was all-out war. Nothing was held back to bring victory.

**Hard Hearts**

Just like Peter and John, the hardened hearts of those opposing God’s message (“saved by grace through faith and not of our own works”) could not stand the message Stephen was preaching. Just like in our time, Stephen presented the TRUTH, of which evil hearts cannot cope. So, what does an evil heart do to The Message with which they cannot cope? They destroy the messenger.

**Acts 6:10** But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit

 with which he was speaking.

We see this in court rooms all the time in America. The attorneys attempt to discredit the witness by a series of questions. Often-times, they are successful. They can lie, by the questions they ask. ‘*Is it true that you kicked your dog yesterday*?’ No matter what the jury hears after that question, they will think that you are a person that may be an animal abuser. The question does not have to be true. The question is to paint doubt about your character.

**Acts 6:11** Then they secretly induced men to say,

 "We have heard him speak blasphemous words

 against Moses and against God."

Lies worked well in illegally prosecuting Jesus and lies will work against Stephen. It is my observation that lies are believed because the ears that hear lies want them to be true.

 **Acts 6:12** And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes,

and they came up to him and dragged him away

and brought him before the Council.

 We know that Stephen came to the public’s attention after Jesus, Peter and John. Those that opposed God’s Message had their plan of attack well-rehearsed. Discredit, lie and bring false witnesses to gain a conviction. Then there is the ‘guilt by association’. We see here that the accusers associated Stephen with Jesus, and, for good measure, accused Stephen of attacking Moses, speaking against the Temple and the Law. God hates these tactics. There isn’t any record of how their eyes looked, other than they “gazed” at Stephen. Stephen’s accusers utilized at least six of the things God hates.

**Proverbs 6:16-19** 6 There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: 17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, 19 A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers.

 **Acts 6:13** They put forward false witnesses who said,

"This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law;

 **14** for we have heard him say

that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place

and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

Again, these charges worked against Jesus, so why not keep using the same ingredients. Verse 15 accounts for all seven sins that God hates listed in Proverbs 6. ‘Haughty eyes’ means to look down on someone with a superior and condemning attitude. Or were they shocked to see Stephen’s face like angel?

**Acts 6:15** And fixing their gaze on him, [haughty eyes Proverbs 6:17]

all who were sitting in the Council saw his face

 like the face of an angel.

**Historical Insight**

Due to comparisons with historical events, historians tell us that Stephen was stoned in about 35 A.D. Historians also tell us that in 6 A.D. the Roman policy throughout their empire made it illegal for local authorities to execute anyone on their own authority.

Stephen’s stoning took place after Pilate had left the governor’s office and before the next Roman governor arrived. The Jewish authorities used the legal vacuum to apply their own authority on the people. We see this documented by Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book XX, Chapter 9 (Greek, English). This reference is our insight to the death of Jesus’s brother, James, and the Roman execution policy. James was stoned by the order of the High Priest (Ananus) during a period when the Roman governor was not in place.

**Insight into Stephen**

What does Stephen tell the High Priest and court?

This is the same court that tried Jesus, Peter and John. We see a view into Stephen’s knowledge of Jewish history and what we call the Old Testament. We know that Stephen was a person of Greek culture and language. He most likely was not born a Jew but became a Jew and learned their history through reading the Old Testament (The Tanahk: Tora (Law), Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketubim (Writings). Stephen was a learned person who paid attention to the details. Stephen saw in the Old Testament that the current Jewish leadership had misunderstood God’s Word. I see this as one of the greatest speeches, and delivery of a speech, in the Bible.

Please open your Bibles to Acts 7 and follow along as we observe God at work in the life of Stephen.

**Acts 7**

1 The high priest said, "Are these things so?"

 2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him,

 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES,

 AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.'

 4 "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran.

 From there, after his father died,

 God had him move to this country in which you are now living.

 5 "But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground,

 and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that

 HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION,

 AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM.

 6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his

DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND,

AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED

AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.

 7 "'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God,

 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT

 AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.'

 8 "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

 9 "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph

and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,

 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.

 11 "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.

 12 "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt,

he sent our fathers there the first time.

 13 "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.

 14 "Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all.

 15 "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died.

 16 "From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

 17 "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt,

 18 until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH.

 19 "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.

 20 "It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.

 21 "And after he had been set outside Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son.

 22 "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians and he was a man of power in words and deeds.

 23 "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel.

 24 "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian.

 25 "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.

 26 "On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?'

 27 "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying,

 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US?

 28 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?'

 29 "At this remark,

 MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.

 30 "After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH.

 31 "When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord:

 32 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look.

 33 "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.

 34 'I HAVE CERTAINLY

SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT

AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS,

AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM;

COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'

 35 "This Moses whom they disowned, saying,

'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?'

is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.

 36 "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.

 37 "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel,

 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.'

 38 "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

 39 "Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him,

 but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt,

 40 SAYING TO AARON,

'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US;

FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT-- WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.'

 41 "At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

 42 "But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets,

'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL?

 43 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.'

 44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.

 45 "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David.

 46 "David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

 47 "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.

 48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

 49 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?

50 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

 There isn’t any house that man can build for God to stay. God does not need housing like the pagan gods, represented in the idols the Hebrews brought-out of Egypt. The Temple was a place to worship God, and a meeting place. The Holy of Holies was representation of the place to meet God for the forgiveness of sin. The Mercy Seat is on top of the Ark of the Covenant. In God’s plan, His Spirit indwells people’s hearts. Jesus teaching to Nicodemus (John 3) calls for a person to be reborn of Spirit. This enables a person to meet God in their heart. Ezekiel 36 details God changing hearts of those who call upon Him (Ezekiel 36:37). This is stated again in Romans 10:13 “*Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*” (Joel 2:32). The Temple’s Holy of Holies is in the heart of every Believer. This is the place where God meets people who humble themselves seeking Him for forgiveness.

**Public Indictment**

It is obvious, based-upon recent events that Stephen knew the response he would receive, and the authorities would seek to kill him. Stephen is likened to a soldier captured in a war, and given a mock trial where the outcome was predetermined. Instead of reciting a “form confession” written by the enemy, Stephen spoke the truth. Stephen indicted them in the presence of their own public. This is the power of the Resurrection. Why do people say and do the things Stephen did unless they have seen and verified the Truth in God’s Message. They are called to be that eternal witness. It is the *Truth-worth-dying-for*. We see this in wars throughout history. People speak the Truth and live-out the Truth. For their devotion, they are killed by those who oppose the Truth.

 51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

 52 "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;

 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

**Response**

 54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

**View to Eternal Life – Life into Eternal-Life Experience**

 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit,

he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God;

 56 and he said,

 "Behold, I see the heavens opened up

 and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

 57 But they cried out with a loud voice,

 and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.

 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said,

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice,

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"

 Having said this, he fell asleep.

We all will one day ‘fall asleep’ in the Lord. Some are called to be a soldier, like Stephen, in a war and fully anticipate passing through temporal death’s door. But Stephen also knew his eternal reality. Jesus told us. . .

**John 14:1** "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

 2 "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.

 3 "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

 4 "And you know the way where I am going." AMEN