

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

08.30.2026 | Growing Pains and Growing Persecution | Acts 6 | Dr. Ben Day, Senior Pastor

If you have a Bible this morning, I want to invite you to turn with me to Acts chapter 6. We've been walking through the book of Acts for a couple of months now, and in a few weeks we're going to take a short break. For about five weeks we're going to do a series that is a topical series helping us think about how we reach our own Jerusalem. But we're continuing on the book of Acts, and as we come to Acts chapter 6, I think what you'll find this morning is that we're going to come to some very familiar themes, some things that we've already seen as we've studied the book of Acts, but they're going to have some new elements to them. So one of the familiar themes that we're going to see is that the church was growing.

Always throughout the book of Acts, these first six chapters or so, we're just seeing people are being added to the church. The church was growing in number. People were continuously being saved. That's a familiar theme that we're going to see this morning, but there's a new element to it. For the first time, we're going to see this morning that all of this growth actually presents a problem within the church. This is not the same as the intentional deception of Ananias and Sapphira, that sin that happened within the church. Rather, this is a problem that arises because of the growth of the church, and we'll see that this morning. Another familiar theme that we'll see is that as the church continues to grow and more people are coming to faith, that opposition comes from the outside. That people are seeking to oppose the advancement of the gospel.

We've seen this already in Acts chapters four and five. We see it again here in Acts chapter six. We'll see it in Acts chapter seven. But one thing that's a new element to it is that the persecution grows. Here, we are introduced to Stephen. Next week, we'll see that Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. That opposition and persecution isn't always just threats, imprisonments, beating, but it even at times takes the form of death. So I've titled this sermon, Growing Pains and Growing Persecution. Because what we'll see is as the church continues to grow in these familiar ways that we've already seen, new things arise. There are growing pains within the body, and there's growing persecution outside the body. Let's read Acts chapter six and see how these growing pains and growing persecution, I think, work together in the life of the church.

Acts chapter six, I'll read verses one through 15, the whole chapter. Luke writes, "Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the 12 summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

What they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Procarus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and a number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. And some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

You know, in these last few chapters, we've seen a great deal of courage and bravery from the apostles, as they've been met with opposition and persecution and imprisonment. Here in chapter six and even more in chapter seven, we're going to see a bravery and a courage from Stephen, even as he faces death. You know, I was reading this, I was thinking,

you know, it takes a great deal of courage to stand up for what you know is right. I was also reading this passage, and I was thinking, it also takes a great deal of courage to admit when you are wrong. You know, when you're carrying out a mission and you really want to see that mission fulfilled, you've got to be able to withstand hardships. You've got to be able to push through when there's opposition, when there's discouragement. But you also need to recognize whenever there are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed, areas where you don't just need to ignore, but you need to change, you need to grow.

You think of the number of leaders throughout history who are very driven individuals, and they ignored warnings and dangers that were brought to them to their own demise. Think of the story of Napoleon leading his army to invade Russia. There's all sorts of warnings as to why this wasn't going to work, but Napoleon, being the driven leader that he was, ignored all those warnings, and it led to a great failure for him and his army. So many times for us to carry out the mission, we're going to have to push through and endure, as we've seen so many times already in the book of Acts. But other times we're going to need to actually stop and listen and change. Sometimes we need to be able to push through, and sometimes we need to grow and adjust. Some concerns that are brought to us are legitimate. Sometimes we need to meet things that are brought to us with not courage and bravery, but humility to listen and to grow.

See, I think one of the things that ties this whole passage together in Acts chapter six is seeing the things that were brought to the leadership of the church. The church is seeking to carry out its mission, and there's things that come that could be seen as friction or tension, could be seen as distractions from what they are trying to do. But one of them is a legitimate concern in which the church needed to grow. The other one was an illegitimate form of opposition in which the church needed to endure and continue on. See, sometimes God will present us with problems that will expose our failures so that we might grow and become more like the people of God that we are supposed to be. But other times I think the enemy will bring opposition that tests our faithfulness. And in those cases, we need to not change, but continue to do what God has called us to do.

And I think Acts six helps us to see the difference between the two and how we can respond to both. This morning, I want us to see how we can respond both in humility to legitimate things that need to be changed and how we can respond with Christ-like courage to those things that we need to endure. So let's consider the first one, areas where we actually do need to probably grow as the people of God. Here's how I would summarize the first half of Acts chapter six. When problems expose our failures, we should respond with humility and wise action. When there are problems in our lives or in our church that expose our failures as the people of God, we need to respond with humility and wise action.

You know, anytime a group increases in size, there is potential for what you might call growing pains. Anytime a group gets larger, things that worked when the group is smaller don't always work in a larger group. Systems and operations that worked when there was just a few people sometimes need to be adjusted, shifted as the group, as the organization grows. You think about the early church. It started off with just a few hundred people and has grown now to thousands upon thousands here in the city of Jerusalem. We don't know how long it's been, maybe some months, maybe even a year since the church was birthed, but the church has gotten larger. And we know that they weren't just gathering together for a worship service once a week. They were like an organized community. They were meeting together in homes in the temple. They were caring for one another. We even saw in Acts chapter four that the people were selling their property, bringing the proceeds to the apostles, and the apostles were distributing all these resources to all the people. Well, think about as the group grows, what's going to present problems, growing pains, if you will. And that's what happens here, I think in Acts chapter six. Notice what Luke says in verse one. He says, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."

So notice Luke specifically frames us at a time when the disciples were increasing in number. I think it's helping us to see that these are growing pains. I think what happens in this story is not intentional. I don't think this is necessarily sinful behavior in which somebody is intentionally doing something wrong, but it hasn't changed the fact that it is a real problem. It's a real failure on the life of the church. It's something that really needed to be addressed. So what was happening? Well, it says that a group of Hellenists, Hellenists would be Greek-speaking Jewish people. So for historical reasons that we won't get into right now, the Jewish people had been dispersed. And a lot of times that changed them. Changed the language that they spoke. It changed the kind of culture in which they lived. And so there was a group of

people who were Jewish by descent, but they spoke Greek and they were Greek culturally. They even had their own synagogues. In fact, later on in verse nine, we hear about the synagogue of what was called the freedmen. That was the synagogue of the Hellenists. That was a time probably when the Jewish people would gather in synagogue and they would speak Greek and they would have probably more Greek culture and customs. And in that city of Jerusalem, there's this Greek group of Jewish people and specifically their widows were not receiving what they needed in the daily distribution.

So what was apparently happening in the early churches, things were being brought to the apostles and all things were being had in common, is they were dispersing resources as they had them. And they were neglecting a certain group of widows. And so the portion of that part of the church, the Greek-speaking Jews, they come to the apostles. Now here's what you need to know. The apostles and probably all of those who are in leadership in the early church are all Hebrews. What that means is they did not speak Greek. They spoke Aramaic. It meant that they gathered in their own synagogues. It meant that they were probably separated from the Greek-speaking Jews. I think what this shows us is that I don't think this was intentional from the Hebrews. I don't think the apostles were looking down at these Greek-speaking people or purposely withholding from their widows. But I do think it probably shows that this was a blind spot for them. That as they were just naturally thinking about the needs of their body and they were thinking about the people that they often interact with, they might not often see those Hellenists. They might be gathering in their own synagogues. There might be language barriers as they seek to communicate with them. And they have this blind spot that they've been missing.

And it is a real problem. While I don't think it was intentional by the apostles, it's a real problem and a real failure for the early church. I mean, the church is called to care for all people, but especially for widows, a vulnerable group of people who need care, who had no way to provide for themselves, dependent upon the care of others. And the church is failing to care for them. Not only that, but this really presents a chance for the unity of the church to be tested. People are going to start to ask the question, are ethnic connections more important than being members of the body of Christ? Because you're caring more for those who speak your language and look like you and have your cultures and customs. So this is a real problem, even if it is unintentional, and it needs to be addressed. And I appreciate that it seems like the apostles actually listen.

This is why I would say we need to respond with humility. Because the apostles could say, listen, I think you're overreacting. I think those widows are doing just fine. They could say, look, we're just doing our best. I mean, there's only 12 of us. What we're trying our best that the group is growing so much, give us a break. But they don't. They seem to respond with humility. They seem to listen to people who are pointing out this blind spot. And I think this is what I mean when I say, when there's problems that expose our failures, areas where we need to grow, we need to respond with humility. We need to listen. We need to recognize that people from different ethnicities, different races have different experiences than we do. We need to hear from them. We need to recognize that men and women often have different experiences in the world and even in the church, and we need to listen to each other. They're recognized that people from different generations, different socioeconomic classes, they bring different perspectives that we need to hear from each other. The body of Christ globally and even in this local church is so diverse. We should never think that any one of us or even just a group of us can see it all clearly. We need to recognize that we each have blind spots. We each have areas where we need to grow. We need to listen to each other humbly, and we need to respond with wise action.

The apostles don't just kind of say, "Okay, yes, we hear you." No, they respond in a certain way. Listen to what happens in verses two through four. It says, "And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples, and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men full of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, who we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." What the disciples decide to do is they decide to delegate. What they basically say is that they recognize that the needs have grown, and they cannot do all that they are called to do and meet these needs. Notice what they say. They say, "We have been called to the ministry of the word, to the preaching and teaching of the word." The apostles had a very unique calling. They were the people who had walked with Jesus and talked with Jesus. We know from Acts chapter two that the people were gathering together to learn from the apostles' teaching. We still benefit from the apostles' teaching as we have in the Bible today. They had a unique role. I don't hear them saying, "You know what? Doing all this serving of tables is beneath us." They talk about serving tables. They're talking about

serving the food or the resources that they have to give to those who are in need. And what they're saying is, "We have a unique role to play, that we have walked with Jesus and talked with Jesus, and we need to teach the word of God to people, and we should delegate, we should empower and equip other people to do this ministry."

You see, you could read this, and you could think they're being kind of arrogant and saying something's beneath them, but actually see it as humility. They're not trying to hold on to power in every area of the church. They're not trying to say, "Oh, you know what? Jesus entrusted the church to us, so we need to be in charge of all these things." No, they actually bring the whole congregation in. They say, "Let's bring all the believers together, and let's find people who can do this ministry." Pastor Clark mentioned earlier in the service that we're asking for nominations from the church for leadership team and deacons. Why? Because we believe the whole body should be involved in this process. So they bring the whole group together, and they say, "Find seven men who are godly people, men who are full of wisdom and of the spirit, who are faithful, and we will give them this ministry, so we can be focused on what we've been called to do, communing with God in prayer, ministering to people through the ministry of the word, but we are going to appoint people to this type of ministry."

Now, there's nothing in Acts chapter 6 that says that these people were called deacons, or filled the office of deacon. The title deacon is not really used. Deacon is a word in Greek that really means a servant. And when it says serve tables, it actually does mean to deacon the tables to serve the needs. So there's nothing here that specifically says this is the time when the church began to have deacons, but many people have used Acts chapter 6 as a bit of a model or an example to say, "Here is what deacons can be doing for the body." The deacons can know the body and make sure the body is known and cared for and needs are being met. This is how we try to empower our deacons to serve our church. I didn't warn them that I was going to do this because I thought they might skip service if I did, but we have a great group of deacons. If you're a deacon in our church, would you just stand up so people could see the group of deacons that we have in our church? I'm looking at some of you. You're not standing up quite yet. Keep standing. (Applause) Our deacons are not here to fix every problem. They're not here to necessarily do the ministry of the word. They're not always there to answer every question, but they are there to make sure needs in our body are being met. This is what we want to do. We want to find areas where we need to grow and keep empowering people with wise action to serve in these ways.

It wasn't just that they appointed seven godly people. I think there's even some more wisdom to it than that. You keep reading in verses five and six. It says, "And what they said pleased the whole gathering." Everybody's on board and they choose Stephen, a man full of faith in the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Procarus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch. "These they set before the apostles and they prayed and laid their hands on them." So here's something that's kind of interesting that you might not notice in the first glance of reading those names. Those are all Greek names. It seemed like the main requirement was find godly men, and I think they did. It wasn't like they were just first looking for Greek-speaking men. Their first requirement is to find godly men. What they find were seven godly men who were a part of this group that was being neglected and needing to be ministered to. I think that was part of the wise action. It wasn't just about saying, "Oh yeah, there's this need. We'll make sure to appoint more people." I think they were seeing that there was a group of people who were maybe underrepresented in the church and in the church's leadership at that time, and they were making sure that in hearing from them, they put them in places where they could do the ministry that they were called to do.

And this is just the application for us, I think, is are we listening to each other as a church? Like we're a very diverse body. People have different experiences, different needs. Do we take the time to hear from each other? And I'm preaching to all of you, but I'm really preaching to myself because typically what I've found is that people in positions of leadership are often some of the worst listeners. People in leadership often think that they need to have all the answers rather than hearing from other people. I was meeting with a potential new church member this week. He was telling me there were some things from his previous church that he thought were really helpful and he thought might be helpful to our body. I want to be humble enough to listen to him, to not think, "Oh no, I think we've got it all together here at First SF." No, but to recognize, I bet your church did some really good things that you could help us in. You could help us continue to grow.

I believe if we'll be humble enough to listen to each other, we'll take wise action to grow in areas where God is calling us to, I believe God will continue to bless our church. I believe it'll help us to continue to be a healthy body here and we'll continue to see more people reached. And as the church addresses its growing pains, it continues to grow. Verse 7, "The

word of God continued to increase. The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." This phrase, "The word of God continued to increase," is given to us a few times in the book of Acts. It's always a reminder that the gospel was going forth. People were being saved. Even some of the priests that have been questioning the disciples are being saved. Don't you know we have that same Holy Spirit within us today. We have that same word of God in us with us today. May we see the word of God continue to increase in San Francisco in our days. And as that happens, as we continue to share the gospel and grow, while we will experience growing pains that we need to address, places we need to change, we'll also continue to experience opposition.

And when opposition tests our faithfulness, we should respond with truth and Christ-like character. Here's how, that's how I would summarize the second part of this passage of Acts chapter 6. Yes, there's going to be real problems that expose our failures and we need to be humble and we need to respond with wise action. But when opposition tests our faithfulness to Jesus, then we need to respond with truth and Christ-like character. I got an email from a CG leader this week who said, "You know what? You've been using this word opposition throughout our sermon series on Acts. What exactly do you mean by that?" It's always good to get those questions because I recognize places where maybe I'm not making something as clear as I think I am, something that I'm just assuming as I speak about things.

I think when we talk about opposition, especially as we see it in the book of Acts here in these early chapters, what we're talking about is things, could be people, could be circumstances that would oppose us from doing what God has called us to do. As we seek to carry out the mission God has given us, there will be opposition, things that oppose us from carrying out that mission. Sometimes that might come from within. As we saw in Ananias and Sapphira, sometimes it's our own sinfulness, division within the church that will bring opposition to what we are trying to do. But as we've seen early on throughout the book of Acts, oftentimes it is external. We have an enemy who is often at work to use circumstances, to use people to seek to oppose us from carrying out the mission of God.

And I think that's where Acts 6 is helpful for us thinking through, well what's the difference between the two different types of problems or things we might experience? Because again the apostles could have looked at this complaint and said, "Oh you know what, these Hellenists, they're just complaining. We're supposed to be going out and sharing the gospel. Here they are wanting us to focus more on distributing these resources. They're just distracting us from what's really important." But they didn't. They listened. How do we know the difference? I think the key will be when we keep our focus on the mission that God has given us. Like when our focus really is on being witnesses for Jesus, testifying to the gospel both in word and deed throughout our lives. We'll be able to see when there are times that we are not doing that faithfully.

And there are problems that come up that we need to address and change. There'll be other times that as we carry out the mission our faithfulness is tested. In those times we don't need to change. We need to continue on in perseverance. Just like the apostles, Peter and John have shown us already. Just like Stephen shows us here. Listen, as you seek to go out and do the ministry of the gospel and carry out the mission God has given you, you will likely experience opposition. Don't be discouraged. Follow in Stephen's example. Respond in truth and in Christ-like courage. So it says that Stephen, who we know was appointed as one of these servants of the church, he was going out and doing ministry. He's full of grace and power by the Holy Spirit. He is speaking to people. He is ministering to them. And it causes a problem. Those who are outside the church don't like this. So some of those Greek-speaking Jews of maybe Stephen's own synagogue were bringing charges against him. They were trying to dispute with him and it said that they could not dispute him well. This is the way Luke puts it in verse 10. They could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. This is why I say we need to respond to opposition with truth. Because they're bringing false statements and other arguments against Stephen, but they cannot stand up against the truth that he is proclaiming.

Listen, if you seek to go out and proclaim the truth of God, of his word, of the gospel, you'll probably have a similar experience to Stephen I mean, there will be people who disagree with you on these things. There'll be people who claim there is no God. People who claim that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. People who claim that all religions are basically the same. People who say that all religions are basically the same and that they're all bad. Religions, what's wrong with the world? People who will say that ideas of sin are really hurtful to people and ideas of eternal punishment are cruel. What I need you to know is I don't think you need to be an expert in apologetics to be able to deal with those types of opposition. I don't think you have to have an answer to every question or a perfect argument for every situation.

I don't know Stephen well, but we'll see in Acts chapter seven that he really was just focused on proclaiming the gospel.

I had to think that when Stephen wasn't serving tables and going out and doing ministry, he was probably sitting under the apostles teaching. I don't know if he sat around the final points of Greek and Roman philosophy so that he could debate with people our understanding all the arguments from the Jewish perspective so that he could argue someone into the kingdom of God. The fact is you can't argue people into the kingdom of God. When you think about the opposition that you might face when seeking to proclaim the truth, what I just want to call us to is simply proclaim the truth. We don't need to have a perfect presentation or an exact argument to every answer or question. We just need to share what is true. Now listen, sharing the truth, sharing the gospel, it looks different in different cultures and contexts and we do need to think through what does it look like to share the gospel in our day and age. We're thinking through that some this fall both in the equipping course and even in the sermon series that we'll be coming to at the end of September.

We do want to think about what it looks like to share the truth in our day and age but my emphasis this morning is just that we would share the truth, that we would simply proclaim the gospel. Maybe we just simply share what is true in your own life. Like how have you seen God work in your life? Have you seen him change your life? Would you just consider this week sharing the truth of what God has done, is doing in your life with one person? Could this just be our challenge this week? I want to challenge myself to do it as well. Many weeks I don't go out and share the good news of Jesus with people like I should. Could we all just think about, pray about God giving us an opportunity to just share his truth with somebody this week? Just share what he has done, is doing in your own life. Share how the gospel is good news to you.

Stephen is just proclaiming the truth and it's clear that they could not stand against him. So they start bringing in false witnesses, they start to slander his name and he doesn't respond in slander. He doesn't respond by calling them names or doing anything he shouldn't do. He really responds in a Christ-like way. He acts like Jesus did. In fact there's a lot of things that are very similar between what happens to Stephen, what happens to Jesus. Being put on trial falsely, having people claim false things against him. Stephen responds a lot like Jesus did, by simply speaking the truth. And when he's reviled, he doesn't revile in return. Notice how Luke ends this section. Next we'll hear in chapter seven about what Stephen says, but here we just get a glimpse of him. In verse 15 it says, "As they were gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

You know when Luke writes that, I have to think he means something different than a man might often mean whenever he writes to a woman that he loves, that she has the face of an angel. I don't think Luke is speaking about Stephen's angelic beauty. I think he is saying that when people looked at him, they could see God's presence. They got a glimpse of God's glory. They could see that even whenever they are saying false things about him or to him, or they are threatening him, even with death, they could sense that God's presence was within him. They could see, I think, Jesus in him. How does someone respond in such a way? How does someone have the courage to, in the face of this type of persecution and opposition, respond in a way that helps people see Jesus?

I think Acts chapter 7 will show us this more clearly, that it's because he was looking to Jesus. And he wasn't just looking to Jesus as an example, although I think that's part of it, but it's because he was looking to Jesus at the right hand of the Father. That he was seeing that Jesus went through that false trial. That he suffered silently. That he went to his death, but he did not stay dead. That he rose from the dead. That he was now in heaven, reigning as king, and that gave Stephen the courage to continue to act Christ-like, even in the face of opposition. The answer for us this morning is, next week as we look in Acts chapter 7, it's not to look at Stephen as an example, but to look to the one Stephen was looking to. To look to Jesus Christ. Both to his example that he gives us, but more importantly to the work that he accomplished on our behalf. It's actually the key to living out all of Acts chapter 6.

What's the key to having the humility to actually listen to people, recognizing you have blind spots? Is it not regularly confessing your sins as we did this morning? When we come to the table and we remember the fact that we're not coming to the table because we think we've got it all together. We're not come to the table because we see everything so clearly. We actually come to the table for the exact opposite reason. We recognize we don't see it all. We have areas

where we need to grow. We have sins that we commit. We have blind spots that need to be pointed out. We receive this type of humility only by looking to Jesus as we partake of the bread and of the cup. But we also have a great deal of courage to not have to give in every time someone opposes us. To not always have to please people, to know that we have a savior, who accomplished a great work on our behalf. To know that the savior whose body was broken, his blood was shed, that same body got up from the grave. He is reigning as king and one day he will return. Shouldn't that give us a hope and a courage even when we face opposition?

We want to live out what we see in Acts chapter 6 with the humility to grow where we need to grow and with the courage to withstand what we need to withstand. It will come when we look to Jesus as you come to the table this morning. I pray that you would come with a humility in yourself but a confidence in the gospel and in Jesus. That through taking of communion there are times spent under the word the spirit would use us to go out and to continue to carry out the mission that God has given us.