

# Fifth Sunday of Easter

## A COLLISION WITH GRACE

Acts 7:55-60

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### Analysis by Eric W. Evers

55But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into 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!" 57But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. 58Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Colliding with God

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Putting God on Trial*

Stephen is "in the dock." He's on trial before a local council and the high priest. He has just finished giving a Christocentric telling of Israel's history as his defense. But why must he be in this situation at all? The very spiritual authorities who most should have recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of their history, have decided that he doesn't fit into their picture. Stephen is under their judgment, because the One of whom he speaks, Jesus, is under their judgment. The

“good, religious folks” have decided that they are the ones who should be evaluating God. And while we may not do it with stones in our hands, we are guilty of the same behavior, weighing whether or not Jesus (or some version of Jesus) meets our standards and fulfills our needs. The Judge is the judged.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Closed Ears***

When the council members hear Stephen’s testimony, “I see... the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!,” they cover their ears. It’s not just a desire to avoid hearing blasphemy; it’s an unwillingness to hear a word that contradicts their own convictions. They show that their trial of Stephen is not an act of principled discernment, seeking to discover what God has truly said, but instead an act of will. It is a desire to impose their will onto God and force him into their mold.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Collision with a Rock***

We know where this will end up. Stephen’s story is patterned after Christ’s story. A collision between God’s will and human will ends only in death. Jesus died at human hands, and the rejection of God’s living Word continues in Stephen’s execution. To want to judge God is to seek to kill God. Of course, the story ends only in death, but not for God. Those who would presume authority over Stephen, God’s faithful servant, will find the Almighty One to be their Judge, and the verdict will be deadly for them.

## **PROGNOSIS: Run over by Grace**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Son Still Stands***

But there is more to this collision of wills. The human heart fears and attacks God’s self-disclosure, seeing it as a threat to our own (illusory) sovereignty. But Stephen sees what the fearful religious council does not: the Son of Man, crucified

and raised, standing at God's right hand. God's will is, in Christ, to be merciful. Jesus who was killed now lives, and lives to forgive those who killed him, and who would kill him again in his servant.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Giving up Our Spirits***

And now we who are forgiven can live, truly live freely after our collision of wills with God. Rather than trying to dictate the terms of life to God and the world, we can, like Stephen, entrust ourselves to a God who will stop at nothing to be merciful, gracious, faithful, and life-creating. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59) need not be only a death prayer; it is now a life prayer, an act of faith by which we cast ourselves into God's hands, believing in his goodness more than our own dreams and pretensions.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Caught up in the Grace***

Saul was there, witnessing and even tacitly supporting the martyrdom of Stephen. And we know what is being foreshadowed! Saul the persecutor, in his own personal collision with the risen Christ, will become Paul the apostle. If the Son of Man has overcome sin and death, then any transformation is possible! When the grace of God claims us, we are freed from our need to confront God, and freed for a life that glorifies him and serves our neighbors. Saul was caught up in the mercy of Jesus; who knows what we will be freed to do when the same happens to us!