

Chapter 18: The Heavens Opened

Acts 7:54–60

As Stephen drew his testimony to a close, he brought very pointed accusations against the Sanhedrin. Whatever they may have thought about Stephen's exposition of Old Testament history, there could be no doubt in their minds that Stephen represented a threat to their religion, position, power, and influence in his final statements. From this, the court transforms into an enraged mob that quickly carries out Stephen's execution. Yet, throughout this ordeal, Stephen is not portrayed as frightened, but as captivated by the glory and the kingship of Christ, as he sees the Son of Man reigning from heaven. Although we are not promised to see in this life the same vision that Stephen saw, what Stephen saw is given for our instruction, to ensure us that *Jesus' reign as king transforms Christian suffering into victory*.

The Reign of Jesus (Acts 7:54–56)

Luke does not tell us at what point the Sanhedrin understood the pointed nature of Stephen's rehearsal of Old Testament history. Did they see early on his subtle weaving together of an indictment against their fathers as a way of turning the tables against them in these proceedings? Or, did they only understand the significance of the story he was telling in Acts 7:51–53, when Stephen's accusations became pointed? We do not know when they became enraged at Stephen, but v. 54 makes clear that they became enraged: "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him." The word "enraged" translates three words. The first word signifies something that is "sawed in two," and it appeared in Acts 5:33 to describe the rage of the Sanhedrin against the apostles. This time, however, Gamaliel does not stop the fury of the Sanhedrin from harming Stephen. The second two words mean "the[ir] heart." In some ways, the Sanhedrin is "cut to the heart" like in Acts 2:37, although the language for "cut" is different from "sawed in two." The difference is apparent: this sawing-in-two of their hearts did not lead Sanhedrin to repent, but rather to rise up to silence Stephen by putting him to death.

As the Sanhedrin rises against him, Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit and sees a vision from heaven: "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (v. 55).¹ We should remember that being full of the Holy Spirit is not new for Stephen, since our introduction to him in Acts 6:5 told us that he was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). Even so, the New Testament speaks of being filled with the Spirit as something that happens to different degrees at different times (Acts 4:8, 31; 13:52; Eph. 5:18), so that we are meant to understand this moment as an extraordinary filling of the Holy Spirit. It is instructive to us that Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit" when he saw the glory of God and Jesus, "standing at the right hand of God" *in heaven*. Specifically, he says that he sees "the Son of Man," which is the only time in the New Testament that anyone other than Jesus uses that title to

¹ "But as for us, it is no marvel if Christ do not show himself to us, because we are so set and tied upon the earth....But as for us, it is no marvel if Christ do not show himself to us, because we are so set and tied upon the earth." (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:313.)

describe Jesus.² Christ is “seated...at [God’s] right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:20), and God has “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). As with all blessings that we experience in this life, we receive this through “the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13–14).

What, though, does Luke mean when he says that Jesus is “standing” at the right hand of God, when so often the Scriptures portray him as “sitting” at the right hand of God (e.g., Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33–34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). For Lutheran theologians, the contrast between Christ’s *sitting* (normally) and his *standing* (here) illustrates their doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ in the *genus maiestaticum* (“majestic genus”), in which Christ’s glorified body gained divine attributes, namely of omnipresence.³ By this doctrine, Lutherans teach that Christ’s body and blood is present in an unlimited way with his people. The Reformed, however, have taught that Christ’s body retains the ordinary attributes of human nature, namely that a human body can only be in one place at one time—and, for Christ, we are taught that Christ’s body is in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. (The Lutherans have termed this doctrine the *extra Calvinistica*, i.e., a novel, unique, “extra” belief which they allege were held by Calvinists alone.)

Others have argued that seeing Jesus in a *standing* position emphasizes something about what he is doing for Stephen and/or against the Sanhedrin: as an advocate,⁴ as a witness,⁵ as a judge and ruler.⁶ David Noe argues, though, that Theodore Beza was correct to translate the word “standing” not as a reference to Jesus’

² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 165–66.

³ e.g., Lenski: “Strange interpretations have been given to Luke’s words. Thus it is said that Jesus is standing and not sitting with God on his throne; that he is not revealing himself as coregent with God but as the servant of the King of heaven, the one who is next to the throne, who is ready to obey the nod of the King and his will in the whole domain of his rule. An older view claims that Jesus’ standing thus in heaven means that, when in his human nature Jesus is sitting or standing in heaven, he is closed there so that he cannot at the same time and in the human nature be present on earth (Calvin, *Institutiones* IV, 17, 16), and that we must interpret Matt. 28:20; 18:20; the words of the Lord’s Supper, and all similar passages according to the limitation this reasoning places upon the body, the bodily presence, and the human nature of Jesus in his glory. The basic deficiency of these reasoning has often been pointed out. They play one passage of Scripture against another instead of letting one class of passages illumine and interpret the other class. *Scriptura ex Scriptura explicanda est*, always and always, and not by rationalizings of human minds regarding some passage or passages so as to make them conflict with other passages.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 304–05.)

⁴ The position of Augustine: “that he sitteth as a judge, that he stood then as an advocate” (quoted by Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:315.)

⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 168.

⁶ “The view [of Jesus’ standing] with the most far-reaching implications, however, is that Stephen’s vision links up with the original Son of Man vision in Dan 7:13–14, where the Son of Man is depicted as standing before the Ancient of Days. The primary role of the Danielic Son of Man was that of judgment, and the New Testament consistently depicts Christ in this role of eschatological judge (cf. Matt 25:31–46). The standing position may thus depict the exalted Christ in his role of judge. If so, Stephen’s vision not only confirmed his testimony, but it showed Christ rising to render judgment on his accusers. They, not he, were the guilty parties. In Dan 7:14 the Son of Man was given dominion over ‘all peoples, nations, and men of every language.’ If this is a further implication of Stephen’s Son of Man vision, it ties in well with his understanding of God as not being bound to one nation or people. It is a vision of the boundless reign of Christ, which was soon to begin with the Samaritan mission of Stephen’s fellow Hellenist Philip.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 208.)

bodily posture, but to his location.⁷ If so, then the text should be translated as something like, “the Son of Man *positioned* at the right hand of God.” Noe points especially to Revelation 3, where Jesus is both portrayed as standing and sitting at the same time: “Behold, I *stand* at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him *to sit with me* on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:20–21). Another significant text Noe points to for understanding “standing” as referring to location is in the parable of the tax Pharisee and the tax collector where both are described as “standing,” but in different locations; the Pharisee is “standing by himself,” while the tax collector is “standing far off” (Luke 18:11, 13). The posture is not so much in view as the respective location of each man.⁸

All of these explanations, in one way or another, remind us that Jesus himself told the Sanhedrin that “from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69). Therefore, Stephen’s vision confirmed that “Jesus is indeed now risen and exalted to his position of authority at God’s right hand. The vision confirmed Stephen’s testimony. His messianic claims for Jesus were verified in his vision of the exalted Son of Man.”⁹ Stephen’s declaration in v. 56, then, offers one more piece of evidence that the Sanhedrin had not erred wickedly in condemning Jesus; however, as Bruce observes, “Unless the judges were prepared to admit that their former decision was tragically mistaken, they had no logical option but to find Stephen guilty of blasphemy as well.”¹⁰

The Rage of the World (Acts 7:57–58)

Although some have argued that the reaction of the Sanhedrin reflects a formal sentence of death on Stephen, the text does not support this idea. Having tried to salve their guilty consciences by going through the legalism of a formal trial, they now drop the charade: “Pandemonium broke loose. All legal formalities were cast aside as mob rage and violence suddenly came into control.”¹¹ Just as Stephen had rebuked the Sanhedrin from being “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (Acts 7:51), so now the Sanhedrin “stopped their ears” as they “rushed together at him.”¹² In their minds, however, they were treating “Stephen’s words...[as] the most awful blasphemy. Lest they hear another word like that they shout with might and main to drown out Stephen’s voice and stop their ears so that no word of his may enter them.”¹³ Because their hearts rejected Stephen’s proclamation that Jesus was in heaven, reigning as king, they refused to listen to him any longer. Truly, their hearts and their ears were uncircumcised.

⁷ David Noe, “Sitting or Standing? Theodore Beza’s Interpretation of ἑστῶτα in Acts 7:55–56” (Seminar presented at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 6 November 2025).

⁸ See also the position of Calvin: “For mine own part, I think that though these speeches be diverse, yet they signify both one thing. For neither sitting, nor yet standing, noteth out how the body of Christ was framed; but this is referred unto his power and kingdom. For where shall we erect him a throne, that he may sit at the right hand of God the Father, seeing God doth fill all things in such sort, that we ought to imagine no place for his right hand?” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:315.)

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 207.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 165.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 306.

¹² Bock, *Acts*, 313 citing L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra pagina 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 140.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 306.

Next, Luke tells us that “they cast him out of the city and stoned him” (v. 58a). As when Jesus was taken outside the city to be crucified, “there was a certain irony in their action. Out of concern for the sanctity of the city, they performed their unholy deed outside its bounds.”¹⁴ Their actions, then, line up with Stephen’s rebuke of their wrong understanding of the holy place of the land and the city of Jerusalem.

Most significantly, Luke drops a detail with characteristic understatement: “And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (v. 58b). This is our first formal introduction to Saul, who would later be called Paul; however, we should remember that the opposition against Stephen arose from a synagogue of Hellenistic Jews from areas that included “Cilicia” (Acts 6:9), the region from which Saul came (Acts 21:39; 22:3). As mentioned in a previous study, it is likely that Paul was a member of this synagogue. The reason for laying down garments at the feet of Saul, is not clear; however, Lenski offers a basic assessment of the data: “We must assume that Saul was acting in an official capacity, either alone or in conjunction with others who were superintending the stoning.”¹⁵ The introduction of Saul is important here, since Luke will spotlight Saul’s persecution in the next section (Acts 8:1–3) as what scatters the church into Samaria (Acts 8:4ff), where Philip (in particular) bears witness as the next step in obedience to Jesus’ command in Acts 1:8.

The Redemption of Persecution (Acts 7:59–60)

The story of Stephen’s death closely follows the details of Jesus’ own death, as Polhill explains well: “He seems to have consciously followed the pattern of his Master as he faced his own death. His last words, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’ echoed those Jesus prayed from the cross. This was the same basic commitment of his life to his Lord that Jesus made to the Father in his own dying moments (Luke 23:46).”¹⁶ There is, however, “one major difference” in that Stephen “calls out’ to heaven....It recalls the exhortation of Peter that to receive salvation one must call out to the Lord (Acts 2:21). Thus in the moment when Stephen is truly alone and his life is at an end, he turns to God and asks that his spirit be received.”¹⁷ In this, we see both that Stephen follows the example of Jesus’ death, and that Stephen is an exemplar to believers who suffer and die in dependence upon the Lord Jesus.

The same pattern appears in the final verse: “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (v. 60). Bock writes, “Stephen ends up on his knees in prayer (on this posture: Luke 22:41; Acts 9:40; 20:36; 21:5). He cries out to the Lord (probably to Jesus, see v. 59) for the forgiveness of those stoning him, thereby recalling Jesus’ words to pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6:27–28) and emulating Jesus’ act on the cross (Luke 23:34...).”¹⁸ Stephen looks to Jesus as the Savior who died an unrepeatable death for his salvation, but Stephen also looks to Jesus as the paradigmatic example of a righteous death.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the Sanhedrin react to Stephen’s speech (v. 54)? What does it mean that Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit” (v. 55a)? What did Stephen see in heaven (v. 55b)? Why does Luke record

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 208.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 308.

¹⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 209.

¹⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 315.

¹⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 315.

the contents of the vision twice, once in the narrative, and once in Stephen's own words (vv. 55–56)? What is the significance of the title "Son of Man" (see Dan. 7:13–14)? What is the significance of Jesus' being positioned at his Father's right hand?

2. How does the Sanhedrin's rage and the stopping of their ears connect with Stephen's accusation that they were "uncircumcised in heart and ears" (v. 57; see Acts 7:51)? Why do they "cast [Stephen] out of the city" (v. 58a)? How formal and legal were the proceedings to execute Stephen? What is the significance of the brief description we have of Saul here (v. 58b)? How will Saul carry forward the persecution in the church after this (see Acts 8:1–3)?

3. What is the significance that Stephen "called out" (v. 59a; see Acts 2:21)? How does Stephen's prayer for the Lord to receive his spirit compare with Jesus' prayer from the cross (Luke 23:46)? What is the significance of Stephen's "falling to his knees" (v. 60a)? How does Stephen's prayer for the forgiveness of his persecutors compare to Jesus' prayers (Luke 23:34)? What is similar, and what is different, between the deaths of Jesus and Stephen?

4. Where has the church experienced persecution historically? Where do Christians suffer the fiercest persecution today (see the website for *Voice of the Martyrs* for more information)? How have the enemies of the church increased persecution against the church in the United States recently? How might persecution beget more persecution? How does Stephen's vision strengthen our faith today as we prepare for the possibility of persecution?