
ACTS OF THE APOSTLES



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COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH
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SERMON RECAP

Pastor Gary took us into Acts 6–7 and the life and death of Stephen as a powerful “bubble-breaking” passage. A “bubble” is that insulated place where we only see our own comfort, concerns, and culture. Stephen’s story shatters that bubble. Here is an everyday servant described as “full of grace and power,” performing signs and wonders, falsely accused, and ultimately stoned to death. Yet as he faces a violent mob, his face looks “like the face of an angel,” and he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. This is Pentecost too, not just tongues and visible gifts, but a Spirit-empowered life marked by compassion, grace, endurance, and a supernatural countenance in suffering.

The pastoral heart of the message was a call to move beyond a narrow, doctrinally-driven view of the Spirit’s work and into a relational reality with Christ that transforms how we live, especially under pressure. Pastor Gary challenged us to break our bubbles: to see persecuted believers around the world, to recognize “Stephens” in our own day, and to rethink what it means to “fight for the faith.” We don’t fight primarily by arguing and throwing “grenades” online, but by demonstrating grace, power, and compassion, especially toward those who oppose us. Stephen’s forgiveness and Christ-like response to his killers deeply marked Saul of Tarsus and helped shape the future apostle, Paul. In the same way, our responses to hardship and opposition may be shaping the “Sauls” around us into future “Paul’s,” even if we never see it.

Finally, Pastor Gary reminded us that all of us are called to die daily: our pride, anger, resentment, and self-importance must go to the cross so that the Spirit can fill the empty space. We are not guaranteed a life of ease; Scripture is clear that hardship will come. The question is not, “Will I suffer?” but “How will I suffer?” Will we, like Stephen, see our hardships as opportunities to display Christ to our families, coworkers, and a watching world? Our greatest fear should not be death, but wasting the opportunities God gives us before we die.

STUDY GUIDE

KEY POINTS

- **Break the Bubble of Self-Focus**
Stephen's story pulls us out of our safe, Western Christian bubble and reconnects us to the global church and to historic, costly discipleship. Christianity cannot be defined only by our own experience.
- **Grace and Power, Not Just "Boom" Power**
Stephen is described as "full of grace and power." Pentecost is not only about explosive displays of power (tongues, miracles), but also about compassion, meekness, generosity, courage, and a face like an angel under pressure.
- **Compassion as True Spiritual Power**
Many miracles in Scripture flow from compassion. Pastor Gary emphasized that what we often most need is not "more power" but more compassion for the abused, the vulnerable, the unborn, and the persecuted.
- **Dying Daily Creates Space for the Spirit**
Stephen's physical death changed the world. Our daily "deaths" to pride, resentment, selfishness, and sin create room in our hearts for the Holy Spirit to fill. Something has to die this week, so that more of Christ can live in us.
- **Our Witness in Suffering Shapes Others**
Stephen's countenance and words ("Lord, do not charge them with this sin") profoundly impacted Saul of Tarsus. In the same way, our responses to insult, opposition, and hardship may either harden or soften the "Sauls" around us.
- **Redefining Persecution and Offense**
Compared to Stephen, most of what we call "persecution" is minor. We should expect and even welcome insults for Christ's sake, responding with grace instead of vindictiveness. It is to our glory to overlook an offense.

KEY SCRIPTURE (PRIMARY SERMON TEXT)

- **Acts 6:8-15** - Introduction of Stephen: "full of grace and power," performing signs and wonders, falsely accused, with a face like an angel before the council.
- **Acts 7:54-60** - Stephen's martyrdom: vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God; prayer of surrender and forgiveness; Saul present and approving.

SCRIPTURE EXPLICITLY CITED OR CLEARLY ALLUDED TO

- **Philippians 3:10** - "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings..."
- **2 Timothy 4:5** - "Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship..." (paraphrased in sermon).
- **Romans 12:12** - "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

- **Matthew 5:11-12** - “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me...”
- **Acts 9:4-5** - “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (referenced in explaining how Jesus identifies with Stephen).
- **Various Gospel healings** - Jesus moved with compassion (e.g., Mark 1:40-42; Matthew 9:35-36; alluded to in describing compassion as the engine of miracles).
- **Luke 9:23 / parallels** - “Take up your cross daily” (referenced to describe daily dying to self).
- **Matthew 25:40** - “What you did for one of the least of these... you did for me” (principle applied to Stephen and persecuted believers).

Note: Pastor Gary didn’t give chapter/verse for each, but these are the clear scriptural anchors of his references.

OTHER RELEVANT VERSES

These were not all explicitly quoted, but they strongly reinforce the sermon’s themes:

1. **Hebrews 12:1-3**
“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”
THEMATIC TIE: Encourages us, like Stephen, to fix our eyes on Jesus and endure opposition without losing heart.
 2. **1 Peter 4:12-16**
Calls believers not to be surprised by the “fiery trial,” but to rejoice in sharing Christ’s sufferings.
THEMATIC TIE: Expounds on the “fellowship of His sufferings” that Stephen experienced and Paul later desired.
 3. **Galatians 2:20**
“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...”
THEMATIC TIE: Clarifies what it means to “die daily” and live a cross-shaped life in front of others.
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DEVOTIONAL MATERIAL (DAYS 1-5)

DAY 1 - "FULL OF GRACE AND POWER"

Reflection Question

When people look at my life, especially in hard moments, what do they see me as "full of"?

Reading

- Acts 6:8-10

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people... But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."

Devotional Content

Stephen first appears in Acts 6 as one of the men appointed to oversee the distribution of food to widows. In the culture of the early church, this was humble, practical service, making sure the most vulnerable were not overlooked. Yet Luke describes this "table-server" with unusually weighty language: "full of grace and power... full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3, 8).

In the ancient world, religious "power" was often associated with the elite: priests, philosophers, or miracle-working holy men. But Stephen is an ordinary believer empowered by an extraordinary God. He is not an apostle; he holds no exalted title. He simply makes himself available, and the same Spirit poured out at Pentecost rests on him. Luke wants us to see that the Spirit's power is not confined to a few special people or spectacular moments. It flows through servants, those committed to both truth and compassion.

Notice also the pairing: "grace and power." In our culture, power easily turns harsh, self-promoting, or domineering. But Spirit-given power arrives hand-in-hand with grace: undeserved kindness, forgiveness, and a gentleness that disarms hostility. Stephen debates vigorously, but those opposing him are confronted not only with sharp arguments, but with a radiant, Spirit-saturated life.

Application & Closing Challenge

Ask the Lord to show you what you are "full of" right now. Is it anxiety? Resentment? Self-protection? Or grace and power?

- Identify one relationship or situation where you tend to rely on your own strength, control, or defensiveness.
 - Pray specifically: "Lord, in this place, fill me with Your grace and Your power."
 - Then, look for one concrete way to serve someone today, especially someone vulnerable or easily overlooked, as Stephen served the widows.
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DAY 2 - "A FACE LIKE AN ANGEL"

Reflection Question

How does my countenance (especially under stress) either reveal or conceal the presence of Christ in me?

Reading

- Acts 6:12-15

"And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

Devotional Content

Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court. These are the same kinds of religious authorities who condemned Jesus. In that culture, being brought before such a council, surrounded by elders and scholars in official robes, would have been terrifying. The charges are serious: blasphemy against Moses and God. The penalty could be death.

Yet Luke captures a stunning scene: as the council stares at Stephen, they see his face shine "like the face of an angel." This phrase evokes Moses' radiant face after meeting with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29–35). The irony is sharp: Stephen is accused of dishonoring Moses, yet he bears the same kind of radiance Moses had after being in God's presence.

This is Pentecost in action. The Spirit's work is not only in words and miracles, but in the transformed presence of a believer under intense pressure. In a world that expects fear, anger, or self-defensiveness, Stephen radiates calm, confidence, and a beauty not of this world. He does not control the trial's outcome, but he does, by the Spirit, embody a different kingdom, a kingdom where rage and lies cannot extinguish the light on a believer's face.

Application & Closing Challenge

Our "trials" may be staff meetings, tense family conversations, or online hostility rather than formal councils, but the principle holds: people are watching us. Our reactions preach.

- Think of a stressful context where you know others are "looking steadfastly" at you (work, home, school, social media).
- Ask: "What does my face usually say there? Fear? Irritation? Cynicism? Or peace and hope?"
- Before you enter that environment next time, pause and invite the Spirit: "Lord, let Your presence be visible in my countenance today. Give me a face that reflects Your peace."

Challenge: Choose one upcoming stressful moment (meeting, phone call, etc.). Arrive 5–10 minutes early and spend that time quietly with the Lord, asking Him to shape not just your words, but your very demeanor.

DAY 3 - "THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS"

Reflection Question

Do I see suffering as an interruption to my Christian life, or as a pathway into deeper fellowship with Christ?

Reading

- Philippians 3:10
- Acts 7:54-56

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings..." (Philippians 3:10)

"But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God..." (Acts 7:55)

Devotional Content

Paul's desire in Philippians 3:10 is radical: not only to know Christ and resurrection power, but to share in His sufferings. The man who wrote this once stood approvingly at Stephen's execution. Years later, as a follower of Christ, Paul would himself be beaten, imprisoned, and eventually killed for the gospel. He learned that suffering is not merely something to avoid; it is an intimate place where we come to know Jesus more deeply.

Stephen's final moments illustrate this "fellowship of His sufferings." As the enraged crowd prepares to stone him, Stephen is "full of the Holy Spirit" and granted a vision of the risen Christ? Not sitting, but standing, at the right hand of God. In the ancient world, a king stood to honor or welcome someone of special significance. Jesus, who once stood before a hostile council, now stands to welcome and honor His faithful witness.

Culturally, stoning was designed to shame and erase a person. They were thrown into a pit and pummeled with rocks, often forgotten by history. But heaven saw every moment. The Trinity watched. Christ stood. Suffering for Christ became the very place where Stephen experienced the nearness and approval of his Lord.

Application & Closing Challenge

Most of us will not face physical martyrdom, but all of us will face suffering: illness, loss, betrayal, disappointment. The question is not "Will I suffer?" but "With whom will I suffer?" Alone? Or with Christ?

- Identify one area of current or recent suffering in your life.
 - Ask: "Have I seen this mostly as an obstacle to joy, or as an invitation into deeper fellowship with Jesus?"
 - In prayer, name your pain honestly to the Lord, then deliberately invite Him into it: "Jesus, share this with me. Let me know You here."
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DAY 4 - "LORD, DO NOT CHARGE THEM"

Reflection Question

How do I respond, externally and internally, when I am insulted?

Reading

- Acts 7:57-60
- Matthew 5:11-12

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60)

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." (Matthew 5:11)

Devotional Content

As stones rain down, Stephen's final words echo those of Jesus on the cross: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." In the ancient Near Eastern context, family honor and revenge were powerful forces. To be publicly shamed or attacked often demanded a response. Yet Stephen, like his Lord, uses his dying breath not to curse his killers, but to intercede for them.

Jesus had already prepared His disciples for this kind of response in the Sermon on the Mount. Being insulted and falsely accused for His sake is not a sign of failure, but of blessing and identification with the prophets. In many parts of the world today, believers are ostracized, beaten, imprisoned, or killed for following Christ. Our "persecution" in the West is often far lighter. But our calling is the same: to respond not in kind, but with radical grace.

Stephen's prayer did not vanish into the dust of that day. The young man holding the cloaks, Saul of Tarsus, would be haunted by Stephen's face and words. Years later, confronted by the risen Christ, he would hear, "Why do you persecute Me?" What Saul did to Stephen, he did to Jesus. And what Stephen prayed for his killers, Christ would answer in Saul's conversion. Our grace-filled responses may have a time-release effect on the "Sauls" watching us.

Application & Closing Challenge

Consider how you normally respond to opposition, especially online or in cultural debates. Do your words (spoken, written, posted) make it easier or harder for your "opponents" to imagine the grace of Christ?

- Think of one person or group that frustrates or opposes you because of your faith or values.
- Name before God any resentment or contempt you carry toward them.
- Ask the Spirit to help you pray Stephen's kind of prayer over them: that God would not hold their sin against them, but would reveal Christ to them.

Challenge: This week, when you are tempted to "lob a verbal grenade" (online or in person), pause and silently ask: "Will this response help turn a Saul into a Paul, or just harden them further?" Choose one instance to deliberately respond with restraint and grace instead of retaliation.

DAY 5 - "SOMETHING HAS TO DIE"

Reflection Question

What needs to "die" in me this week so that there is more room for the Holy Spirit to fill?

Reading

- Luke 9:23
- Romans 12:12
- Galatians 2:20

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." (Romans 12:12)

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

Devotional Content

Stephen died physically once. Most believers will not face that call. But Jesus speaks of a daily cross, a continual dying to self. In the first-century Roman world, crucifixion was a public display of utter humiliation and powerlessness. To "take up a cross" meant embracing the death of one's own agenda, pride, and claims to self-rule.

Paul later describes the Christian life as being "crucified with Christ," such that our old self no longer rules the heart. That death creates space for a new life to operate: "Christ lives in me." Pastor Gary suggested that this "making space" is essential for the Spirit's filling. Our hearts cannot be both full of bitterness, racism, resentment, and pride, and full of the Holy Spirit. Something must go.

Romans 12:12 sketches a cross-shaped posture in daily life: joy anchored in hope (not circumstances), patience in affliction (not panic or self-pity), and faithfulness in prayer (not self-reliance). When our "bubble" we face a choice. Will we cling to self or die to self? Will we fixate on what we've lost, or will we see, as Pastor Gary said, an opportunity to show our children, our friends, our watching world how to both live and die with dignity in Christ?

Application & Closing Challenge

Ask the Holy Spirit to put His finger on one specific area where "self" must die this week:

- A grudge you are holding.
- A pattern of self-pity.
- A habit of complaining.
- An area of moral compromise.
- A need to always be right.

Name it before God, and then:

- Confess it honestly as sin or self-rule.
- Ask Christ to crucify that pattern with Him.
- Ask the Spirit to fill the new “space” with His love, joy, peace, or compassion.

Challenge: Write down one concrete, daily practice that will help you “die” to this area (e.g., blessing someone you resent, remaining silent instead of arguing, confessing a habit to a trusted friend). Practice it for the next seven days, asking God to fill the emptied space with more of Himself.

IV.

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES

OPENING

Welcome everyone and briefly acknowledge that this week's focus is on Stephen's life, death, and the kind of Spirit-filled witness that breaks our cultural "bubbles."

Invite the group into a short time of prayer.

Suggested prompts:

- Thank God for the Book of Acts and the example of Stephen.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to break any "bubbles" of comfort or self-focus.
- Pray for sensitivity to persecuted believers and for courage in our own context.

THEMATIC RECAP

Stephen's story in Acts 6–7 shows us a Spirit-filled life that combines grace, power, and compassion, even under deadly pressure. Pentecost is not only about spectacular gifts; it is about ordinary believers, full of the Spirit, living and dying in a way that reveals Jesus to a watching world.

Key Highlights

- Stephen is an everyday servant "full of grace and power," performing signs and wonders.
- He faces false accusations with a radiant countenance "the face of an angel."
- His Christ-like forgiveness of his killers deeply imprints Saul of Tarsus.
- Our daily "dying to self" creates space for the Spirit, shaping the "Sauls" around us.

ICEBREAKER (5-15 MINUTES)

Question:

Describe a time (recent or long ago) when someone's response under pressure deeply impacted you, for good or for ill. What did their reaction show you about what they were "full of"?

(Keep it general enough that people don't feel forced to share something too vulnerable right away.)

SCRIPTURE EXPLORATION

PASSAGE 1: ACTS 6:8-15

Read together: Acts 6:8–15.

Discussion Prompts

1. What stands out to you most about the way Luke describes Stephen in verses 8 and 10?
2. How do “grace” and “power” together paint a different picture than “power” alone?
3. Why is it significant that Stephen is not an apostle, yet operates in signs and wonders?
4. What might it have felt like for Stephen to stand before the council, facing serious charges?
5. How do you imagine his face “like the face of an angel” appeared to those watching?

PASSAGE 2: ACTS 7:54-60

Read together: Acts 7:54–60.

Discussion Prompts

1. What does Stephen’s vision of Jesus “standing” (not sitting) at the right hand of God tell us about Christ’s posture toward His suffering servants?
2. How does Stephen’s final prayer mirror Jesus’ prayer on the cross? Why is that important?
3. Verse 58 mentions Saul. How do you imagine this scene affected him in the long term?
4. How might remembering this scene shape the way we think about our own sufferings?
5. In what ways does Stephen “finish well”? What does “finishing well” look like for us?

PASSAGE 3: PHILIPPIANS 3:10 & ROMANS 12:12

Read together: Philippians 3:10; Romans 12:12.

Discussion Prompts

1. What do you think Paul meant by wanting to know “the fellowship of sharing in [Christ’s] sufferings”?
2. How is that desire different from the way we often pray about suffering?
3. Romans 12:12 calls us to be “joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Which of these three is most challenging for you, and why?
4. How might Stephen’s example help us understand and live out these verses?

Grand Synthesis Prompt

- Looking at all these passages together, how would you describe a “Pentecost-shaped” life in everyday terms? What does it look like in our context to be full of grace and power, to suffer with Christ, and to respond to opposition like Stephen?
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APPLICATION: PRACTICAL STEPS

As a group, brainstorm and discuss concrete ways to live out this message this week:

Personally

- Identify one “bubble” of comfort or self-focus God may be asking you to break (e.g., ignorance of global persecution, indifference to local suffering, harshness toward those who disagree with you).
- Choose one daily practice to help you “die to self” (e.g., forgiving an offense, serving someone unseen, restraining from online arguments).

Communally

- As a group, consider:
 - Supporting a ministry to the persecuted church or to abused and vulnerable people.
 - Setting aside time in your next meeting to pray specifically for believers suffering for their faith.
 - Sharing weekly stories of where you faced “insults” or opposition and how you responded.

Invite group members to choose at least one personal step and one communal step to attempt before you next meet.

CLOSING

Leave time (10–15 minutes) for prayer needs and response.

Prayer Prompts

- Pray for persecuted believers around the world, modern “Stephens.”
- Ask God to fill your group with grace and power, not fear or anger.
- Invite the Spirit to reveal specific areas where each person needs to “die to self.”
- Pray for any group members currently facing hardship, that they would sense Christ “standing with them” as Stephen did.

Encourage group members to pray in their own words. Leaders can guide the flow by themes (global church, personal needs, bold witness) rather than reading a scripted prayer.

LEADER NOTES

- **Create Safety:**
Remind the group at the outset that honest struggles with fear, anger, or reluctance to suffer are welcome. Model vulnerability yourself (at an appropriate level) so others feel free to share.
- **Honor the Quiet:**
Some members may be more contemplative. Don't rush to fill silence; give space after questions for people to think. Sometimes the Spirit works most deeply in the pauses.
- **Keep the Focus on Christ, Not on Guilt:**
This message can easily lead to unhealthy shame ("I don't suffer like Stephen; I must be a bad Christian"). Gently redirect toward Christ's sufficiency and the invitation to grow, not condemnation.
- **Avoid Comparative Suffering:**
Be careful not to dismiss "smaller" sufferings just because others face martyrdom. Help the group see that every hardship is an opportunity to lean into Christ, while still honoring and praying for those who face extreme persecution.
- **Handle Sensitive Topics Wisely:**
If conversations about persecution, abuse, or global injustice arise, listen carefully and avoid oversimplifications. Point people toward appropriate pastoral care or resources when needed.
- **Prayer Protocol:**
Encourage Spirit-led, unscripted prayer:
 - Prompt by themes ("Let's thank God for Stephen's example," "Let's pray for courage in our own workplaces...").
 - Invite short, simple prayers rather than long ones that might intimidate newer believers.
 - Consider praying in smaller clusters if the group is large, to allow more participation.

As you lead, keep bringing the group back to this central question:

"In our real lives, this week, what would it look like to respond like Stephen—with grace, power, and a face turned toward Jesus?"