

CONCERNING THE WAY

March 2, 2010

LESSON 93: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



Chapter 6

I want to start this lesson with the last verse from chapter 5, because there's something there I forgot to point out last time:

Acts 5:42 *And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

This is one of those things that easily gets missed (I did the first time through), but notice that the apostles kept right on *teaching* and *preaching*. These are two different things. Teaching is the Greek word *didaskō*, which means to teach objective truth, and in this context means to install doctrine in someone, and it is where we get the word "doctrine".

The word "preaching" is the Greek word *euaggelizō*, which means to bring good news, and in the New Testament context, means to bring good news about salvation that can be found in Christ. It's where we get the word "evangelize". These are two different concepts, and make us realize that the apostles were teaching the believers doctrine, and they were preaching, or proclaiming in some versions, the good news about Jesus to unbelievers.

This is important, because in too many churches all pastors do is preach from the pulpit, when they need to be constantly teaching the doctrine of the Word of God. Preaching is for unbelievers. Teaching is for the church.

The early church was teaching and preaching every day, in the temple and from house to house! What could we accomplish if we did that today! Of course, it was a unique time, one that we couldn't repeat today. In some ways, it was simpler to witness then – not necessarily easier, but simpler. You didn't have to explain who God was to a Jew. And they all knew, at least in a general way, that Messiah was coming to deliver the nation. All they basically had to do was explain that this Jesus that everyone had heard so much about was the Messiah, and explain the scriptures that talked about Him.

Today it's much more complicated. To witness to people today, you can't just jump in talking about Jesus, because so many people don't really know who Jesus is. You have to start by talking about The God who created everything from nothing, then about Adam & Eve, the Fall, and so on and eventually get to God's plan to save the human race. You have to do that or they don't understand why Jesus had to die for us. We live in an increasingly pagan society that doesn't know the true God or anything about the Bible.

Acts 6:1 *In those days, as the number of the disciples was growing larger and larger, a complaint was made by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.*

The Hellenists were those of Jewish descent who grew up outside the land of Israel, but had returned

to Jerusalem. Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek, were raised in Hellenistic culture, and used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint. The Hebrews were Palestinian Jews who spoke Aramaic and used the Hebrew Old Testament.

Hellenistic Jews were Jews who had pretty much adopted Greek thought, customs, and lifestyle, as well as the Greek language. The city of Alexandria in Egypt was where you would find many of them, but they were scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

It was a custom for many Jews of the Diaspora to return to Jerusalem later in life so that they could die and be buried there. This is the reason why there were so many Hellenistic widows. We've mentioned before that there was a Jewish belief that in the last days when the resurrection happened, those who were buried in Jerusalem would rise first. Even today there is a Jewish custom of being buried with a packet of soil from Israel.

In those days many men died young, and there was no social security or life insurance to take care of their families, so there were many women left widowed that had no means to support themselves or their children. Apparently the widows would line up to receive food handouts from the church. Remember, from Acts 2:44-46 we know that the early church shared with each other so that none of the believers would be in need, and that included sharing food.

It is clear in the Law and the Prophets that it is the responsibility of believers to care for widows and other needy people (Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 24:19, 26:12-13, 27:19, Isaiah 1:17, 23, Jeremiah 7:6, Malachi 3:5). We see in Acts that the early church continued this tradition. But the Hellenistic Jews felt that the Hebraic widows were being given priority. Whether this was true or not, the apostles took action:

Acts 6:2-4 So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables. (3) But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task. (4) But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Keep in mind that the twelve are the apostles, but there were many other disciples – followers of Christ. What they say here is very important. Those who are called to be pastors or “overseers” of churches are to spend their time in prayer and ministry of the word, not with other church duties. It is not that they are too proud to wait on tables, but they are gifted for teaching and prayer, and anything that keeps them from that causes the whole ministry to suffer .

But you can see how important that charitable duties were, because look at the qualifications given in verse 3. They must have a good reputation, are controlled by the Spirit, and are full of wisdom.

Too many pastors think it's their job to be the CEO, or coach, or cheerleader, or psychologist of the church, but they cannot be wasting their time with those things. They must be focused on giving the Word of God. At this point the apostles are acting as the elders of the church, and scripturally the elders are also responsible for teaching the Word of God. But here in Acts no elders have been appointed yet.

The story is told how when Chuck Swindoll was hired by a church in California, they told him right up front that they wanted him to spend at least thirty hours a week in his office praying and studying the Word of God. They said they would take care of the running of the church, but his job was to give

them the Word of God. That's the way it is supposed to be, folks! How many pastors these days do you think spend 30 hours a week studying the Bible and praying?

Acts 6:5-6 The proposal pleased the entire group, so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch. (6) They stood these men before the apostles, who prayed and placed their hands on them.

What we have here is the church appointing the first deacons in the church. A deacon, the Greek word "diakonos", is "an *attendant*, that is, (generally) a *waiter* (at table or in other menial duties), or a servant". The seven men here chosen are not actually called "deacons" in this section, but it is probable that their activities later grew into an actual office of the church. In 2 Timothy 3:8-12 Paul gives us the detailed requirements to be a deacon. There's not much else in the New Testament about deacons, but these people are assigned the more "lowly" tasks in the church. Not lowly as in unimportant or insignificant, but more menial and thankless jobs. We would think of the deacons or "young men" at Jerusalem preparing the rooms for meetings, distributing food and money, maintaining order at the meetings, baptizing new converts, and distributing the elements at the Lord's Supper. These are the people who do important tasks in the church, but are hardly ever recognized. They do the things that keep the church running.

The praying and "placing their hands" on them, or more commonly referred to "laying on of hands", is not something mystical. It simply means that they were approving these men and commissioning them for this ministry (also see Deuteronomy 34:9). We also know that this symbolically conferred at least some apostolic authority to them, because next we see Stephen doing miracles that previously only the twelve had been doing. The people would now know that these seven men were the apostles' representatives and could be trusted like them.

Notice that the deacons were chosen by all the disciples, or church congregation, but were approved by the apostles, who were the functional elders/overseers at the time. This is a pattern for churches today.

This may be a shock to you, but the Biblical pattern for the operation of a church is not a democracy. There are only two places in the New Testament where the congregation of a church has a say in the operation of the church. One is here in Acts 6, and the other is in Acts 15:21-26, where the church as a whole chooses missionaries (Judas and Silas) to go with Paul and Barnabas. There is no other Biblical support for the congregation voting on anything but choosing deacons and missionaries. The other decisions in the church are to be made by the elders. Churches must be led by elders. We'll discuss eldership more later in Acts.

All seven men had Greek names, implying they were Hellenistic. Nicolas, the last one named, was not even a Jew but was a convert to Judaism and then to Christianity. The early church may have felt that this would help solve the problem of the perceived neglect of Grecian Jewish widows.

Stephen and Phillip, the first two men in the group, we'll read more about in the next few chapters. The other five men we never hear any more about.

Acts 6:7 The word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Amazingly, even many of the religious leaders were responding to the gospel. It is estimated that there were as many as 8,000 priests in Jerusalem at that time that served their turn in temple service. There were many sincere and godly priests among them like Zacharias (Luke 1:6-7). They would have been well aware of the teachings of Jesus and also of the evidences of His resurrection, and were not part of the group which got Him crucified. This response on the part of so many priests is a more evidence of the truth of His resurrection. On the other hand, it is also possible that these men, with their training, could have taken on a leading role in the church and been responsible for its later problems with the so-called "Judaizers," who wanted the Christians to continue also in all the temple rituals and practices.

Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

For the first time, miracles were being done by someone other than the twelve disciples. Stephen, one of the new deacons, is being used by God (full of grace and power) in a dramatic way. God was doing this to show that He was using this man. There was no written New Testament at that time, this was how God was spreading the gospel here in the early church, with miracles.

Acts 6:9-10 But some men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, as well as some from Cilicia and the province of Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. (10) Yet they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

When the truth is going out, there will always be opposition. That is as true today as it was then, so be prepared for that whenever you witness to people. This was apparently a group of former slaves who had formed some kind of association. They had been living in Greece, (modern day) Turkey, and North Africa, and they were apparently here in Jerusalem now and had formed a synagogue.

Stephen was not just waiting on tables, but was actively evangelizing, going into synagogues to share the good news about Jesus. It was probably in this setting that these "Freedmen" started arguing with Stephen. But because he was full of the Holy Spirit's grace and power, they could not stand up to the truth he was speaking. They couldn't refute it or stop it. This is another fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies in Luke 12:11-12 and Luke 21:15.

Acts 6:11-12 Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." (12) They incited the people, the elders, and the experts in the law; then they approached Stephen, seized him, and brought him before the council.

So they got some people stirred up, including the Jewish elders (not church elders), accusing him of speaking against the Mosaic Law (to speak against God's Law was to blaspheme God), and brought him to the Sanhedrin. This is the third of four times in Acts that followers of Christ are brought before the council (Peter and John in 4:15, all of the apostles in 5:27, And Paul will be brought before them in 22:30).

Acts 6:13-15 They brought forward false witnesses who said, "This man does not stop saying things against this holy place and the law. (14) For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." (15) All who were sitting in the council looked intently at Stephen and saw his face was like the face of an angel.

“All through history, including today, the enemies who attempt to undermine the Christian faith have resorted to distortions of one kind or another, as well as ad hominem attacks against its teachers. They cannot use actual facts, as all true facts of Scripture, science and history support Biblical Christianity.” Henry Morris

Stephen may have said the things they accused him of; but they misrepresented his intentions (see Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58; John 2:19). Jesus Himself predicted the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6), though He never said He would do it.

This is probably the first time we see in history the clash between the idea of salvation by works (keeping the Law) and salvation by grace. Stephen was preaching that salvation was not possible through law-keeping, but only available through believing Jesus was Messiah. He knew that the Law was temporary.

The Jews believed you had to keep the Law of Moses to be saved. So this is a central issue that was hitting them in the face early on, and it still creeps into even the church today. The Jews made the Law the centerpiece of their theology. If we do that we bypass the saving grace found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the centerpiece of our theology, and He completely fulfills the Law. The purpose of the Law was to reveal that we are sinners and to bring us to Christ.

“This place” in verse 14 is the temple, of course. This is close to what Jesus said, but purposely misquoted Him to condemn Stephen. Jesus was saying that His body would be torn down in three days and would rise again.

Stephen’s face looked like an angel. Evidently his face glowed with God’s glory (like Moses’ face, Exodus 34:29, 35).

Chapter 7

Acts 7:1-5 Then the high priest said, "Are these things true?" (2) So he replied, "Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our forefather Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran, (3) and said to him, 'Go out from your country and from your relatives, and come to the land I will show you.' (4) Then he went out from the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God made him move to this country where you now live. (5) He did not give any of it to him for an inheritance, not even a foot of ground, yet God promised to give it to him as his possession, and to his descendants after him, even though Abraham as yet had no child.

Although there are similarities between Jesus’ trial and Stephen’s, a big difference is that Jesus didn’t open his mouth in response to questioning. Stephen, however, while not answering the charges, turns the tables on them and went on the offensive. He went after them like a prosecuting attorney.

Stephen is now going to give the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Israel, a history lesson. Why did he do this? It’s possible that by this time many Jews and even religious leaders did not know their own history very well. Do you find that strange?

I’ll guarantee you the majority of people in the United States don’t know the history of our country very well, and we’ve been around for less than two hundred fifty years. Most people can’t name more than

a few of our most famous men and events in U.S. history, but can name you all the current pop stars and sports figures.

This is the longest recorded message in the book of Acts, which shows how important Luke thought it was. We'll read through the verses without much comment, because these are pretty well known facts of Jewish history. Some have tried to say there are contradictions in these verses with the account in Genesis, but there are solutions to each of these apparent problems, and you have to keep in mind that Stephen was trying to sum up 2000 years of history in just a few minutes. It's understandable that he would have rounded off numbers and compressed some events. He wasn't necessarily wrong in anything he said, he was just summing up very quickly in order to get his point across, which we'll see in verse 51.

Acts 7:6 But God spoke as follows: 'Your descendants will be foreigners in a foreign country, whose citizens will enslave them and mistreat them for four hundred years.'

Stephen is probably rounding off at 400 years, as many of us do when we mention a larger number. Galatians 3:17 tells us it was 430 years.

Acts 7:7-14 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,'said God, 'and after these things they will come out of there and worship me in this place.' (8) Then God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision, and so he became the father of Isaac and circumcised him when he was eight days old, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

(9) The patriarchs, because they were jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him, (10) and rescued him from all his troubles, and granted him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. (11) Then a famine occurred throughout Egypt and Canaan, causing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. (12) So when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there the first time.

(13) On their second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers again, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. (14) So Joseph sent a message and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come, seventy-five people in all.

This number follows the Septuagint, which arrived at 75 by including the son and grandson of Manasseh and two sons and a grandson of Ephraim. Genesis 46:27 numbered the family differently, totaling 70. A theme that Stephen is presenting throughout this narrative is that the rejected one becomes the deliverer of the nation. In this case, it was Joseph.

Acts 7:15-16 So Jacob went down to Egypt and died there, along with our ancestors, (16) and their bones were later moved to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a certain sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

According to Genesis 23:16, Jacob was buried at Hebron in the Cave of Machpelah, which Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite. Joseph was buried at Shechem in a piece of ground Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor (Joshua 24:32). Stephen is just "telescoping" these two events because he was being brief and in a hurry.

Acts 7:17-22 "But as the time drew near for God to fulfill the promise he had declared to Abraham, the people increased greatly in number in Egypt, (18) until another king who did not know about Joseph ruled over Egypt. (19) This was the one who exploited our people and was cruel to our ancestors, forcing them to abandon their infants so they would die. (20) At that time Moses was born, and he was beautiful to God. For three months he was brought up in his father's house, (21) and when he had been abandoned, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. (22) So Moses was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

Though it is not mentioned in Hebrew scriptures, historians Josephus and Philo both say that Moses received the finest Egyptian education and was trained in arithmetic, geometry, music, literature, astronomy, writing, philosophy, and more.

Acts 7:23-35 But when he was about forty years old, it entered his mind to visit his fellow countrymen the Israelites. (24) When he saw one of them being hurt unfairly, Moses came to his defense and avenged the person who was mistreated by striking down the Egyptian. (25) He thought his own people would understand that God was delivering them through him, but they did not understand. (26) The next day Moses saw two men fighting, and tried to make peace between them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why are you hurting one another?' (27) But the man who was unfairly hurting his neighbor pushed Moses aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?' (28) You don't want to kill me the way you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?' (29) When the man said this, Moses fled and became a foreigner 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 desert of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. (31) When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and when he approached to investigate, there came the voice of the Lord, (32) 'I am the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look more closely. (33) But the Lord said to him, 'Take the sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. (34) I have certainly seen the suffering of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Now come, I will send you to Egypt.' (35) This same Moses they had rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and judge?' God sent as both ruler and deliverer through the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

History repeats itself. Once again the rejected one (Moses) becomes the deliverer of Israel.

Acts 7:36-45 This man led them out, performing wonders and miraculous signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. (37) This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers.' (38) This is the man who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors, and he received living oracles to give to you. (39) Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him, but pushed him aside and turned back to Egypt in their hearts, (40) saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go in front of us, for this Moses, who led us out of the land of Egypt — we do not know what has happened to him!'

(41) At that time they made an idol in the form of a calf, brought a sacrifice to the idol, and began rejoicing in the works of their hands. (42) But God turned away from them and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: 'It was not to me that you offered slain animals and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, house of Israel? (43) But you took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rephan, the images you made to worship, but I will deport you beyond Babylon.' (44) Our ancestors had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as God who spoke to Moses ordered him to make it according to the design he had seen. (45) Our ancestors received possession of it and brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors, until the time of David.

Now we're brought up to the time of David. They've had the tent-tabernacle all this time, but now it was time to build a temple:

Acts 7:46-50 He found favor with God and asked that he could find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. (47) But Solomon built a house for him. (48) Yet the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says, (49) 'Heaven is my throne, and earth is the footstool for my feet. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is my resting place? (50) Did my hand not make all these things?'

Stephen seems to be saying they were overemphasizing the importance of the temple, and neglecting the One it was made for. The tabernacle and the temple were always meant as a representation of God's presence, God dwelling with His people. But in reality God cannot be confined to a building, of course! God is omnipresent. Jesus is confining Himself in His physical body, and is currently at the "right hand" of the Father in heaven, but His spirit is actually everywhere, and lives in those who have trusted Him. This is a mystery we cannot fully grasp, but it is so.

Acts 7:51 "You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, like your ancestors did!"

Stephen finishes his history lesson and then makes his point, which is a rebuke to these religious leaders. I bet his face doesn't look like an angel now! He was reminding these people how He has led them through all the years of their history, and how rebellious they were. Israel had shown a pattern of not recognizing their own savior. Like Joseph and then Moses, Israel rejected the deliverer that God had sent in Jesus Christ.

Some translations use "stiff-necked" for the word stubborn. Stephen then cut them to the core by telling them that though they may have been circumcised in their flesh, they were uncircumcised in the core of their being, their soul. He really nailed them with that, because circumcision was the great sign of belonging to God. The dirty filthy Gentiles were the uncircumcised! What an insult!

Acts 7:52-53 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold long ago the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become! (53) You received the law by decrees given by angels, but you did not obey it."

This would be like us standing before Congress and starting out talking very pleasantly about the founding of our nation, the history of how God has led us, and then letting them have it by calling them traitors, thieves, and murderers. Come to think of it, maybe someone should do that!

Stephen was accusing these guy's ancestors, and by extension themselves, of being the ones who persecuted and killed the prophets who spoke of the coming of the Messiah. Keep in mind that all of the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of the coming Messiah, and many were persecuted and killed. And there were other prophets who didn't write books that also tried to get the people to repent and prepare for the coming of the Messiah, and they were also persecuted. People didn't want to hear it. There has always been a resistance to the idea of a coming Messiah, even today most people don't want to talk about the 2nd coming of Christ. Psalm 2 tells us that this rebelliousness is not just confined to Israel, but all the nations resist the coming of the Messiah.

And Stephen keeps turning the knife by accusing them, the keepers of the Law, of not keeping the Law themselves.

"You received the Law by decrees given by angels". The involvement of angels is also mentioned in Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2; and Deuteronomy 33:2.

Acts 7:54 When they heard these things, they became furious and ground their teeth at him.

The word furious doesn't really do the original Greek justice. It has the sense of a knife cutting them in their heart. What Stephen said slashed them in the hearts. And they're so mad, they grit their teeth. Have you ever been so mad that you talk while gritting your teeth? That's what they were doing.

Acts 7:55-56 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (56) "Look!" he said. "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

"Son of Man" is the Messiah from Daniel 7. The picture of Jesus standing (rather than seated) could be Jesus rising to receive his child, Stephen. It could have been to honor Stephen, who was giving an incredible testimony of Him. It's also interesting to note that defense counsel normally represent his client while sitting down. But if he is attacked or misrepresented, he will stand up and object. Jesus is our great intercessor and advocate (Acts 2:34; Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1), and He was standing to receive His client, Stephen. What a picture for us! Will Jesus stand to receive you into His presence?

We also may have the opportunity to glorify God in the face of death, boldly declaring our confidence in the fact that we will spend eternity in the presence of God.

By speaking this vision out loud, Stephen offended the council even further, who believed no one could share God's place in heaven. The phrase is a variation on Psalm 110:1.

Acts 7:57-58 But they covered their ears, shouting out with a loud voice, and rushed at him with one intent. (58) When they had driven him out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.

They quickly saw what Stephen was saying—Israel was guilty; the Law was temporary; and the temple would be done away with. There was no greater offense to the ruling council of Israel, and it's no wonder they didn't wait any longer, they didn't get Roman approval, they just rushed him out of the city and stoned him.

So Paul was there, indicating that he was also there with the Sanhedrin as Stephen was speaking. As

we mentioned last time, Paul was being trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel.

In stoning, the first official witness pushed the naked victim off a nine to twelve foot scaffold or cliff. Then the second official witness dropped a large stone on his head or chest, and others pelted the dying man.

Acts 7:59-60 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” 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.

What Stephen says is similar to what Jesus said on the cross in Luke 23:34, 46. Jesus called to the Father to receive His spirit, Stephen called on Jesus to receive His spirit, another indication of Jesus’ divinity and equality with the Father. Luke recorded his death by simply writing, he fell asleep. For a Christian, his body (not his soul) sleeps in death (John 11:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 15). At the moment of Stephen’s death, his spirit was welcomed into the presence of Jesus, but one day, at the resurrection, his body will wake up from sleep in a glorified state.

So Stephen is stoned by his own people and becomes the first Christian martyr (John the Baptist died during the Old Testament administration as an O.T. prophet, and was not a “Christian”. I believe Stephen’s testimony spread around Jerusalem, and caused the gospel to be received even more. God used this event to further His plan and cause more people to believe.

“In the Book of Acts, the infant church faced opposition from Jew and Gentile alike. But with every successive wave of persecution, the church grew more and more. In hardships and trials, Christians depended increasingly on the Lord for strength and guidance. In so doing, they demonstrated their faith to others. Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to minister to the needs of the neglected in the early church, became the first martyr of the Christian faith, but he certainly was not the last. Although falsely accused of blaspheming Moses and God, his unfair treatment and violent death would serve as an example to persecuted believers throughout the centuries who would face similar trials for upholding the name of Christ. The Book of Acts tells us that right after the stoning of Stephen, a zealous young Pharisee named Saul continued the persecution of the new faith by hunting its members down and imprisoning them to face similar charges and similar fates. Although Saul was trying to stop the spread of the Christian faith, other eventual persecutors such as the Roman Emperor Nero (a.d. 37–68) cared little about the blaspheming of a Jewish deity. Nero was merely looking for scapegoats to take the blame for the great fire that destroyed most of Rome in a.d. 64. Later Christian martyrs would face death at the hands of their so-called fellow believers. William Tyndale (1494–1536) was burned at the stake for heresy because he dared to translate the Bible into the English language, thus making it more accessible to the common person. Others have traveled into remote areas fully aware of the dangers of retribution from pagans. In 1956, five American missionaries were murdered in the jungles of Ecuador by headhunters called the Aucas. This same tribe was eventually converted to Christianity through the persistence of missionaries, who emulated the perseverance of the martyred missionaries who had gone before them. Since Stephen’s death, countless Christians have died for their witness to the truth of the gospel. They set their eyes on Jesus instead of on this world. They did not value the approval of people over the approval of their Savior. Therefore, they refused to disown Jesus. For their courage to stand up for the truth, Jesus promises to acknowledge them before His Father in heaven (see Matt. 10:32, 33).” The Nelson Study Bible