



NG Study Guide: Acts 7:44-60 “The Spirit Manifest in Stephen” Pt.3 [9.25.22]

Love God + know the Bible better:

1. Read the passage cited above, and try to answer the questions below before your group meets.
2. *Leader note: Please review the brief instructions for leaders at the bottom.*

The Study

Thesis: One of the most dramatic moments in all of the Bible unfolds at the Last Supper, in the Upper Room (Matt. 26:20-25). During the Passover meal, Jesus says, “Assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.” The disciples were deeply saddened, and each of them began to say to Him, “Lord is it I?” Notice they did not all point at Judas, or at others, but reflect. In humility before Jesus they acknowledge His Lordship, and ask “Lord, is it I?” They are four of the most powerful and life transforming words in the universe.

In contrast, Judas said, “Rabbi is it I? His words appear to invite correction, but also reveal the condition of his heart. Jesus is his teacher, but not his Lord. Judas resists rather than repent, later realizes Jesus is the Christ, and regrets his actions.

Those who are yielded to God, reflect upon where they need to grow to be more like Jesus. They consider where their attitudes or actions may be misaligned; and when God reveals correction they repent and yield to God’s Spirit rather than resist. We can minimize regrets in this life and the life to come by yielding to God’s Spirit.

Subject: Stephen’s address to the council

Object: Yield to God

Context: In Stephen’s address to the Sanhedrin, he has reminded them of Israel’s failure to recognize God’s plan the first time regarding Joseph, and Moses until the second time. Here, his message builds to a crescendo as he focuses on the temple and the Christ.

A. Religion (44-50)

“Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, ⁴⁵ which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But Solomon built Him a house.

1. God is to be worshiped not a temple (44-47)

Stephen was accused of speaking unspecified blasphemous words against the temple (6:13). Stephen reminds the council that when

the Jews came out of Egypt that God instructed Moses to erect a tabernacle (tent). This was a model of God dwelling amongst His people (44). The tabernacle was brought to the Promised Land (45). King

David wanted to build a more glorious dwelling place for God than the tabernacle (46). God would not allow David to build the temple, but his son Solomon did (46).

The temple was to be a place where God was manifest to worshipers. The temple was not to be an object of worship, but was to be a gathering place of God's people who would worship God. Yes, the temple was a sacred place, but so was the ground around the burning bush, and that was outside the Promised Land. Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple, because in Christ God is dwelling among, and in His people. The temple should facilitate worship not be an object of worship.

2. God is beyond a temple or any structure that man can create (48-50)

However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:

⁴⁹ 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, or what is the place of My rest? ⁵⁰ Has My hand not made all these things?

Stephen quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2, to remind that God is beyond a temple made by man's hands (48). Heaven is God's throne and the earth is His footstool (49). What structure could man build for God to dwell or rest in (49). All of Creation is His handiwork (50).

In context of Isaiah 66, the Jewish people were being corrected, because they were more concerned about the temple than truly honoring or worshiping God. God looks favorably upon those who humbly approach Him with reverence rather than those who outwardly manifest religious behavior, but their hearts are hard to God (Is. 66:3).

As people contemplate the idea that God is beyond any temple there are a couple of cautions to consider. First, there is the idea that you don't need to go to church to worship God (e.g. the beach is my church). It is true that God can be worshiped anywhere and everywhere. And it also true that God's people are instructed to gather together to learn of Him, to pray and offer praise to God, to honor Him in a community of faith. Second, is the idea of associating God with the church building, and neglecting an awareness of God away from the building (e.g. home, work, school, recreation).

Jesus made clear to the Samaritan woman that the place of worship was not as important as the heart of the worshiper. Jesus' followers have God's Spirit in them, and are the temple (dwelling place) of the living God (2Cor. 6:16). We are to worship God in spirit and in truth. True worship yields to God's truth (the Bible) and is inspired by God's spirit (Jn. 4:1-24).

So, as I consider the proper heart of worship I need to ask, **"Lord Is it I?"**

B. Rebuke (51-53)

"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."

Stephen comes to the crescendo as he delivers a stinging rebuke of the religious leaders. In effect, Stephen identifies three problems that keep a person separated from God.

1. Resist the Holy Spirit (51)

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

A *stiff-neck* refers to pride, and an *uncircumcised heart and ears* refers to unwilling to hear or receive from God (hardness of heart). Stephen declares the essence of the problem, *You always resist the Holy Spirit*. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin (John 16:8). God's Spirit reveals where our attitudes and actions are misaligned from God's will and guides us to repent or yield to God. It is not shame, or a guilty conscience, but an awareness of God's conviction prompting a return to God.

Unbelievers, resist the Spirit's work regarding humanity's need for a Savior. Believers can resist the Spirit by knowingly engaging in attitudes and actions that are contrary to God, or grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30); or resisting the prompting of the Spirit (quenching 1Th. 5:19).

2. Reject the prophets and the Christ (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...

They rejected the prophets who pointed to the *Just One* and they rejected Him (Jesus).

3. Refuse to yield to God (53) *who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.* Stephen was accused of blaspheming the law, presumably because he had repeated what Jesus had declared that He had come to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17-18). Jesus is the culmination of the Mosaic law (Rom. 10:4). God's perfect standard of morality, justice, truth and grace are realized in Jesus. No one else has or will ever meet that standard. Israel's leaders had not kept the law, because no one can perform to that standard; but also because they rejected Jesus who is the fulfillment. We are made right with God through faith in Jesus and yielding to God, not our perfection or performance, but His.

So, as I consider God's correction (rebuke) in my life I need to ask, "**Lord Is it I?**" Where am I resisting the Holy Spirit's work, where am I refusing to yield to God? Where am I focused on my performance or the performance of others rather than the gospel and Jesus' performance. And for some of us, have you rejected Jesus? All of these circumstances separate us from God.

C. Response (54-60)

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.

1. Hard-hearts (54):

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

Hate a rebuke, don't receive correction + don't repent

They were *cut to the heart* is the sense that their hard hearts were pierced, but instead of softening their hearts to God they were furious at the messenger.

2. Those who are yielded to the Spirit (55-60)

Recognize Christ (55-56) Stephen was *full of the Holy Spirit* is the idea of being yielded to God and empowered by God, and has a vision of heaven (55). He sees the glory of the Father, and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father (55), and describes the vision to the council (56).

Represent Christ (57-60) They stoned Stephen (the penalty for blasphemy). The young man, Saul, will later be known to us as the apostle Paul. His heart was moved as he listened to and watched Stephen. Stephen forgives the council just as Jesus did from the cross (Lu. 23:34), "Lord do not charge them with this sin" (60). Stephen, prayed to God the Father and God the Son to receive his spirit (59) and became the first martyr of the church.

So, when I'm corrected by God's Spirit, or another person, do I seek to recognize Christ and represent Him, or does my heart harden towards God's correction? The reason to be encouraged by God's correction is that it proves that you are His child (Heb. 12:4-6), and it provides a catalyst to grow in Christlikeness. So, when there is a conflict, or a word of correction, rather than defend, deflect or justify, let's ask, **Lord Is it I?**

Study Guide Qs

Q1. Why is the inquiry, "Lord is it I?" uniquely Christian? What are some benefits to this inquiry? Why might it be difficult to adopt this perspective?

Q2. Review the Study Guide message notes regarding v.44-50 about religion, the temple and worship. What do you find interesting or noteworthy?

Q3. Review the Study Guide message notes regarding v.51-53. As you consider the rebuke, what do you find interesting or noteworthy?

Q4. Review the Study Guide message notes regarding v.54-60 contrasting two types of response to correction. What do you find interesting or noteworthy?

“Disciples Who Dig Deeper” (optional or alternative study)

1. Here is a good article about Jesus fulfilling but not abolishing the law: <https://www.gotquestions.org/abolish-fulfill-law.html>.

2. Read this article to discover more about worshiping God in spirit and truth: <https://www.gotquestions.org/worship-spirit-truth.html>.

Love your neighbors (inside + outside the group) better:

1. Who would like to share how they sought to befriend or build relationship with their neighbors inside or outside the group?
2. Are there some needs that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbors inside or outside the group?

Disciples who make disciples:

1. Who would like to share how they recently sought to make disciples?
2. Here is a disciple making idea to consider for the weeks ahead:
Next time you have an interpersonal conflict, explain to the other person that you are going to genuinely consider, “Lord is it I.” Help them to understand why you’re inquiring.

Prayer [Loving God and Neighbors better]:

Close the NG meeting with a time of group prayer. Encourage each participant to pray, but don’t force anyone to pray. Encourage the group to keep their prayers brief so that each person can pray.

Leader Notes:

1. **Seek to involve as many group participants as possible.** A good group discussion time allows people to get to know the passage and one another better.
2. **Feel free to pre-select the discussion questions that you want to focus on** in case there isn’t enough time to answer them all.
3. **The “Disciples Who Dig Deeper” section provides some optional or alternative study and discussion activities.** As a group leader, you can choose to focus on the “Disciples Who Dig Deeper” section, include

part of that section in your group meeting, or not use it at all. Try to give the group sufficient notice so they can be prepared for the meeting.

4. Every time you meet consider asking:

a. What about this passage is particularly exciting, challenging, or confusing? If a leader is uncertain about a question of doctrine or theology don't hesitate to follow-up with your coach during the week. Then revisit the issue(s) when the group gathers next time.