



Acts: The Church Unleashed
Empowered: Session 4
Acts 6:8-15; 7:44-53; 7:54-60

Reference: The Gospel Project, Winter 2018

INTRODUCTION

A powerful scene in the movie Braveheart is at the end. William Wallace, (played by Mel Gibson), has been captured and is on his death table receiving persecution. The crowd at first was very angry towards Wallace, but as they witnessed his strength in the face of persecution they began to shout “Mercy!” over and over. Wallace’s death is noted later on by the narrator as being a motivator to the Scottish gaining their independence from England.

What are ways that you have seen the willingness of someone to receive persecution for their belief in Christ as a motivator to stand for your faith?

What are some ways around us that we see the world trying to escape death or persecution?

How are Christians to view death?

The gospel declares that death is far from the end, and it reframes our lives and work within the promise that God is restoring all things through Christ Jesus. Whether in joy or suffering, thriving or languishing, our lives’ meaning, and purpose is found in a larger and more glorious story being written by the Creator of the cosmos. And this knowledge empowers the Christian to encounter suffering, persecution, hardship, embarrassment, ridicule, and even death with an incredible boldness.

We can be confident because God is holding us in His story—we’re going to be all right. This knowledge comes as we hear the gospel story, and it’s secured in us as we walk in step with the Spirit, whose power sets our hearts on this ultimate hope and liberates us from fear and oppression.

Transition: In this session, we will see how God’s Holy Spirit empowers the followers of Christ to endure suffering for the sake of Christ. Whether that suffering takes the form of false accusations, death, or other variations, our faithful witness in the midst of suffering is a testimony to Jesus Christ, who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets and to save us from our sin. When we suffer in faith, we are following in the footsteps of our Savior and bearing witness to His worth above all things, even our very lives.

UNDERSTANDING

1. Testify of Jesus in the Face of False Accusations (Acts 6:8-15)

One of the earliest and most powerful stories of Christians staring down suffering and death comes from Acts 6–7, where Stephen, a disciple of Jesus, is persecuted for his testimony about Jesus. Stephen’s story begins as he served as a deacon, a layman, in the church. As the church handled the conflict we can see the church further unifies and grows. Then from this experience we begin to see how Stephen’s faith grew.

Have a volunteer to read Acts 6:8-15.

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.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gets a reputation for performing signs and wonders while testifying to who Jesus is amongst the Jews. As a result, he attracts the attention of men who want to come and argue with him, challenging him and hoping to stop his testimony. But because of his wisdom and because he’s filled with the Spirit of God, their efforts fall short.

This is a consistent theme in the Book of Acts: ordinary men like Stephen and Peter taking up debates with well-educated clergy and winning. Their unfair advantage in these debates is twofold. First, they’re on the side of the truth (which makes winning any debate much, much easier). And second, they’re filled with the Holy Spirit, which gives them supernatural wisdom in what to say and when.

What was Stephen accused of? (blasphemy against the temple and law) What comparisons do you see between Jesus’ time of accusation (Mark 14:55-65) and Stephen’s?

What are things that Christians are accused of today? How should we respond to accusations against Christians?

In Stephen’s case, he was accused of speaking blasphemy against the temple and against the law found in the Old Testament. In our case, what’s more is that we’ll be accused of hateful speech, of bias and bigotry, simply because we hold to traditional beliefs about the value of human life, the meaning of marriage, and the origins of sexuality. Even if we never utter a judgmental word, we might find ourselves accused. Here in Acts 6, we see that this is the nature of opposition to Christianity. It thrives on exaggeration, distortion, and lies in an attempt to discredit the work of the gospel.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, has yet to answer their accusations. He simply shines with the face of an angel. The Bible tells us he is blessed *because* he’s facing this kind of

opposition: “You are blessed when they insult and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me” (Matt. 5:11). This is one more example of the wonderful, upside-down economy of God’s kingdom. It’s *good* to be opposed. It’s *good* to be attacked. In this position of weakness and brokenness, there is a unique kind of strength. Surely that accounts for Stephen’s angelic appearance. He was blessed, and he was filled with the Spirit.

The statement is made is how the greatest apologetic to the Christian life is how we deal with suffering.

How have you dealt with suffering in the past? How has it been a demonstration of Christ’s impact in your life?

Have you seen false accusations being leveled against Christians?

How have you seen opposition become a blessing?

What role does the Holy Spirit play in our response to opposition?

What is our responsibility to prepare for the reality of opposition? (Refer to 1 Peter 3:13-18)

Transition: Eventually, Stephen is called on to speak, and when he does throughout Acts 7, he delivers a stark rebuke with a clear testimony to Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, which they’ve accused him of blaspheming.

2. Testify of Jesus as the Fulfillment of Scripture (Acts 7:44-53)

Have a volunteer to read Acts 7:44-53.

44 “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.^[a] 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

48 “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

49 ““Heaven is my throne,

and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?

says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

50 Has not my hand made all these things?’^[b]

51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Stephen's sermon might sound a little bit odd to our ears. It's important to keep two things in mind when we read it, so we understand how powerful its message is and why the reaction against it was so strong.

First, to Stephen's Jewish audience, there was nothing on earth as sacred as the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was the high point of all of Jewish history. Their exclusive claim as Jews was that the one true God dwelled with Israel, first in a portable sanctuary and then in a permanent temple in Jerusalem. That temple was magnificent and was a symbol of God's blessing and their national pride.

Second, Israel was unfaithful to their covenant with God, and they turned to the gods and idols of their neighbors. Eventually, they were conquered, the temple was destroyed, and the nation was crushed. For generations, the temple was rubble. Its reconstruction came with a religious revival, and the second temple's presence in Jerusalem was seen as a sign that God would be coming back to Israel and they would one day be free from the tyranny of the nations.

By saying this, not only did Stephen confront them as those who killed Jesus, he lumped them in with all of those who had been unfaithful to God in Israel's history. Just as the unfaithful members of Israel had killed the prophets, their first-century sons had killed the One to whom the prophets had pointed. They killed Jesus—God incarnate—and furthermore, now they were persecuting His church, where God the Holy Spirit lives in the hearts and praises of the followers of Christ.

How does Stephen's message compare with Peter's sermons in Acts 2 and Acts 4? (All refer to Jesus being the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Messiah, all refer to how it was the Jewish people that put Jesus to death)

How does Stephen demonstrate the ability to always be prepared to give a defense? (1 Peter 3:15-16)

What are ways that you have experienced God's presence both inside and outside of the building of the church? What is the relationship between the temple, the Holy Spirit, and the people of God? (Refer to 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 2 Corinthians 5:1-5)

What are some ways we might get in the way of Christians obeying the leading of the Spirit? (refer to Mark 4:31-34 as even Jesus' own family tried to stand in the way of Him doing the will of God)

Transition: As we complete this story we begin to see how the people responded to Stephen's message.

3. Testify of Jesus in a Christlike Death (Acts 7:54-60)

Have a volunteer to read 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.

There are three things worth pausing on in this final scene in Stephen’s life, all of which illustrate the way his death was a testimony to Jesus.

First, notice that God was with Stephen in the midst of this trial. A principle that we see throughout the Scriptures is at work here: God supplies all we need to obey Him and follow Him. In a moment of acute suffering and persecution, He gave the power and vision to sustain Stephen. God provides what we need as we need it, and when suffering and trials come into our lives, we can be confident that God will supply the strength, support, and encouragement we need in order to remain faithful through them.

How have you experienced the Holy Spirit sustaining your faith in the midst of trials?

Second, we see that Stephen doesn’t let the fact that he’s right make him judgmental or arrogant. That might sound strange, given how harsh his rebukes were in the previous verses, but as Stephen dies, he cries out “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Like Jesus, he cried out for mercy for his persecutors. His actions here were motivated not by pride—an eagerness to be right and to prove his rightness—but by love. He wanted them to believe in Jesus, not simply to believe him. Preaching, evangelizing, and contending for the faith must come from a heart of love and compassion for the lost, not from an ego that simply wants to win.

Third, as the crowd gathered stones to kill him, they piled their cloaks at the feet of a Jew named Saul. This Saul would become one of the church’s most violent persecutors. But then he became one of the church’s leading church planters and theologians, whom we know as the apostle Paul. His presence at this moment reminds us that we never quite know what will result from our ministries and our words.

The fact that this story is included in the Book of Acts tells us that someone witnessed it, someone knew it mattered, someone was impacted by these words. Very likely, that someone was Paul himself, who partnered with Luke (the author of Acts) on many missionary ventures later in the book. It seems like Stephen’s prayer for mercy for his persecutors found a most unlikely answer in the conversion of the ringleader for his execution.

How have you seen faithful suffering encourage believers? How can suffering open the doors to sharing the gospel with unbelievers?

How is the good news of Jesus displayed in times of radical forgiveness?

APPLICATION

We can see this picture of how Stephen would be the ideal player for the church final fantasy team as he is characterized as a team player, knows the playbook inside and out, every down player, and he shows up in the fourth quarter.

Which one of those qualities do you struggle with the most? Which one of these have you seen from someone else before in the church?

Spirit-filled Christians find themselves doing many strange and wonderful things. Nothing is so strange and powerful as the fearlessness with which they can face suffering and death.

What is one step that your group can take this week to be bolder in your faith and encourage each other to share the good news?

The early church grew because the people grasped the same vision that Stephen did. A supernatural strength sustains them, and it's just as powerful when they face a mob as when they face cancer or Ebola. Empowered by the Spirit and looking with hope to Jesus, we have a confidence that overshadows the power of death (1 Cor. 15:51-58).

We may not face the mob of opposition this week, but we can seek to be more prepared when the challenges come. ***Pray as a group for each person to be filled with the Holy Spirit as you encounter a world that is against the gospel.***

Stephen died at the hands of persecutors, but he died with great confidence because Jesus is alive, the grave is defeated, and in His world, we have nothing to fear. ***Set aside time this week to communicate with each other and remind the group that Jesus is alive and that makes all the difference in any situation we face in opposition or suffering!***

Quotes/Illustrations

Acts 6:8-15

“God...gives us assurance and confirms all his promises as definitely as, for example, a man holding an object in his hands is certain that he has it. In the same way faith grasps the promise of God, which is invisible, and clings to it as though it were visible.”¹
–Peter Riedemann (1506-1556)

“The strength of the good soldier of Jesus Christ appears in nothing more than in steadfastly maintaining the holy calm, meekness, sweetness, and benevolence of his mind, amidst all the storms, injuries, strange behaviour and surprising acts and events of this evil and unreasonable world.”³

–Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

“There is an expectation in the NT that as the believer witnesses to the reign of Christ to a world that does not know Him, persecution will happen. However, one of the telling things in these passages that makes its way to the forefront is the fact that the Lord uses suffering from *without* and *within* as a means to grow us in Him, and conform us to the image of Jesus Christ.”⁴

–Eric Mason

Acts 7:44-53

“And in sum, [Stephen] said that every human deed, word, work, being and life apart from faith is pure sin. We are unable to capture God in wood and stone, in gold and silver, nor is it the true worship of God to build wood and stone temples. Instead, the hearts of believers are the true temple and dwelling place of God.”^z

–Johann Spangenberg (1484-1550)

Acts 7:54-60

“This is the boldness of speech that belongs to a man who is carrying the cross. Let us then also imitate this. For although it is not a time for war, it is always the time for boldness.”⁹

–John Chrysostom (circa 347-407)

“I am not tired of my work, neither am I tired of the world, yet, when Christ calls me home, I shall go with gladness.”¹⁰

–Adoniram Judson (1788-1850)

Further Commentary

Acts 6:8-15

“Stephen’s teaching aroused keen opposition, and a full-dress debate was probably arranged. The exact subject of the debate is not stated; the messiahship of Jesus was no doubt the central issue, but Stephen expounded the implications of this messiahship more radically than his fellow-believers had hitherto done, with reference to the abiding validity of the law of Moses and especially of the temple order...The strength of his case was such that his opponents in the debate found themselves worsted. They accepted his premises (for like him they acknowledged the authority of Old Testament scripture), but they could not accept his conclusions, so scandalous and revolutionary did they appear.”²

–F. F. Bruce

Acts 7:44-53

“There is more to God and God’s presence than this one locale. There is a danger in making too much of the temple...[T]he point is not that it was wrong to construct the tabernacle or temple but that ‘they should never have been regarded as in any literal sense God’s home.’”⁵

–Darrell L. Bock

“Stephen...called on Old Testament history to assert that God’s ultimate goal had been the coming of Christ and the creation of the church. He implied that this gospel was universal in that God never had been limited to one land or building. He also saw within this history the continual pattern of official persecution of God’s messengers from Moses to the prophets, to Christ, and to Christ’s disciples. This approach...called into question the exclusive claim that Jews had placed on being the people of God. If God’s purpose was to produce a universal gospel through Christ, then the Jews were tools to accomplish this, rather than being the only people of God. Thus, Stephen began to set the stage for the extension of the gospel to non-Jewish people.”⁶

–Timothy N. Boyd, *Biblical Illustrator*

Acts 7:54-60

“[W]hy is the Son of Man revealed to Stephen as *standing* rather than sitting? This posture has been variously interpreted. It could symbolize Jesus’ readiness to welcome Stephen as a persecuted prophet, soon to enter his presence. Perhaps the vision serves as ‘assurance of Jesus’ supportive witness in the heavenly court’ (cf. Luke 12:8). Perhaps it implies a personal coming to the martyr at the time of his death, as at the end he will come to all. At this particular point in the narrative, however, it is more likely to be a way of asserting the readiness of the Son of Man to act in judgment against those who deny him...a specific warning to those who have rejected Jesus and his witnesses in the past and who are about to reject him again by killing Stephen.”⁸
–David G. Peterson