

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 10,

Acts 6:8-8:4

6-Min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer, where we break down big ideas into clear, compelling stories. Today, we're diving into a really pivotal moment from history, the story of Stephen, the very first Christian martyr, and how his execution, maybe unexpectedly, launched a movement that went worldwide. So let's jump right in.

This story from the Book of Acts kicks off not with armies on a battlefield, but with an argument inside and really, this isn't just some ancient tale. It's a powerful case study in how ideas can collide and how one single debate can change the world in ways no one saw coming. Okay, so to really get what's going on, we first need to know who the key players were.

And we're talking about the Hellenists. These were Jewish people who were, for all intents and purposes, culturally Greek. They spoke Greek, they thought in Greek ways, and now they were part of this growing community of Jesus followers right in Jerusalem.

And you can probably guess that created a pretty fascinating and volatile cultural mix. Our story unfolds in this really prestigious community center in Jerusalem, a place where tensions were already simmering. An internal debate is about to boil over, and it's threatening to tear this very influential group apart right from the inside.

Now, this wasn't just any old synagogue. This was the synagogue of the freed persons. Its members were actually descendants of Jews who had been enslaved by Rome.

So they had won their freedom, and get this, Roman citizenship, which was a massive status symbol back then. This was a place of real power and influence, and among its members was probably this fiercely intelligent young man named Saul of Tarsus. You'll want to remember that name.

So what sparks the whole conflict? Well, it turns out one of their own, a guy named Stephen, is just so persuasive that his opponents simply can't refute his arguments. And he's not just winning debates with logic; he's also performing signs and wonders that they just can't explain, and it's really starting to tear their whole community apart. So because they can't win the argument with reason, Stephen's opponents, well, they change the rules of the game.

You know the old saying, if you can't beat the message, you attack the messenger. They completely switch gears, moving from an intellectual debate to a full-on legal and religious attack. They actually hire false witnesses to accuse Stephen of blasphemy, which, by the way, was a capital crime.

We're talking the death penalty here. And here's where things get really, really interesting. There's this profound irony that scholar Dr. Craig Keener points out.

The classic example of blasphemy back then was to swear a false oath in God's name. So, get this: in their very attempt to convict Stephen, his accusers were committing the exact crime they were charging him with. It's just, wow.

Now, these charges were so cleverly chosen. They were designed to stir up the most passion possible. Accusing him of speaking against Moses and the temple, that was a potent combination, blending religious duty with national pride.

In that culture, it was basically like accusing someone of treason and heresy, all rolled into one. So Stephen's on trial for his life. You'd think he'd defend himself, right? Nope.

He does something completely unexpected. He delivers this powerful counter-prosecution. He essentially puts the entire history of his own people on trial.

Instead of pleading for his life, he completely reframes their shared history to make two revolutionary points that strike right at the heart of their accusations. First, he just dismantles their charge about him speaking against the temple. He quotes the prophet Isaiah, and he makes this radical point.

God is not confined to a building. God's presence is what makes a place holy. And if God can be present on a desert mountain, he can be present anywhere.

I mean, this idea laid the theological groundwork for a faith that could actually exist beyond the walls of Jerusalem. Second, he takes that charge of betraying Moses, and he turns it right back on them. He walks them through their own history, showing this consistent, really painful pattern.

God sends a deliverer, and the people reject him. Joseph was rejected by his own brothers. Moses was rejected by the very people he was sent to save.

The prophets? They were persecuted and killed. You see where this is going, right? And this all builds to his final, devastating conclusion. He looks right at his accusers and declares that they aren't defending their history.

They are repeating its most tragic pattern. By rejecting and killing Jesus, he says, you have just done it again. Okay, so this brings us to the climax of the story, where one death changes everything.

Stephen knows what's coming, but his execution is about to create a legacy that absolutely no one could have predicted. His speech doesn't win his freedom. In a way, it proves his point.

His words cut them to the heart, and the legal proceeding is just; it explodes into mob violence. They drag him outside the city walls, and they stone him to death. But in his final moments, what Stephen does is just incredible.

His actions directly echo what Jesus did on the cross. He asks for his killers to be forgiven, and he commends his spirit to God. He's the first to follow his master not just in life, but all the way to death.

And Stephen's death sets off this immediate, incredible chain reaction. First, we see that guy Saul at the stoning, and he approves. Second, Saul then spearheads this huge, city-wide persecution, forcing the believers to run for their lives.

Third, these believers, especially Stephen's fellow Hellenists, scatter all over the place. And finally, as they flee, they take their message with them, planting it wherever they go. And actually, these Hellenists were the perfect carriers for this message, because they already bridged the Jewish and Greek worlds.

And this, this is the incredible irony at the very heart of the story. The man leading the charge to crush this movement, Saul, becomes the unintentional catalyst for its global expansion. The attempt to stamp out the message didn't destroy it.

It planted it everywhere. It's just such a powerful lesson in unintended consequences, isn't it? The attempt to extinguish a single flame only scattered the sparks. The story of Stephen shows that a powerful idea, especially one sealed with conviction, can't be easily silenced.

Sometimes, the very effort to stamp it out is the thing that spreads it to the ends of the earth.