

Stephen, the Unwavering Martyr

Devotional Reading: Luke 23:32–43

Background Scripture: Acts 6–7

Acts 6:7–10

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.



Acts 7:54–60

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Key Text

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

—Acts 6:8

A. Handling the Hardships

Max Cleland (1942–2021) led a promising life. In high school, he excelled in sports and received the title of “Most Outstanding Senior.” At the age of 24, he volunteered for combat duty in Vietnam, where he served as a captain in the army.

Just one month before returning home, Cleland picked up a grenade that he thought he had dropped accidentally. He was mistaken, and the resulting explosion mangled or altogether severed his right hand, right leg, and left leg. Though not expected to survive, Cleland recovered from his triple amputation, and he recalled the apostle Paul’s teaching that “hope does not put us to shame” (Romans 5:5).

When Cleland returned to civilian life, he entered politics, learned to drive a car specially equipped for him, and traveled extensively to mobilize support for veterans’ causes. At age 34 he became the youngest man ever to head the Veterans Administration. Later, he was elected as a US senator from Georgia. Max Cleland summarized his experience: “Life doesn’t revolve around an arm and a leg. People look at you the way you look at yourself.”

Today’s lesson presents a servant of God who faced a catastrophic blow. It was a blow that led directly to his death. The story of God’s servants is stained with the blood of prophets and apostles who paid the price for speaking the truth, and today’s lesson presents this reality in vivid detail.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Acts begins the story of the earliest church by focusing on its development within Jerusalem. The theme of “witnesses” in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is like of a “Table of Contents” for Acts as it sketches the birth of the church. The narrative starts with events on the Day of Pentecost (2:1–41). Predominant in the account is the divine power behind the dynamic Jerusalem fellowship. The church increased in number from only about 120 believers to more than 3,000 in a single day (compare 1:15; 2:41).

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 3: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recount the story of Stephen’s courageous witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.
2. Describe the parallels that Acts draws between Stephen and Jesus.
3. Write a way that Stephen’s courageous witness may inform their own witness to Jesus Christ.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Handling the Hardships
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Growing Church (Acts 6:7–10)

- A. Disciples and Priests (v. 7)
- B. Power and Wonder (v. 8)
- C. Wisdom and Spirit (vv. 9–10)

II. The Faithful Martyr (Acts 7:54–60)

- A. Furious Reaction (v. 54)
- B. Fervent Realization (vv. 55–56)
The Worst of Times
- C. Fateful Reaction (vv. 57–60)
Punch Back

Conclusion

- A. Opposition and Response
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

The number of believers in Jerusalem continued to increase over the weeks and months after Pentecost (Acts 2:47b; 5:14; 6:1). The expanding number of believers led them to develop habits for their gatherings and expectations for how they would treat each other (2:42–47a; 4:32–35). During that time, almost all followers of Jesus were of Jewish heritage. However, not all had the same cultural upbringing. Some had adopted elements of Greek culture while living in the Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) portions of the Roman Empire (compare 9:29), while others lived in Jewish regions of Palestine. The distinction between Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews was revealed in a conflict regarding the treatment of widows (6:1).

To resolve conflict, the Twelve selected seven men “full of the Spirit and wisdom” to handle food distribution to the needy. These men included Stephen (Acts 6:3–5).

I. The Growing Church

(Acts 6:7–10)

A. Disciples and Priests (v. 7)

7. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

This verse highlights two important aspects of the growth of the first-century church. First, its development is driven by the dramatic *spread of the word of God* (compare Acts 9:31; 12:24; 19:20; 28:31). As the influence of the gospel message increases among people, so does *the number of disciples*. When the gospel falls on willing hearts, spiritual fruit results, often in abundant measures (see Luke 8:8, 15).

Second, the fact that the church’s number *increased rapidly* implies exponential growth. A comparison of the number of believers in the early chapters of Acts highlights this expansion (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; see also 2:47; 5:14; 6:1; 16:5).

Counted among these believers are numerous *priests*. These men serve in the temple when their lot is chosen (example: Luke 1:5, 8–10). We may find this surprising since chief priests opposed Jesus and his message in conjunction with both Pharisees

(Matthew 21:45; 27:62; John 7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 18:3) and Sadducees (Acts 4:1–4; 5:17–18, 27–28).

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to ensure that the Word of God spreads through your family and community?

Digging Deeper

To what extent does the Word of God spread through the Spirit’s work, and to what extent does it spread through human effort?

B. Power and Wonder (v. 8)

8. Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

The display of miracles that accredit Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2:22) and confirm the message of the apostles (2:43; 5:12) now also certify God’s approval of the ministry of *Stephen*. These signs confirm the presence of God’s grace and the empowerment of his servants (2 Corinthians 12:12).

The book of Acts does not specify the nature of Stephen’s miraculous work *among the people*. His calling before this was to be one of seven men to oversee a first-century version of “Meals on Wheels” (see Acts 6:1–4). We presume that Stephen’s ministry in that regard did not involve miracles. Therefore, the *great wonders and signs* he now performs indicate relief from suffering from both physical and spiritual ailments, as has been true of the apostles (compare 3:1–10; 4:30; 5:15–16). Although he is not one of the apostles, Stephen is chosen by God to bear witness to salvation (compare Hebrews 2:3–

How to Say It

Alexandrians	Al-ex-an-dree-unz.
Cyrenians	Sigh-ree-nee-unz.
Hellenistic	Heh-leh-nihs-tic.
Libertines	Lib-er-teens.
Pentecost	Pent-ih-kost.
Sadducees	Sad-you-seez.
Sanhedrin	San-huh-drun or San-heed-run.

4). As one who is “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5), his life demonstrates the spiritual *power* that Jesus promised (1:8).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can believers develop spiritual power?

Digging Deeper

How can mature believers leverage their spiritual power to encourage the growth of newer believers?

C. Wisdom and Spirit (vv. 9–10)

9. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

After the exile of 586 BC, the need for synagogues arose among the Jewish people. By the time of the first century AD, synagogues served as important meeting places for observing religious practices, studying Scripture, gathering on the Sabbath, and discussing Jewish law and tradition (examples: Matthew 4:23; Acts 9:20; 13:14–15; 15:21). Additionally, synagogues were places for financial contribution, elementary education, and hospitality.

More than one *synagogue* may be in view here. Commentators suggest the writer could be considering anywhere from one to five synagogues, although most tend to lean toward one or two. Paul refers to multiple synagogues in Jerusalem (Acts 24:11–12). Therefore, the groups mentioned in this verse may attend different synagogues. Nonetheless, they all had a specific dispute with Stephen.

The Freedmen are Jews who have been liberated from slavery or who are descendants of those freed; these differ from freeborn citizens who never experienced enslavement. *Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria* are from what is modern-day North Africa, and *Cilicia* and *Asia* are regions located in what is modern-day Turkey. The mention of these groups heightens anticipation for the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem and its surrounding areas to all nations and peoples (Acts 1:8; 2:5–12).

Acts 6:11–14 indicates that the dispute with Stephen is likely over his interpretation of the Law of Moses and the relevance of the temple. The result is a charge of blasphemy, a charge that Jesus himself faced (Matthew 26:65; Mark 14:64).

10. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

The fact that the synagogue members *could not stand up against* Stephen does not mean that they agreed with his message; rather, it indicates their inability to refute his teachings. Their powerlessness fulfills Jesus’ promise to give his persecuted disciples “words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:15). Such fulfillment suggests that Stephen’s wisdom was given to him by Jesus himself, undoubtedly through his Spirit (compare 12:11–12).

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to ensure your speech is filled with wisdom?

Digging Deeper

How do Proverbs 15:1–2; Ephesians 4:29–32; Colossians 4:5–6; and James 1:19; 3:13–18 inform your answer?

II. The Faithful Martyr
(Acts 7:54–60)

The conflict between Stephen and the synagogue members escalates. False accusations lead to Stephen’s arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:11–15). Stephen, speaking in his defense, emphasizes Israel’s history of rebellion against God. In that regard, Stephen lodges at least four countercharges: the Jewish leaders (1) are “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised” in heart and ears” (7:51); (2) resist the Holy Spirit (7:51); (3) have betrayed and murdered the Messiah and his prophets (7:52); and (4) have not obeyed the Law of Moses (7:53).

A. Furious Reaction (v. 54)

54. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

The Sanhedrin is the highest Jewish council in Palestine. It was led by the high priest (Acts 5:21,

27; 7:1; 23:2) and was composed of priests, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law, as well as Sadducees and Pharisees (4:5, 23; 5:21, 34; 23:6).

This include everything that Stephen has spoken in his lengthy speech found in Acts 7:2–53, especially the last three of those verses. His words provoke a sharp reaction from the Sanhedrin. They were *furious*, full of intense anger or rage (compare Acts 5:33). The phrase *gnashed their teeth* signifies a corresponding behavior or facial expression. We see increasing hostility on their part as we trace their reactions from Acts 4:1–22 to 5:27–42 to 7:54–58. Their anger escalates as the story unfolds.

B. Fervent Realization (vv. 55–56)

55. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen, like Moses, is granted the privilege of witnessing God's *glory* (compare Exodus 33:18–23). To be seated *at the right hand* is considered to be in a place of honor (Psalm 110:1 [quoted in Acts 2:34 and Hebrews 1:13]; Matthew 26:64; Luke 22:69; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3). But we note that Stephen sees *Jesus standing*, not sitting, at that position. At least three interpretations have been proposed. One theory is that it indicates Jesus' transcendence, meaning that he is supernatural and surpasses creaturely boundaries. A second interpretation is that Jesus is rising from his throne to welcome Stephen into heaven. A third interpretation proposes that it signifies his readiness to judge, either in support of Stephen or against the Sanhedrin—or both (compare Isaiah 3:13). Indeed, this imagery may embrace all three ideas.

56. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

A vital turning point occurs. On rare occasions, Scripture mentions *heaven* being opened (compare Ezekiel 1:1; Matthew 3:16; Luke 3:21; John 1:51; Acts 10:11; Revelation 4:1). That is no less the case here when we compare the last line of Acts 7:55 (above) with the last line in the verse now before us.

Stephen replaces the name "Jesus" with the des-

ignation *the Son of Man*. This title was Jesus' favorite self-designation during his earthly ministry. It appears more than 80 times in the Gospels and is associated with Jesus' authority, judgment, and role in salvation (compare Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 12:8; 22:69). This title can be traced to Daniel 7:13–14. Thus Stephen recognizes Jesus as the divine and promised Messiah, something the doubters don't do (compare John 12:34).

Tied to this revelation is the fact that Stephen sees Jesus sharing in God's presence and glory. His acknowledgment of the divinity of Jesus cannot be missed.

Stephen has avoided making direct statements about Christ up to this point. Now Stephen directly associates Christ with God himself, a confession he knows will not help his case before the Sanhedrin. Jesus was previously convicted of blasphemy by this group for making similar associations with God (Matthew 26:64–65; Luke 22:69–71). One can only admire Stephen's courage in the face of deadly opposition.

What Do You Think?

How does this passage expand your understanding of Jesus' role as an advocate for believers?

Digging Deeper

How does Stephen's vision of Christ's authority and transcendence encourage your faithfulness to Christ?

The Worst of Times

One late autumn day, it felt like everything in my life was going wrong. Our family's plans for the future had crumbled, and we found ourselves searching for jobs. We desperately sought any glimpse of the hope we had lost.

I began taking walks through our neighborhood, praying, crying, and asking God to fix our situation. Over time, those walks became sacred to me. As I walked, I realized I was not alone: God's presence was with me. The more I poured my heart out to him in prayer, the more I noticed his peace.

I haven't experienced a day like Stephen did in Acts 7. But when I read his story, I see that God's

presence was with him on his worst day—just as God has been with me time and time again through the most challenging seasons of my life.

On your most difficult days, do you experience the comforting and strengthening presence of God's Spirit? If not, why not? —B. R.

C. Fateful Reaction (vv. 57–60)

57–58a. At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

What started as a trial based on false witnesses (Acts 6:13) ends with deadly mob violence. The Jewish leaders sentenced Jesus to death after their perception of blasphemy (Matthew 26:65–66; compare John 10:31–33). Death by stoning is indeed the proper Old Testament punishment for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10–16). But the members of the Sanhedrin refuse to consider evidence of Jesus' divinity as they cover *their ears*.

Their *loud* voices drown out Stephen's perceived blasphemies (see Acts 6:11). All pretense of due process is out the window as the Jewish leaders act on their belief that Stephen's conviction means he deserves immediate death. We expect mob action from unruly crowds (Ezekiel 16:40; John 10:22–39) but not from the members of the Sanhedrin!

Ironically, Stephen previously accused these leaders of having “uncircumcised” ears, unwilling to hear the truth (Acts 7:51; compare Jeremiah 6:10). Their actions reflect precisely this unwillingness. If they had circumcised ears and hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Romans 2:29), they would respond with faith and repentance (compare Acts 2:37–41; 4:4).

However, as the Jewish leaders acknowledge in the case of Jesus, Roman law reserved the imposition of capital punishment for itself (John 18:31). Therefore, as the religious leaders rush to execute Stephen, they are simultaneously misapplying the Law of Moses and breaking the Roman legal code.

58b. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

The witnesses are likely the “false witnesses” whose accusations Stephen just addressed (Acts 6:13–14; 7:2–53). Furthermore, their laying

down *their coats* is practical rather than symbolic; it allows them to throw stones more easily and avoid staining their clothes with blood.

The text introduces a new character, a young man named *Saul*. The note that Stephen's executioners place their clothes at Saul's *feet* suggests that he has a position of authority among the Jews (compare Acts 4:35, 37; 5:2). This detail supports the fact that he approves the execution (8:1; 9:1–2; 22:20).

While Stephen's speech likely had little immediate impact on Saul, the arguments about the law and the temple will become foundational to Saul's ministry as he becomes known as Paul (Acts 13:9). He too will be attacked by an angry mob in Jerusalem (21:27) and have to defend himself against charges involving the law and the temple (25:8), not to mention being stoned himself (14:19; compare 2 Corinthians 11:25). Stephen's speech thus will be echoed in ways he does not live to see. Saul's memory of this day will not fade (Acts 22:20).

It is worth noting that there are two references to Saul's age in the New Testament. The designation *young* can indicate an age between 18 and 40, according to the use of that word at that time. At this point, he is young, while in Philemon 9, he is “aged.”

59. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

In prayer, Stephen once again acknowledges Jesus' lordship and divinity. By asking the *Lord* to *receive my spirit*, Stephen affirms the Christian hope of living with Christ after death. Stephen's prayer also echoes the Lord's final words on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46; compare Psalm 31:5).

60. Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

This element of Stephen's prayer echoes Jesus' prayer on the cross in Luke 23:34 to forgive the executioners. By requesting this, Stephen follows Jesus' teaching to “love your enemies” and “do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27–28). In word and deed, Stephen's steadfast witness exemplifies what it means to follow the crucified and risen Messiah (compare 9:23).

The sobering episode concludes as Stephen falls *asleep*—a metaphor for death (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Jesus’ disciples were often confused by his use of figurative language (examples: Mark 7:17–18; 8:14–21; John 11:11–15; 16:25–30). But there’s no mistaking what is happening here.



Be a faithful witness, no matter what comes.

Visual for Lesson 10. *Display this visual as you ask the class to list attributes of a faithful witness to Christ Jesus.*

What Do You Think?

How can we cultivate a heart of forgiveness and love for those who hurt us?

Digging Deeper

What practical steps can you take to show forgiveness to someone who has wronged you, even if they haven’t sought reconciliation?

Punch Back

When I was a little girl, my brother and I would play a game during car rides. We’d look for Volkswagen Beetles, or “punch buggies” as we called them. The first person to spot a punch buggy was allowed to punch the other person in the arm. We often added a disclaimer as we punched: “Punch buggy! No punch backs!” As you might imagine, fists frequently flew in the backseat of my parents’ vehicle, and revenge hits were part of the game. Pretty soon, we weren’t looking for Volkswagens; we were looking for retaliation against each other.

As Stephen faced death, he didn’t cry out for revenge against his killers. He didn’t call others to “punch back” in revenge. Instead, he followed Jesus’ example by asking God to forgive his murderers and offering up his spirit to the Lord.

When was the last time you asked God to forgive your enemies rather than retaliate against them? —B. R.

Conclusion

A. Opposition and Response

Stephen’s suffering was not in vain. The tragedy of his death led to the spread of the gospel (Acts 8:1–8). His Spirit-filled obedience to Christ empowered him to act selflessly in the face of unfair objection. As a result, Stephen is a model of courage in the face of opposition.

Followers of Jesus can expect opposition—possibly even *bitter* opposition—from others. Stephen faced fierce resistance from many of his fellow Jews. Synagogue members argued with him, false witnesses testified against him, and religious leaders responded with murderous rage. The actions taken against Stephen remind us of Jesus’ promises to his disciples: “If [the world] persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20).

When faced with opposition, we can follow Stephen’s example and respond with wisdom, love, and a reliance on God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit and wisdom filled Stephen, which allowed him to present such compelling arguments that no one could effectively counter or refute. And though he rebuked his fellow Jews, he did so out of love and a desire for them to repent and believe in Christ. Indeed, Stephen loved his opponents even to his death, courageously defending the gospel and graciously praying for their forgiveness. The Lord expects nothing less from us today (Luke 6:27–36; 1 Peter 3:15–16).

B. Prayer

Father God, empower us to be courageous witnesses to your Son in our own settings. Enable us to respond to opposition with as much wisdom, love, and dependence on the Spirit as possible. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Respond to opposition as Jesus and Stephen did.