



First Martyr

Kicking It Off

Have you ever stood up for something you knew was right, even though it was unpopular? What happened?

Read

Acts 7:54–8:3

Summary

Stephen was telling everyone, "You don't need the temple system anymore. God isn't trapped in a building and Jesus already paid the price for everything." And the religious leaders seethed with anger and hatred towards him, because if that's true, their whole system falls apart. It's like if someone showed up offering unlimited free gas, the oil companies would not be happy about it.

Here's what's interesting, though. Stephen knew this message would get him killed, and he said it anyway. We all love the idea of being like Jesus when it means doing cool stuff, having great friends, living with purpose. But Jesus's life was defined by rejection, and following Him means signing up for that too. Most of us are fine with God's plan as long as it leads to our success. The second it requires us to lose something, we want out. But Stephen gets it. Even while he's being killed, he does two things that mirror Jesus on the cross. He asks God to receive his spirit, because death isn't the end, it's actually just the beginning. And then he prays for the people killing him, asking God not to hold it against them. That's what being full of God's Spirit actually looks like. It's not lightning bolts. It's having genuine love for people, even the ones who are against you.

Standing right there watching Stephen die was a young guy named Saul, who later becomes the apostle Paul and writes a huge chunk of the New Testament. Stephen never saw that coming. He just had to be faithful and die, like a seed going into the ground. God grew the fruit later.

We live in a time when people have everything, technology, freedom, resources, and yet so many feel purposeless. You won't find real meaning in life until you figure out what's worth giving your life for. And the gospel says the answer is Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Many of us are willing to follow God when it leads to success, comfort, or recognition, but we hesitate when it leads to personal loss. When has following God cost you something, and how did you respond?
3. Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of the people who were killing him, mirroring Jesus on the cross. When someone wrongs you, is your instinct to seek forgiveness for them or justice against them?
4. It is easy to turn God's commands into "our way" over time, where obedience gradually becomes a source of pride and control rather than humility. Where in your life might you be holding onto a religious habit more for your own comfort than out of genuine submission to God?
5. Our culture tells us the highest value is protecting yourself, your comfort, your plans, and your identity. What would it look like for you to practically "give your life like a seed to the ground" in this season?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"God doesn't care that I bow down 90 degrees and show Him reverence. He accepts me, and He is worthy of not just a bow. He is worthy of me being prostrate and laying on the floor, saying, 'Lord, You are worthy.' It's not the amount of worship I give God that causes Him to accept me. He accepts me, He loves me, and it leads me to want to be more holy."

"You won't find purpose until you know what you're willing to die for. You won't find true meaning in life until you know what your life is worth giving up for."

"The beauty of the gospel is that the Lord bears fruit where you would least expect it. Stephen did not witness his fruit. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."

"If you want a litmus test for whether you're full of the Spirit, ask yourself: when you speak the truth, do you feel hatred for your enemies, or do you feel love for your enemies?"

Sermon Notes

Acts 7:54–8:3

54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 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. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Outline

1. Rejected Like Jesus (7:54–58)
 - a. We embrace being like Jesus when it means miracles, friendships, and power, but His life was defined by rejection
 - b. We prefer God's way when it leads to our success; the moment it requires our failure, we resist and become like the Pharisees
 - c. Stephen understood that speaking truth would cost him everything and spoke anyway
 - d. God is able to use rejection and even death for His glory; what looks like waste from a human perspective serves God's purposes
 - e. Jesus standing at the right hand of God (v. 56), not sitting, pictures Christ rising to receive His faithful servant
2. Praying Like Jesus (7:59–60)
 - a. Stephen's first prayer echoes Jesus: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (cf. Luke 23:46), reflecting the understanding that death is not the end but the beginning
 - b. Stephen's second prayer mirrors the cross: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (cf. Luke 23:34)
 - c. Stephen's attention is split between heaven and earth: focused on Christ while concerned for his enemies
 - d. Litmus test for being full of the Spirit: when you speak truth, do you feel hatred or love for your enemies?
 - e. The filling of the Holy Spirit is experienced as deep affection for people, even those who oppose you
3. Fruitful Like Jesus (8:1–3)
 - a. Persecution scattered the church like seeds, fulfilling the Great Commission through suffering, not strategy
 - b. Saul, the last person anyone would expect God to use, stood approving Stephen's execution; this is the origin story of the apostle Paul
 - c. The Lord bears fruit where you would least expect it; the gospel chooses the sick, broken, and unlikely
 - d. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24)
 - e. Stephen never witnessed his fruit; faithfulness does not require seeing the outcome
 - f. The church is not built on demographics or religious polish but on shared need for Jesus

Notes

Why do you believe? It is a question worth sitting with, not as an abstract theological exercise, but as something deeply personal. For me, the answer begins with anxiety. I have spent much of my life managing an anxious disposition by learning the rules and following them meticulously. Growing up in a Korean church, I was the model student, the kid who bowed with full reverence, the one the parents pointed to as an example. What I did not realize until much later was that my adherence to the rules was not driven by devotion. It was driven by a fear that if I broke the rules, people would reject me.

That fear was not unfounded. I grew up in a shame based culture where failing to meet expectations could cost you your place in the community. Even as a pastor, I have been asked to leave churches, not because of sin, but because a leader did not care for my personality. Those experiences deepened my anxiety and sharpened my instinct to figure out the rules, follow them, and earn acceptance.

And yet, this is precisely where the gospel intervenes. I believe in God because God accepts me as I am, not because of anything I have done to earn that acceptance. God does not look at the depth of my bow and decide I am worthy. He accepts me, and that acceptance is what moves me to worship. The order of operations matters here. It is not that we do all the right things and then God accepts us. God accepts us, and that acceptance leads us to want to do the right things. This may sound simple, but it is a distinction we have to fight for constantly, because there is a religious spirit that always wants to reverse the order, to make acceptance contingent on performance.

This is exactly the tension we find in Acts 7 and 8. Stephen, one of the early church's deacons, has been preaching a message that threatens the entire religious establishment. His argument, laid out in a long speech before the Jewish leaders, is that God's presence was never confined to the temple. God went with Abraham, went with Moses, went with His people wherever they went. The Spirit of God was not containable by walls or systems. And now, with the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is a new covenant. The sacrificial system, the temple rituals, the Levitical priesthood, all of it pointed to Jesus, who became the eternal sacrifice. His body and blood make us new. The golden ticket of righteousness is not something we earn. It is given to us freely, paid for by Christ's suffering.

You can imagine how threatening this message was to the religious leaders. Their entire livelihood, their authority, their identity was wrapped up in the temple system. If people no longer needed priests to mediate between them and God, if sacrifices were no longer required, the leaders were out of a job. It would be like someone offering unlimited free energy to the world. The oil companies would not celebrate. They would

fight back. And that is exactly what the Pharisees did. When Stephen spoke the truth, they did not engage it intellectually. They were enraged. The Greek word suggests their hearts were being sawn in half. It was not rational disagreement. It was a visceral, murderous fury born from the conviction of the Holy Spirit meeting a hardened heart.

This brings us to the first reality of following Jesus: we are called to be rejected like Him. We love the idea of being like Jesus when it means performing miracles, having deep friendships, or living with purpose and clarity. But Jesus's life was marked by rejection. And if we are honest, most of us are only interested in following God's way when it leads to our success, our glory, our comfort. The moment God's way requires our failure, our humiliation, or our loss, we start to resist. We become like the Pharisees, preferring a system we can control over a God who is truly glorified through our weakness.

Stephen understood this. He knew that speaking truth would cost him everything, and he spoke anyway. His life was cut short. From a human perspective, it looked like a waste, a young man with enormous potential silenced before his prime. But Stephen understood that God is able to use rejection and even death for His glory.

The second reality is that we are called to pray like Jesus. As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed two prayers that echo Jesus on the cross. First, he cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," just as Jesus had said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Both prayers reflect the understanding that death is not the end. It is the beginning of eternal life with God. Second, Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," mirroring Jesus's words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." What strikes me about Stephen is that even in his final moments, his attention was divided between heaven and earth. He was focused on Jesus, ready to be received, but he was also concerned about the people killing him. This is the mark of someone full of the Holy Spirit. The filling of the Spirit is not lightning bolts or halos. It is a deep affection for people, even your enemies, that does not lose sight of the truth. If you want a litmus test for whether you are full of the Spirit, ask yourself: when you speak the truth, do you feel hatred for your enemies or love for them?

The third reality is that we are called to be fruitful like Jesus, but the fruit may come in ways we never see. After Stephen's execution, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. What looked like destruction was actually the engine of the gospel's spread. The early church was scattered like seeds, fulfilling the Great Commission not through a strategic plan, but through suffering.

And standing at the margins of Stephen's death was a young man named Saul, who approved of the execution. Saul was a Pharisee of Pharisees, a Hebrew of Hebrews,

the rising star of the religious establishment. He was the last person anyone would have expected God to use. And yet, this is the beauty of the gospel: the Lord bears fruit where you would least expect it. Stephen never saw the fruit of his martyrdom. He did not look at Saul and prophesy that this persecutor would become the apostle Paul, the author of much of the New Testament. Stephen simply had to die. As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."

This is the hard pill we must swallow. We are the seeds, and we are called to die, not necessarily a physical death, but a death to our own plans, our own kingdoms, our own versions of the good life. We give our lives to the Lord the way we give the ground a seed, saying, "This is no longer mine. It belongs to God. He will grow it into whatever He wants it to be."

We are living in a culture plagued by purposelessness. We have more technology, more information, more resources, more freedoms than any generation in history. And yet people are not thriving. My argument is simple: you will not find purpose until you know what you are willing to die for. You will not find true meaning until you know what your life is worth giving up for. Our culture tells us the highest value is self preservation, protecting your truth, your bubble, your comfort. But that was never how we were meant to live. The way of Jesus is to lose your life for the sake of the Lord, and in that losing, to find eternal life.

So as we consider Stephen, the first martyr, willing to die for his faith and his Savior, the question comes to each of us: would you be willing to give your life for Christ, as He has given His life for you?

Blog

Stephen had just preached the longest sermon in Acts, a sweeping retelling of Israel's history that landed on a single, devastating point: you are doing it again. You rejected Joseph. You rejected Moses. You killed the prophets. And now you have betrayed and murdered Jesus (Acts 7:52). The Sanhedrin, seventy-one of Israel's most powerful religious leaders, did not take it well.

Luke tells us they were "enraged, and they ground their teeth at him" (7:54). The Greek word for "enraged" is important. It literally means "sawn through in their hearts." These were not composed men weighing an argument. They were furious, viscerally so, grinding their teeth like animals cornered by something they could not control. And what they could not control was the truth. Stephen held up a mirror, and the reflection was unbearable.

But Luke doesn't focus on the mob. He pivots to Stephen, and what he shows us is the sharpest contrast in all of Acts. While the council snarls and rages, Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (7:55). Two groups of people in the same room, looking in opposite directions. One staring at the man they want dead. The other staring into the open heavens at a standing King.

That word "standing" matters because nearly every other New Testament reference to Jesus at the right hand of God describes Him as seated. Psalm 110:1, Hebrews 1:3, Colossians 3:1, Romans 8:34. Seated is the posture of completed work, of authority at rest. But Stephen doesn't see a seated Christ. He sees Jesus on His feet. The best reading is that Jesus rises to receive His faithful witness, the way you'd stand to greet someone arriving home after a long and costly journey. Others have suggested He stands as an advocate, bearing witness in the heavenly court on Stephen's behalf while the earthly court condemns him below. Both readings carry weight. Both tell us the same thing: Stephen is not abandoned. The Christ who was rejected before him now stands for him.

Stephen announces what he sees. "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (7:56). That title, Son of Man, comes from Daniel 7, where a figure "like a son of man" approaches the Ancient of Days and receives dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom. Jesus used the title for Himself throughout His ministry. Before this very council, He declared, "From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69). They called it blasphemy then. Stephen now testifies that it was simply the truth. What Jesus promised, Stephen sees.

The council's response is immediate and violent. They cry out, stop their ears, and rush at him (7:57). Three actions in rapid sequence, and the middle one is the most telling. They plug up their ears. This is not involuntary. It is a deliberate refusal to hear what Stephen is saying. The same men Stephen accused of "always resisting the Holy Spirit" (7:51) now physically enact the accusation. They will not listen. They cast him out of the city and begin to stone him.

Luke notes, almost in passing, that "the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (7:58). It's the kind of detail that seems incidental the first time you read it. It is not. Luke is planting a seed that will grow into the second half of Acts. The man holding the coats will become the apostle to the Gentiles. But we're getting ahead of the story.

Stephen, being crushed by stones, prays twice. His two prayers are the final words Luke records from his mouth, and both of them come directly from the lips of Jesus on the cross.

The first: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (7:59). Compare this with Luke 23:46, where Jesus cries out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" The structure is identical. The trust is the same. The only difference is the address. Jesus prays to the Father. Stephen prays to Jesus. That shift is itself a confession of faith. Stephen entrusts his soul to the risen Lord with the same confidence that Jesus entrusted His to the Father.

The second: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). Compare this with Luke 23:34, where Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Stephen, kneeling under a barrage of stones, intercedes for the men throwing them. And Luke tells us he "cried out with a loud voice." This was not a whispered prayer. It was loud, public, intentional. Stephen wanted his killers to hear that they were forgiven. This is not natural human behavior. No one, through sheer willpower, prays for the people killing them. This is the Holy Spirit producing the character of Christ in a man under unimaginable pressure.

Luke, we should note, is the only Gospel writer who recorded both of Jesus' prayers that Stephen echoes. He wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The parallel is not accidental. It is architectural. Luke is showing us, with great care, that the pattern of Jesus' death is being reproduced in His follower. Not because Stephen is a second Christ or because his death atones for sin. Stephen dies as a witness, not a savior. The point is that the Spirit forms Christ's people into Christ's likeness, and that likeness shows up most clearly under pressure. Stephen's crisis revealed what the Spirit had already been building in him through years of ordinary, daily faithfulness.

Then comes the most tender line in the passage. After describing the violence of a stoning in unflinching terms, Luke writes: "And when he had said this, he fell asleep"

(7:60). The Greek word is *ekoimethe*, from *koimao*, "to sleep." It's the root of our English word "cemetery," which literally means "sleeping place." Luke does not soften the violence. He has just described rocks breaking a man's body. But he refuses to let violence have the final word. For those who belong to Christ, death is not the end of the story. It is rest. It is temporary. The man being stoned to death "falls asleep," and the language presupposes that he will wake up.

The passage could end there, and it would be a portrait of courageous faith. But Luke pulls the camera back one more time.

"And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (8:1). Saul launches a campaign of destruction. He goes house to house, dragging men and women to prison. The word Luke uses for his activity, *lymaino*, describes a wild animal savaging its prey. This is the darkest moment in the early church's history.

And it is exactly the moment when the gospel breaks free.

The word "scattered" in Greek is *diaspeiro*. It literally means to scatter like seed. The church, sown across the countryside by the violence of persecution, begins to take root everywhere it lands. Look at the geography: "Judea and Samaria." That's a direct echo of Acts 1:8, where Jesus told His disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." The church had stayed in Jerusalem. The believers had built a comfortable, growing community, and they showed no signs of leaving. It took persecution to push them out. What the Sanhedrin intended as destruction, God used as distribution. The next chapters of Acts will show the gospel reaching Samaria, converting an Ethiopian official, and eventually breaking through to the Gentiles. All of it flows from this moment of catastrophe.

And then there is Saul. The young man at the edge of the scene, approving, ravaging, dragging believers to prison. Augustine wrote, centuries later, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul." We can debate the precision of that statement, but the theological instinct is right. Stephen prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," and God answered that prayer in a way Stephen never lived to see. The man who held the coats at the first martyr's execution would carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Stephen did not know any of this. He did not know the scattering would become a mission. He did not know his prayer would bear fruit in Saul's conversion. He simply obeyed, and he left the results to God. That is what faithfulness looks like. We plant. We water. God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). Some of the most important things He does through us, we may never see.

Stephen's death was not a tragedy. It was a seed. It fell into the ground, and it produced a harvest that is still bearing fruit today. The called out church does not advance by power, strategy, or self-preservation. It advances by faithfulness. Even when faithfulness costs everything.