



Summary

Acts chapter 7 brings us face-to-face with Stephen, the first Christian martyr, whose unwavering witness before the Sanhedrin reveals what it truly means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. We discover a profound pattern woven throughout Israel's history: God consistently sends redeemers to His people, yet they repeatedly reject these deliverers the first time, only recognizing them upon their second appearance. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, then became their savior when they encountered him again in Egypt. Moses was rejected by his fellow Hebrews when he first tried to defend them, yet forty years later became the deliverer who led them out of bondage. Stephen masterfully recounts this history not as an academic exercise, but as a mirror held up to the religious leaders who crucified Jesus—the ultimate Redeemer they rejected. What makes Stephen's testimony so compelling is his complete freedom from self-preservation. He speaks truth with such boldness because his eternal destiny is already secure in Christ. The Greek word for 'witness' is actually 'martus,' from which we get our word 'martyr'—reminding us that true witnessing may cost us everything, yet offers the freedom to speak without fear. As Stephen faces death by stoning, he receives a remarkable vision of Jesus standing at God's right hand, a divine affirmation that God honors those who stand for Him. Even more striking, Stephen's final words echo Christ's own: 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' Among those watching was a young man named Saul, holding the coats of the stone-throwers, whose life would be forever transformed by witnessing this martyr's faithfulness—eventually becoming the Apostle Paul. This reminds us that we can never fully know whose life our faithful witness impacts, but Jesus always does.





Points

Title: Standing for Truth: The Witness and Martyrdom of Stephen

Sermon Summary: This sermon examines the life and martyrdom of Stephen from Acts 7, exploring what it means to be a true witness (martyr) for Christ. Stephen's bold testimony before the Sanhedrin demonstrates how God honors those who stand for truth regardless of personal cost. The message emphasizes that being a martyr isn't solely about physical death, but about faithfully proclaiming God's truth even when it threatens our self-preservation—whether that involves our jobs, relationships, or lives. Stephen's defense recounts Israel's pattern of initially rejecting God's redeemers (Joseph, Moses) only to recognize them later, paralleling their rejection of Jesus. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen spoke truth in love, prioritizing the eternal destiny of his accusers over his own safety. The sermon challenges believers to recognize that we are all called to be witnesses in our spheres of influence, empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak truth when called upon, trusting that God provides the grace we need in the moments we need it most.

Key Points:

- - The Greek word for "witnesses" (martus) is the root of our word "martyr" — all believers are called to be witnesses/martyrs for Christ
- - Stephen was empowered by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by great wonders and signs among the people
- - Stephen's message theme: God has always sent Israel redeemers in times of need, but Israel historically rejected them initially, only recognizing them the second time (Joseph, Moses, and now Jesus)
- - True martyrdom means setting aside self-preservation for the sake of God's truth in any threatening situation
- - The conviction of the Holy Spirit works through faithful witnesses, though the response may be acceptance or rage
- - Stephen's witness deeply impacted Saul (later the Apostle Paul), demonstrating that martyrs cannot know whose lives they are affecting
- - God honors those who stand for Him, providing necessary grace in the moment of need
- - Jesus stood at the right hand of God to honor Stephen's faithful witness
- - Even in death, Stephen followed Christ's example by pleading for mercy upon his killers
- - The motivation for witnessing must be obedience to the Holy Spirit, not the expected outcome

Scripture Reference:

- - Acts 7:1-60 (Stephen's defense and martyrdom)
- - Acts 1:8 (receiving power to be witnesses)
- - John 3:8 (the wind blows where it wishes—the Holy Spirit's work)
- - Acts 6:3-14 (Stephen's appointment as deacon and false accusations)
- - John 8:31-32 (the truth shall make you free)
- - Genesis 15:13-21 (God's covenant with Abraham regarding the land)
- - 1 Kings 8:27 (Solomon acknowledging God doesn't dwell in temples)
- - John 16:7-13 (the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment)
- - Acts 22:20 (Paul remembering Stephen's martyrdom 25+ years later)



Stories:

- - Eddie Miente's testimony about his mission trip to Spain, where language barriers were supernaturally overcome and a grieving man whose mother had just died gave his life to Christ
- - The account of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers and later recognized as their redeemer when they saw him the second time in Egypt
- - Moses being rejected by Israel when he first attempted to deliver them at age 40, then being recognized as their deliverer 40 years later at the burning bush
- - Israel's rejection of God's law at Mount Sinai while Moses received the Ten Commandments, turning instead to worship the golden calf
- - Stephen's vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, honoring his faithful witness
- - The transformation of Saul, who consented to Stephen's death and guarded the coats of those stoning him, later becoming the Apostle Paul who vividly remembered this event decades later





Scripture

Explicitly Mentioned References

1. Acts 1:8 - "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..."
2. John 3:8 - "The wind blows where it wishes..."
3. Acts 6:3 - Seven men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom
4. Acts 6:8 - Stephen full of faith and power
5. Acts 6:11 - False witnesses against Stephen
6. Acts 6:12-13 - Stephen brought before the council
7. Acts 6:14 - Accusations against Stephen
8. Acts 7:1-53 - Stephen's entire defense/sermon (extensively covered)
9. John 8:31-32 - "If you abide in my word...the truth shall make you free"
10. Deuteronomy 18:15 - Prophet like Moses (quoted in Acts 7:37)
11. Exodus 20 - Ten Commandments (alluded to)
12. Amos 5:23-27 - Quoted in Acts 7:42-43
13. Jeremiah 25:9-12 - Referenced in Acts 7:43
14. Isaiah 66:1-2 - "Heaven is my throne" (quoted in Acts 7:49-50)
15. Psalm 102:25 - "Has my hand not made all these things?"
16. 1 Kings 8:27 - Solomon's dedication of the temple
17. John 16:7-13 - The Holy Spirit will convict the world
18. Acts 7:51-60 - Stephen's final words and martyrdom
19. Hebrews 4 - Jesus sat down at the right hand of God (alluded to)
20. Acts 22:20 - Paul remembering Stephen's martyrdom
21. Genesis 15:13-21 - God's covenant with Abram

Key Old Testament Narratives Referenced:

- Genesis 12 - Abraham's call
- Genesis 37-50 - Joseph's story
- Exodus 1-14 - Moses and the Exodus
- Exodus 32 - Golden calf incident
- Joshua 1-24 - Conquest of Canaan (alluded to)

Thematic Verses (Not Explicitly Mentioned but Relevant):

1. Matthew 10:19-20 - The Spirit will give you words to speak
2. 2 Timothy 3:12 - All who desire to live godly will suffer persecution
3. Romans 8:31 - If God is for us, who can be against us?
4. Philippians 1:21 - To live is Christ, to die is gain
5. Matthew 5:10-12 - Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness
6. 1 Peter 3:15 - Always be ready to give a defense
7. Luke 21:15 - I will give you words and wisdom
8. Acts 4:13 - Boldness of Peter and John



9. 2 Corinthians 12:9 - My grace is sufficient for you
10. Romans 1:16 - Not ashamed of the gospel

Main Biblical Themes Discussed:

- Martyrdom and faithful witness
- The baptism and power of the Holy Spirit
- Israel's pattern of rejecting God's redeemers
- Personal relationship with God vs. religious tradition
- Speaking truth regardless of consequences
- God's faithfulness throughout redemptive history



Quotes

God honors martyrs for Christ because God honors truth.

The Greek word for witnesses that Jesus said is actually from the Greek Martus, from which we derive our English word Martus. You are a martyr when you speak forth the word of God's truth as the Holy Spirit leads, whether it results in your death or not.

Being a martyr for Christ makes you free of all charges. If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

Stephen's whole message theme is that God has always been faithful to send Israel a redeemer in time of need. And Israel historically has always rejected the redeemer God sent initially only to recognize the redeemer God sent when he appeared a second time.

The only thing that makes it valuable to God is the hearts of the people who have a relationship with God when they come into this building. That's what makes it meaningful to God.

Your religion has made your neck stiff. Your religion makes you refuse to look up and acknowledge that there is a God. God has always intended it to be about having a close personal relationship with God, just between me and God.

A martyr can never know whose life is being impacted by their adherence to God's truth, but Jesus does. If Stephen had crumbled into self-preservation, would we even have the Apostle Paul?

When you testify, when you witness for Christ, when you are a martyr for Christ, the result might not be good. The way that we measure what we've done, whether it's right or not, is have we been faithful to what the Holy Spirit gave us to say?





Discussion Questions

Stephen's message emphasized that Israel historically rejected God's redeemers initially, only recognizing them the second time. How does this pattern challenge us to examine areas where we might be resisting what God is doing in our own lives or communities?

The sermon describes Stephen as someone who cared more about the eternal destiny of his accusers than his own life. What would it look like for us to prioritize others' spiritual well-being over our own comfort or safety in everyday situations?

Stephen was accused of blasphemy for preaching truth, yet he used that opportunity to evangelize his accusers. How can we view opposition or criticism as an opportunity for witness rather than simply as persecution? The message highlights that Solomon acknowledged God does not dwell in temples made with hands, yet religious leaders focused on the building rather than relationship with God. In what ways might we prioritize religious activities or structures over genuine intimacy with God?

Eddie's testimony from Spain showed how God can speak through us even when we lack natural ability or language skills. What does this reveal about our dependence on the Holy Spirit versus our own competence in ministry?

The sermon states that a martyr is anyone who speaks God's truth as the Holy Spirit leads, whether it results in death or not. How does this broader definition of martyrdom challenge our understanding of what it means to be a witness for Christ in our daily lives?

Stephen was cut to the heart by conviction yet responded with boldness, while the Sanhedrin was cut to the heart and responded with rage. What determines whether conviction leads to repentance or resistance in our own hearts?

The message emphasizes that God gives us the grace we need in the time we need it, not before. How does this truth address our fears about whether we would be faithful in extreme circumstances of persecution or testing? Paul vividly remembered Stephen's martyrdom over 25 years later, suggesting Stephen's witness profoundly impacted his conversion. Who might be watching our witness to Christ in ways we cannot see, and how does this reality affect our daily faithfulness?

The sermon contrasts self-preservation with standing for God's truth, noting that evangelism comes in many flavors including speaking truth because we have love. When have you struggled with choosing between self-preservation and truth-telling, and what helped you discern the Holy Spirit's leading?

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Small Group Guide: The Power of a Martyr's Witness

Based on Acts 7 - The Stoning of Stephen

Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

Begin by thanking God for His faithfulness throughout history and asking the Holy Spirit to guide your discussion and convict hearts as you explore Stephen's powerful witness.

Ice Breaker (10 minutes)

Share a time when standing up for what was right cost you something (a friendship, job opportunity, comfort, etc.). How did you feel in that moment?

Key Takeaways from the Sermon

1. **The Definition of a Martyr:** A martyr (Greek: *martus*) is a witness for Christ, whether or not it results in death. We are called to be martyrs in our daily lives.
 2. **God's Pattern in History:** Throughout Israel's history, God sent redeemers who were initially rejected but recognized the second time (Joseph, Moses, and ultimately Jesus).
 3. **The Power of the Holy Spirit:** Stephen operated in supernatural boldness because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, demonstrating that God gives us the grace we need when we need it.
 4. **Truth Over Self-Preservation:** Stephen prioritized God's truth over his own safety, modeling what it means to be a faithful witness.
 5. **The Ripple Effect:** We never know whose life is being impacted by our faithfulness. Stephen's witness profoundly affected Saul, who became the Apostle Paul.
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Discussion Questions (30-40 minutes)

Understanding the Text

1. What stood out to you most from Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin? Why do you think he chose to give such a comprehensive overview of Israel's history?
2. Stephen recounted how Israel repeatedly rejected God's chosen redeemers (Joseph, Moses). How does this pattern help us understand the religious leaders' rejection of Jesus?
3. In verses 51-53, Stephen directly confronts the Sanhedrin. Was this loving? How do we balance speaking truth with speaking in love?



Personal Reflection

4. Stephen was described as "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:3, 5, 8; 7:55). What does it mean practically to be filled with the Holy Spirit in your daily life? How would you know if you were?
5. The sermon mentioned that "a martyr can never know whose life is being impacted by their adherence to God's truth." Has someone's faithful witness impacted your spiritual journey? Share that story.
6. Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God (verse 56). Why do you think Jesus stood rather than sitting as described elsewhere in Scripture? What does this reveal about how God honors those who stand for Him?

Application

7. The sermon stated: "Self-preservation doesn't necessarily mean it's a life-threatening situation. It could be a job-threatening situation. It could be a relationship-threatening situation."
 - Where in your life are you currently choosing self-preservation over speaking God's truth?
 - What fears hold you back from being a bolder witness?
 8. Stephen prayed for his killers even as they stoned him (verse 60). How does this challenge your attitude toward those who oppose you or Christianity? Is there someone you need to pray for rather than resent?
 9. The sermon emphasized that "God gives us the grace we need in the time that we need it." Share a time when you experienced God's grace in a difficult moment of standing for truth.
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Practical Applications (15 minutes)

This Week's Challenge:

Choose one of the following to put into practice this week:

Option 1: The Boldness Challenge

- Identify one relationship or situation where you've been silent about your faith out of self-preservation
- Pray daily for the Holy Spirit's boldness
- Look for one opportunity this week to share truth in love in that situation

Option 2: The Prayer Challenge

- Make a list of people who oppose Christianity or have hurt you because of your faith
- Commit to praying for them daily, following Stephen's example
- Ask God to soften their hearts and give you genuine love for them



Option 3: The Study Challenge

- Read through Acts 6-7 daily this week
- Journal about what it means to be a "witness" (martyr) in your specific context
- Ask God to show you where He's calling you to stand for truth

Option 4: The Encouragement Challenge

- Think of someone you know who has taken a stand for Christ at personal cost
 - Reach out to encourage them this week
 - Let them know their faithfulness has impacted you
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Group Activity (10 minutes)

Accountability Partners: Pair up with someone in the group. Share:

1. One specific area where you struggle with self-preservation over truth-telling
2. One step you'll take this week to be a bolder witness

Exchange contact information and commit to checking in with each other during the week.

Reflection Questions for Deeper Consideration

- For those who aren't sure about their relationship with Christ:
 - Do you have the "close personal relationship with God" that Stephen had, or is your faith more about religious tradition?
 - Are you willing to receive the Holy Spirit and allow Jesus to transform your life?
 - For mature believers:
 - If you were put on trial for your faith like Stephen, would there be enough evidence to convict you?
 - What legacy of faithfulness are you leaving for the next generation?
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Closing Prayer (5-10 minutes)

Prayer Focus:

- Thank God for Stephen's example of faithful witness
- Ask for the filling and power of the Holy Spirit to be bold witnesses
- Pray for those who are being persecuted for their faith worldwide
- Commit to prioritizing truth over self-preservation
- Pray for those in the group who don't yet have assurance of salvation



Consider praying Acts 4:29-30: *"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

Additional Resources

- For Further Study: Read about modern-day martyrs at Voice of the Martyrs (www.persecution.com)
 - Recommended Reading: Foxe's Book of Martyrs or "The Insanity of God" by Nik Ripken
 - Memory Verse: Acts 1:8 - "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."
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Leader's Notes

- Be sensitive to those who may be facing real persecution or difficult situations
- Create a safe space for honest sharing about fears and failures
- Emphasize that God's grace is sufficient and He provides what we need when we need it
- Be prepared to pray with anyone who wants to receive Christ or be filled with the Holy Spirit
- Follow up during the week with group members on their commitments



Daily Devotional

5-Day Devotional: Standing Firm as Witnesses

Day 1: The Power of a Martyr's Witness

Reading: Acts 7:54-60; John 16:7-11

Devotional: Stephen's death reveals a profound truth: being a witness (martyr) for Christ isn't primarily about dying—it's about living so surrendered to truth that self-preservation becomes secondary. When Stephen gazed into heaven and saw Jesus standing, he received supernatural grace for an extraordinary moment. You may never face physical martyrdom, but you will face moments requiring spiritual courage—at work, in relationships, with family. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment through your faithful witness. Like Stephen, your role isn't to force conversion but to speak truth in love, trusting the Spirit to do His work. God provides the grace you need precisely when you need it, not before. Will you trust Him enough to speak truth today, regardless of the cost?

Day 2: God's Pattern of Rejection and Redemption

Reading: Acts 7:9-16, 23-29; Genesis 37:1-11

Devotional: Stephen masterfully traced Israel's history of rejecting God's redeemers—Joseph sold into slavery, Moses driven into exile. Each time, God's chosen deliverer was rejected at first encounter but recognized upon return. This pattern culminates in Jesus, rejected by His generation but destined to return in glory. Consider how God works through rejection. Joseph's brothers meant evil, but God meant it for good. Your rejections, failures, and setbacks aren't the end of God's story in your life—they're often the beginning. The very people or circumstances that reject your witness today may be the ones God is preparing for a second encounter. Like Joseph and Moses, remain faithful in obscurity. God is positioning you for redemption purposes you cannot yet see. Your faithfulness during rejection determines your usefulness in restoration.

Day 3: Relationship Over Religion

Reading: Acts 7:44-50; 1 Kings 8:27; John 4:19-24

Devotional: Stephen confronted the Sanhedrin's fundamental error: they had replaced relationship with religion, intimacy with ritual. Solomon himself acknowledged that no temple could contain God. Yet these religious leaders trusted in buildings, traditions, and positions rather than pursuing God's heart. This remains Christianity's greatest temptation—substituting religious activity for genuine relationship with Jesus. Abraham, Joseph, and Moses each enjoyed intimate fellowship with God, following the Spirit's leading rather than merely maintaining traditions. Examine your spiritual life honestly. Have your devotions become duty rather than delight? Is church attendance replacing genuine worship? Does theological knowledge substitute for knowing Christ personally? God desires your heart, not your religious performance. The Holy Spirit wasn't given to make you more religious but to guide you into transformative relationship with the Father through Jesus. Stiff necks refuse to look up; surrendered hearts gaze into heaven.



Day 4: The Conviction That Divides

Reading: Acts 7:51-53; John 8:31-36; 2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Devotional: When Stephen declared truth, his audience was "cut to the heart" —but their conviction produced rage rather than repentance. The same sun that melts wax hardens clay; the same gospel that saves some offends others. This isn't failure; it's the nature of truth. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would convict the world, but conviction doesn't guarantee conversion. Your responsibility is faithfulness to truth, not controlling others' responses. Some will gnash their teeth; others, like Saul watching from the sidelines, will be profoundly impacted in ways you'll never know. Stephen couldn't have imagined his witness would help transform Christianity's greatest persecutor into its greatest missionary. Speak truth anyway. Love anyway. Witness anyway. You cannot know whose life hangs in the balance of your faithfulness. The truth you declare in love today may bear fruit decades later in someone you never knew was listening.

Day 5: Grace in the Moment of Need

Reading: Acts 7:55-60; Hebrews 4:14-16; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Devotional: As stones flew, Stephen experienced extraordinary grace: heaven opened, Jesus stood in honor, and supernatural love enabled him to pray for his killers. This reveals a liberating truth—God doesn't give you grace for hypothetical future trials; He gives sufficient grace for present need. You may fear you couldn't endure what Stephen endured, and you're right—not today. But when your moment comes, whether facing physical danger, relational loss, job threats, or social rejection for Christ's sake, the same Spirit who filled Stephen will fill you. Jesus stands for those who stand for Him. Stop rehearsing fearful scenarios; start cultivating present intimacy with Christ. The relationship you build with Jesus today in ordinary moments becomes the foundation for extraordinary grace in crisis moments. Like Stephen, you'll find that setting aside self-preservation for truth's sake opens heaven's resources in ways comfort-seeking never could.

