

Alteration

(Acts Session 12—May 24, 2026)

Acts chapter 7 gives the account of the first Christian martyr.

There is a single word that boiled down the essence of the deadly debate that had developed between Stephen and these men, who ultimately killed him. It is a word that we are all very familiar with.

Politicians love this word. It is, I believe, the most common word used by political candidates on the whole. It is the word “**change**”. Change is an incredibly effective political mantra.

The hope politicians have is that that we will believe—one more time—that FINALLY they will change things and get it done right.

Politics aside, change can be a very positive experience on a personal level. That’s what vacations are all about. You get a change of pace. Something we all look forward to.

But when it comes to the idea of religion, change is a very difficult concept for people deal with. And yet, for multiplied millions of people—they **need** to change their religion. And that is not an overstatement.

Some folks will be automatically offended by such a thought. But think about it. If you take the Bible seriously, you have to admit, that that is precisely the mission that Christ handed to the Apostles. To get the world to change their religion.

Now these days, there are terrorist groups out there that will describe their own goals in very similar terms.

But let me hasten to point out that there are a couple of big differences between us and them.

First of all, if we are biblical about it and follow the directives from Jesus, our assignment to get other people to change their religion doesn’t involve violence.

The Lord sent the Apostles out to change the world, no doubt about it. But He sent them out as sheep amongst wolves. He also gave them these instructions—“**Be wise as serpents, but harmless as doves.**”

And so when a death does occur in the faithful pursuit of Christ’s mission, it will be the death of Christians, not of unbelievers.

Which is the case in our chapter in Acts this morning.

And then I should point out the second difference between us and the terrorists is simply this—we happen to be right. Jesus is the way—the only way to God.

But right at the core of the mission of the church is this word “**change**”. An idea Stephen’s opponents resisted most stringently.

To begin this morning, let’s take a brief look at some verses from last week.

Miracles were not uncommon in the early church. But as we saw illustrated last week, simply observing a miracle did not automatically lead to a correct spiritual state. Miracles do not necessarily change hearts.

This principle gets demonstrated in the ministry of Stephen.

Acts 6:8

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

But in spite of those supernatural events being given as signs—that is to say, God granted these miracles as validation for the message Stephen was preaching about Jesus.

Even with those mighty signs occurring, there were many who observed them that remained unmoved. There were certain men in particular who took it upon themselves to argue against Stephen.

He countered every argument they had, and backed them into a theological corner. So his opponents had two things they had to deal with.

First, there were the miracles. These signs and wonders were indicators that Stephen's message was from God. Secondly, whatever objections they raised regarding his teaching, they were soundly defeated, and had to admit that Stephen was right.

Or at least, they should have done that. What they did instead, however, was to lie, and make false accusations against him. And if you repeat the same lie over and over again, there are a whole lot of folks who can be manipulated that way.

And so we see that the people—the ones who had been so impressed with Stephen earlier—these same people allowed themselves to fall for the lies, and they became willing participants in Stephen's arrest and interrogation.

Acts 6:12-14

12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council.

13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;

14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

And then in the last verse of the chapter, Luke makes an interesting observation. We barely looked at it last time. But as Stephen is standing there waiting to tell his side of the story, something striking occurs regarding his appearance.

Acts 6:15

And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Alright, so what's up with that? Lots of different opinions floating around out there.

My thought—and take it for what it's worth, because I didn't come across this idea as I was digging around in my search for an explanation. But my thought is that perhaps, for just that moment, the council was allowed to see Stephen the way God saw him.

Paul alludes to something akin to this over in **2 Corinthians 5**.

2 Corinthians 5:16

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know *Him thus* no longer.

Paul is talking about how he sees other believers. He doesn't regard them or recognize them according to the flesh. That is to say, according to outward appearances.

Well then, how exactly does he view other believers? He tells us in the very next verse.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

He sees us "*in Christ*". And everything has changed. All the old is gone. Everything has been made new, when we are in Christ.

2 Corinthians 3:18

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

It's happening even now. As you grow in grace and in the knowledge of your Lord and Savior, you are "...being transformed into the same image from glory to glory..."

So this thing about Stephen's face? It seems to me it was just a little preview for these men on the council. The crowd didn't see it. The accusers from the synagogue didn't notice it. But Luke tells us the council saw it.

Acts 6:15

And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

It reminds me of when the three disciples were allowed to see Jesus transfigured in **Matthew 17**.

Matthew 17:1-2

1 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves;
2 and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.

This thing with Stephen wasn't nearly that dramatic. But it just seems like it was God's stamp of approval on Stephen, made visible for these leaders of Israel, just so they would know.

Now here's something for you to chew on during the rest of the week. A question: how do you view yourself as a follower of Jesus? The way God does?

As "***a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.***"?

I have heard a saying that is attributed to the great artist Michaelangelo. Evidently, someone had asked him about the process he employed to create a beautiful sculpture of an angel from a rough block of marble. His answer:

"I saw the angel in the marble, and I carved until I set him free."

God is a realist. He is under no illusions about you currently occupying a position of perfection.

However, if I may borrow the phrase, He "***sees the angel***" in you, and will continue carving until the work is complete.

There is a need for you to "see the angel" in yourself. The Bible has much to say about what God states as currently factual about you. Just a couple of examples before we move on:

Romans 6:11

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Dead to sin, alive to God.

Psalm 139:17

I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, and *that* my soul knows very well.

You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are marvelous.

I Peter 2:9

But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

That is more of a corporate view that encompasses us as part of the body of Christ.

But these words apply to you as an individual Christian as well. ***Chosen, royal, priest, holy, special, with a mandate to proclaim His praises in this dark world.***

So I'm thinking—instead of being so bummed out about that rough block of marble that you see staring back at you in the mirror every morning, how about seeing the angel that God is busily carving out of that rough block of marble? It must might make your day go a little bit better.

A daily exercise of faith: that's how I'd approach it. So, let's use one of the words in **Psalm 139** to give that a try. Turn to your neighbor and say, "**You're marvelous.**"

Alright, let's now move on to **chapter 7**.

I'm going to do something very different today. Normally, we take a verse-by-verse approach in studying a passage. But I'd like to break that rule and jump down to **verse 51**.

And here's why. **The first 50 verses of chapter 7** is a brief synopsis of Israel's history—from Abraham's time until the present day.

It covers a lot of historical territory, but Stephen is doing this to emphasize a single point, which comes out in **verse 51**. And that's where I'd like us to pick up the narrative.

And by the way, if you are doing WordWalk, you read this chapter just last week.

So what we're going to do is jump past most of Stephen's sermon and focus on how he applies the sermon to his hearers.

But allow me to say this much about Stephen's history lesson: He recounts all kinds of blessings that God gave them as a people.

Then in the middle of his sermon he lays out some of the things Israel did through disobedience and rebellion.

And suddenly in **verse 51**, the history lesson is over and it's time to drive his main point home. We'll read to the end of the chapter, 10 verses in all.

Acts 7:51-60

51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so *do* you.

52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, **53** who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept *it*."

54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, **56** and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;

58 and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

That first phrase: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit..."

A couple of points here. The danger of stubbornness.

Proverbs 29:1

He who is often rebuked, *and* hardens *his* neck, Will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.

How many times will these men on the council be faced with the truth about Christ and still insist on pursuing the same rebellious course? There is a point when God says, "**enough**".

That's why the Bible pleads with us to quit playing Russian roulette with our souls.

Hebrews 3:15

"Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Stephen says this: 'You always resist the Holy Spirit.' **Question: how can anyone resist God?** Only because He has made with a free will of your own. You must choose to consciously submit to Christ as Lord. He will not force you.

So if you don't know Christ, and today you hear His voice in your heart, do not harden your heart and resist. Humble yourself, say Yes to Jesus, and receive Him as your Lord.

2 Corinthians 6:2b

... Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

And in vs. 52, Stephen lays it all on the line.

Acts 7:52

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers.

Needless to say, the don't appreciate his sermon application very much at all.

Acts 7:54

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth.

And then comes the statement that pushed them all over the edge.

Acts 7:55-56

55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Now here is that phrase again: **But he, being full of the Holy Spirit...**

Over and over again that phrase pops up in the Book of Acts, and it is a mistake to say that what's being referred to here is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that every Christian experiences at conversion.

This is a description of the supernatural aspect of the Christian life welling up inside of Stephen. Something that is generally bestowed after conversion.

We'll take an in-depth look at this doctrine before long in this study. But for today, I've got to conclude.

It has been pointed out by many scholars and preachers that Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

In every other reference to God's right hand where Jesus' posture is spoken of, He is seated. Only here is He portrayed as standing.

And the thought is that Jesus was taking special note of Stephen's courage and willingness to speak the truth regardless of the consequences. And I must say, I agree with that conclusion.

And these accusers completely lose it. Charging at Stephen, they drag him out of the city and stone him to death.

But as Stephen realizes the end is coming, he follows the pattern set forth by Jesus' own example.

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Just like Jesus, "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit."

And his final statement in this world:

"Lord, do not charge them with this sin."

Just like Jesus. “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Well, there’s a man who patterned himself after Jesus right down to the last moment of his life.

Getting back to Stephen’s main point in **verse 51**—“*You always resist the Holy Spirit...*”

The visible point of contention was that they were resisting change. But it wasn’t just change they were resisting. Underneath the surface, the real issue was that they were taking a stand against the Holy Spirit. And that is an especially bad idea.

When the Holy Spirit came in **Acts chapter 2**, He manifested Himself initially as a rushing wind. Movement is the nature of the Holy Spirit. Living creatures move, and the Spirit of God is life itself. Living creatures move.

The people of Israel needed to get moving again. To get moving towards God. And there was a lot involved there at this point in their history.

It wasn’t as though these men on the council had embraced a false religion. Not at all. As practicing Jews, they had a part in being the stewards of God’s revealed will through His Word.

But the revelation of God to His people was not complete yet. The Old Testament was very clear in that. More was coming, and they needed to be ready to embrace it when it came.

You see, the change that they were faced with was not an abandonment of what they had previously believed. Oh, that was necessary for the heathen religions, where idols and what not were worshipped.

But in the case of Israel, in the case of these men who brought Stephen to trial, they were being asked to simply believe the words of their own Scriptures, and apply those words to themselves.

Stephen was proving through solid teaching and theology that Jesus was who He claimed to be. That He was the Messiah, and worthy of their allegiance and their worship.

That was a change they were unwilling to make. They wanted their religion to stay the same. And they lost out with God because of that.

Sometimes, even in the life of a true Christian, we will be asked to change our religion. Not in terms of becoming a Buddhist or something. But more like what was being asked of these men in Acts 7.

When we get to the place where we lose the movement that is part and parcel of our faith, we need to change our religion. When the wind of the Spirit dies down in our life, we need to change our religion. When we begin to stagnate spiritually, we really and truly need to change our religion.

The Holy Spirit will come to us at times like that. He may do so through the words of someone He uses to communicate, or He may come to you through something you read. Or He may just come to you in one of those still, quiet moments that can be so powerful. And He says to us—“*time for a change*”.

And when He does, what will we say? “*I’m not changing!*”? Not if we have any sense.

Because we know better. And thank God that the Holy Spirit works on us, and wears us down one way or another. Until we surrender and say, “*Not my will, but Yours be done.*”

And very soon a fresh wind of the Spirit begins to move in our lives.

Please—don’t settle for what you’ve always known. Be open to change. Stagnation in religion is a very real danger, and none of us are beyond it. We must always allow both the wisdom of the Word and the movement of the Spirit to carry us along.

Stephen charged those council members with resisting the Holy Spirit. That is something we must never do. But that being said, there is a certain kind of resistance required of us.

We must resist a static faith by embracing a living faith. And that can only happen as we allow the Word of God to keep our hearts alive to what the Spirit of God is doing in us and around us, and growing in our walk with the Lord.

The title of the sermon is "***Alteration***". That is our mission to the world. And that is the description of an ongoing work of the Spirit in our own lives. Becoming more like Jesus is the goal.