



**Leaders Note**

Acts 7: 39-60 Biting the Bullet

**Thought**

People who are empowered by God to give a prophetic word become “experts on bipolarity. They are also God’s unwilling lightning rods. Those individuals who are wired (or mis-wired) along these lines get struck with jolts that can be really embarrassing if they hit during a date, a church service, a Bible conference, or some other venue that is public, calm, and civil. They suffer from a polarity disorder which causes them to identify with God first and humans second. You can identify them pretty easily because their hair is usually singed. Their God smokes, so they do too. God does not need spin doctors or marketing gurus. He has no need of defence attorneys who will emphasize only those facts favourable to his client’s position. It does him no service to cover up or ignore or modify the parts that make Him look bad (to us or to our friends). We have not been hired as God’s image consultants. It is we who need Him, not the other way around. So, though sympathetic with the desire to dress God up, to prop up His image or soften the anger lines running alongside the mouth, I say what any prophet would say, as civilly and as kindly as possible: STOP! Just stop! This abrupt imperative is not intended as a condemnation of moral wrongness but as a cry of warning from a motorist waving hazard lights in front of a washed-out bridge. You mean well, but what you don’t know is that you’re on slippery, dangerous ground. If you keep driving in the same direction, you’ll be swept away by the current.” Timothy Stoner, *The God Who Smokes*

This excerpt from Stoner’s book (interesting title!) really captures Stephen and his encounter with the religious high court of his day. His nation was literally teetering on the precipice of destruction — a pit they would fall headlong into within another three decades. Rather than merely trying to get himself off the hook, or trying to make truth palatable, Stephen — as well as his message — bites the bullet and just says what needs to be said.

**Context**

**Law given by angels:** Jewish tradition stated that the law of Moses was actually given through angelic mediation (i.e. God himself was not actually on the mountain but rather angelic representatives. Stephen alludes to this twice in his speech (verses 38 and 53). Paul mentions it also in Galatians 3:19-20 in this key statement of the law’s purpose: “Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised. God gave his law through angels to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people. Now a mediator is helpful if more than one party must reach an agreement. But God, who is one, did not use a mediator when he gave his promise to Abraham.” So hence the allusion is that the promise outranks the law or the law is merely there to serve the promise.

**They began to stone him:** (This note from Wikipedia on stoning) “In the Torah stoning is specifically prescribed as the method of execution for crimes such as blasphemy, apostasy and some cases of adultery. (See Deuteronomy 13:9-10) However, the Talmud limits the use of the death penalty to Jewish criminals who, having been warned not to commit the crime, do so in the presence of two witnesses. The Talmudic restriction on how stoning was to be carried out differs from the type of stoning commonly assumed. According to the Jewish oral law, after the criminal had been determined as guilty before the Great Sanhedrin, the two valid witnesses and the sentence criminal went to the edge of a high place. From there the two witnesses were to push the criminal off. After the criminal had fallen, the two witnesses were to drop a large boulder onto the criminal — requiring both of the witnesses to lift the boulder together. If the criminal did not die from the fall or from the crushing of the large boulder, then any people in the surrounding area were to quickly cause him to die by stoning with whatever rocks they could find.” It's pretty grim stuff. What we can learn from this, though, is that the stoning of Stephen was not done by 'the book' and could almost be considered a crime of passion.

**The golden calf:** In art and legend, gods were frequently represented by animals thought to symbolize the attributes of a particular deity. In the overall religious experience of the ancient Near East, for example, bulls and bull calves were associated with strength, virility and kingship. The bull was regarded as the earthly form or representation of the heavenly god, embodying physical strength and the procreative power found in nature. Several religious cults in Egypt (that of Apis being the most prominent) worshipped the bull and calf. Deification of a live, “sacred” bull was initiated during the First Egyptian Dynasty and continued throughout ancient Egypt's long history. Bull cults of the Nile delta, which existed at the same time and location as the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt, were dedicated to Horus, the “god of heaven.” The Canaanites also venerated bulls. El, the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon was referred to as the “heavenly bull.” Baal, the storm god, was likewise associated with the bull on account of the animal's fertility. Artistic traditions from Canaan depict gods as riding on bulls, which had become living pedestals emblematic of kingship and power over nature. The golden calf was Israel's first foray into syncretism, the combining of faith in the one true God with pagan traditions. In taking this step, God's chosen people exchanged his glory — the true, manifest presence of God — for the image of a bull — a false representation of God's presence (Psalm 106:19-20). The Israelites had tragically fallen prey to cultural influences from Egypt (from which they had departed) and Canaan (where they would settle). God's people were unwittingly associating their God with the gods of the nations. The cry of the exodus deliverance, “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?” would be belied again and again by idolatry — Israel's colossal stumbling block. Archaeological Study Bible



## Learning Session

Introduce the subject and then read the passage. Begin with this question for open discussion. What was the most defiant thing you did against your parents' wishes — something that you can laugh about now but maybe wasn't so funny then?

After this break up into smaller groups to discuss the following:

- Why isn't Stephen more diplomatic with all these judges who hold the power of life and death over him?
- What one life lesson has stands out from Stephen through his trial, speech, and death?
- Do you think he was scared? Where did his boldness come from?

Gather and have a time of feedback. The truths that we want to reinforce as they are shared (hopefully) are that Stephen received his boldness from God. He was making a stand and saying (in a good way if you read closely) what was needed to be said at the time. God promises (if we remain faithful to Him) to teach us what to say when we need to make a stand. He also promises to be with us to the end, even though Stephen suffers the ultimate price for his words, you can see that God's power and presence is on him right to the end. How else could he have had the grace to call out for the forgiveness of his murderers? We are fortunate, we might make folk angry when we make our stand, but we are unlikely to pay for it with our lives,

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