

Introduction

Good morning. This morning we are **continuing** our sermon series, “**The Acts of Peter**,” with a deep dive into **chapter 7**. If you have your Bible with you, please **turn there** so you can follow the text as we discuss it.

But before we begin, let’s pray...

[PRAYER]

The Process of Preaching

Today’s sermon was **challenging** to write.

Can I pull back the curtain and share a little *behind the scenes* info with you?

My **normal process in sermon-writing** starts with **prayer** and **study**. I want to *understand* the text before trying to *explain* the text (always a good plan, right?!?!). I’ll **work early** in the week on this process – or sometimes a week or two early, if I know I’m scheduled for the pulpit – and **by Tuesday** I usually have a pretty **firm grasp** on what’s happening in the Bible passage and **I’m ready to start writing**.

The **direction** I go with a sermon is **determined by the text**. I want to *draw out* the meaning and let God do the talking, rather than just *read in* my own opinions. Yes, I’ll pass it through the filter of my own personality and style (which is where you get the hockey references, the nerdy stuff, and the hilarious jokes), but my goal is always to **allow God and the Holy Spirit to communicate their** message instead of my own. And the work of study helps me identify where to go. Like I said, usually **by Tuesday** I have a direction and I can start crafting the main points and the flow of what I will say.

Not this week.

On Tuesday I was **still wrapping my head around** today’s chapter. It’s a **long** one: **60 verses, plus** some additional information from the chapter before and the chapter after that are important to include. So I had to do a little bit more processing. At least I’d **be writing by Wednesday**, though, **right?**

Wrong.

On Wednesday I had a grasp of the passage...but I had **no clue** where to go. Well...that’s not quite true. To be honest, I had **too many clues** where to go. Sometimes when you have this long of a section of Scripture, there are **more themes** than you can realistically preach. There are **too many details** to explore. There are **more areas of application** than a person could absorb. You have to **make cuts!** You have to make **hard choices** on what to say and what to exclude.

On Wednesday, I couldn’t do it. I was paralyzed by too many options. My brain bounced from angle to angle, verse to verse, trying to analyze and choose. My prayers were frequent and intense as I tried to discern what God wanted to say to you *and* to me through His Word.

*Side note: PLUS...at this point in the week, I **start to panic** a little. There are **deadlines** for what we do, and not having the sermon mostly crafted by Thursday causes **ripples** in everyone's week. The **bulletin** can't be made until we have the outline and questions to include, the information can't be plugged into the **app**, the material can't be uploaded into our **presentation software** here. (Yes, these are **first-world church problems**, but I hate to be the guy that makes everyone else's life harder! It adds some stress to the process and tempts me to rush things)*

On **Wednesday**, about **thirty minutes before** we started serving the Nite Life meal, it **clicked**. So the writing kicked into turbo mode on Thursday and now "all is well here on Sunday!"

(BTW, I wrote those words on Thursday morning with prophetic hopefulness. LOL).

Before I get to the crux of the sermon this morning, I want to give you a little **peak** into some of the **other directions** I was going to go – some "**bonus material**," if you will. I'm hopeful that by looking at **what might have been**, you will gain some **extra insight** into the passage and a **greater appreciation for the depth** of Scripture. **No passage is ever fully explored!** There are always **additional levels** of truth that the Holy Spirit is waiting to unlock and apply in our lives. He may be **waiting** until you have **extra knowledge** before you have the **tools** to understand, or until you have **extra experiences** before the information is **relevant**, or until you have gained a **deeper love** for God and can **better implement** His plan. But there is always more!

Today's passage, found in **Acts 7** with the entirety of Stephen's speech, has a number of **different layers** and themes, **each one worthy of its own sermon**. Let me briefly show you a **preview** of where today's sermon **could have gone...**

Bonus Material

Everything we will cover in Acts 7 is set up in Acts 6. Let's back up to the previous passage and see the situation that serves as a springboard for all these ideas.

Acts 6:8–7:2a (ESV)

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then 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. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the

customs that Moses delivered to us.”¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7 And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”² And Stephen said...[CUE SPEECH]

A Passage of Transition (Acts 7:58-8:1)

One possible sermon direction was to look at this as a **transitional passage**. The book of Acts, as we’ve seen so far in this sermon series, has **focused** very much **on the activities of the apostles** as they built the church in Jerusalem **after Jesus’ ascension** (chapter 1) and **the Holy Spirit’s grand entrance** on the Day of Pentecost (chapter 2). We’ve seen the church **begin** and **grow**, and **overcome** both internal and external **opposition**. But what we **haven’t seen** the church do is **expand and spread**.

Jesus told the disciples **His plan for expansion** earlier in the book (note the **locations** He mentions):

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem** and in all **Judea and Samaria**, and to the **end of the earth**.”*
(Acts 1:8, ESV)

Stephen’s arrest and subsequent **execution** in chapter 7 serves as a **catalyst for expansion**. Persecution will break out afterwards and drive the church to **new locations**...the same ones Jesus mentioned in 1:8. Much of that will be **driven by a person we meet** at the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8.

*“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**... And Saul approved of his execution...”*
(Acts 7:58–8:1, ESV)

Saul, who later goes by **Paul**, will play a **key role** in the church through most of Acts. By mentioning him here, Luke - the author of Acts - begins the **transition to a new phase of gospel expansion**.

So, **if this had been the route** we had taken in this sermon, we would have explored this **transition**. We could have focused on the idea of **evangelism**. Maybe we would have said:

- **Challenging circumstances can be the catalyst for creating Christians and changing the church!**

Note: See what I did?!?! Nice preacher alliteration, right? But I wouldn’t have said that...especially not that way. It’s just too much. This was a rough draft, okay?

An Example of Boldness (Acts 7:1-60)

Even without reading through chapter 7, you get the idea of what happens. Stephen makes a lengthy **speech**, makes the Jewish leaders **angry**, and then is **killed** for his words by the punishment of **stoning**.

*Side note: **STONING**¹, in case you aren't familiar with it, is method of capital punishment where the executioners hurl rocks and stones at the convicted until they are dead. This was the punishment listed in the Jewish Law for apostasy (Lev 20:2; Deut 13:11; 17:5), blasphemy (e.g., Lev 24:14), sorcery (Lev 20:27), sabbath violation (Num 15:35–36), misusing Yahweh's name (Josh 7:25), and adultery with a foreign wife. Stephen's words are viewed by the Jewish leaders as **blasphemy**, so the punishment fits the supposed crime.*

Stephen is **punished for proclaiming Jesus**. And certainly, that is a situation many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing in the **global church today**. Preachers are threatened by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, Christian families are murdered in Burkina Faso. There is **open violence** against the body of Christ in many countries.

It is something that **may happen here** the future.

Boldness under the threat of persecution was yet another **direction** this particular sermon could have gone. We could have looked at Stephen's **brave words** and his **readiness** to proclaim godly truth. We could have held up his response as an **example to follow**. Maybe we would have said:

- ***Be prepared, be willing, and be bold to share Jesus with others!***

It (hopefully!) would have been a challenging sermon.

An Awareness of the Spirit (Acts 7:2-53)

Just knowing my own tendencies, the **most likely direction** for this sermon was walking **step-by-step** through Stephen's full speech...because it is designed to be a **full message** in and of itself. His **logical flow** may be a bit **unusual** for modern listeners, but there is direction to what he is saying. And there is a ton of **depth** to it, so we can **credit the Spirit for inspiring him** on the spot when his life was on the line!

ACTIVITY: I want you to **challenge you to read this passage** when you get home. It's long to read aloud, but only takes a few minutes if you are reading on your own.

Raise your hand and say, *"I will read Acts 7... before I do anything... on TV, in the kitchen, or on my phone...for the Super Bowl."*

For the purposes of the sermon, I'll **paraphrase** what Stephen says.

Stephen is **accused of blasphemy** against **Moses, God**, and the **Temple**...all because of his **proclamation of Jesus**. So now, in front of some of the same men who put Jesus Himself on trial, Stephen **makes his points clear**...

¹ Stoning. (2016). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

...with a history lesson. (Be still my beating heart!)

Stephen takes us on a **whirlwind tour** of Israelite history, covering (in various levels of detail):

- **Abraham**
- **Isaac**
- **Jacob**
- **Joseph**
- **Moses**
- **David**
- **Solomon**

For a guy accused of blasphemy, Stephen is **surprisingly positive** about these heroes of the past. And that's the point. **Stephen isn't blasphemous**; he just understands **history through a different lens**. The **elders, priests, and council members** are the ones who actually have the **wrong view** of what is going on.

The **patriarchs** that Stephen cites are held up as **examples**. They are men who **trusted and followed God**, even if the divine plan they followed was misunderstood and maligned by others.

Stephen **contrasts** these **godly examples** with the **men who ignored and refused** God's messages, signs, and wonders.

Faithfulness is put on display against **idolatry**;
the **Living Word** is put up against **idle chatter**.

And the **enemies of God** turn out not to be the pagan nations around Israel but rather the **Israelites own forefathers!** Stephen makes the key assertion that God's people had **repeatedly been blind** to God's plan.

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”
(Acts 7:51–53, ESV)

The implication is that the **religious leaders** of the day – the priests, elders, and council members – were on the **wrong side of history** as they rejected the Messiah, Jesus Christ. **Stubborn refusal** to acknowledge this truth would **continue** as the leaders respond to Stephen's words. The leaders were furious and **“ground their teeth.”** And as Stephen makes even more explicit claims about Jesus, they **cover their ears, yell, and rush** at him to carry out the sentence of stoning for one who had been deemed a blasphemer.

What a **message**. What a **warning**.

If we were to **flesh out this possible sermon direction**, we would talk deeply about the importance of **being aware of God's Spirit**. We would push each other to **recognize** when God is at work, and to **submit** to His divine plans. In other words, we don't want to be "that guy" who misses the big picture. We might say:

- ***For the love of God (literally), don't resist the work of the Holy Spirit!***

Which way to go?

So, which way do we go? Three different messages, all trying to be faithful to the text. Each with its own approach to Acts 7.

Where should we **focus**?

As I wrestled with that decision and continued to **revisit the text**, a **fourth option** came to mind. And this is the one I want you to consider today most deeply. Let's approach the passage one last time and discover another important aspect of Stephen's story.

He's Got the Look (Acts 6:8-8:1)

Notice something here: **Acts 6** is the **first place** that we meet Stephen. His name is never mentioned before 6:5, when he is selected as one of the men Ross talked about last week – the ones selected to oversee the distribution of food to the Greek widows in the church. (AKA, the first "**deacons**" in the church).

But as you read through his story, it **feels like we know him**. Listen to the introductory passage from Acts 6:8-15 again.

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then 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 the 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 and 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." (Acts 6:8–15, ESV)

Did you **catch anything familiar**? Jot down some of this stuff...

Stephen is **described here** and earlier as a man full of:

- Grace (6:8)
- Power (6:8)
- Faith (6:5)
- Holy Spirit (6:5; 7:55)

He is **doing some big things** as well:

- Performing great wonders and signs (6:8)
- Speaking with authority (wisdom and the Spirit) (6:10)

He is **treated poorly** by others:

- Arrested/on trial (6:12)
- False witnesses and accusations (6:13)

His **reaction**:

- Face like an angel (6:15)
- Powerful words – confronting the leaders (7:51)
- Killed violently by the religious leaders (7:58)
- Cries out to God during his sentence (7:59)
- Asks for forgiveness for his killers (7:60)

Tell me: who does Stephen sound like?!?!?

Stephen is presented in a way that makes him **seem an awful lot like Jesus!** His **demeanor**, his spiritual **power**, his **reception** by the leaders...it all calls to mind the **ministry, arrest, trial, and crucifixion** of Jesus.

Stephen looks like Jesus!

In the midst of early church history, we are presented with this pretty **ordinary** guy (not one of the Twelve, not mentioned elsewhere) who was **so committed** to Christ that **when we look** at Stephen **all we tend to see** is Jesus.

This description is not accidental. It is **intentionally crafted**. It is done by an author who has a message for the early church. He wants us to **see** and to know **what kind of Christ-followers** we should be.

Stephen isn't Peter in the book of Acts – the best friend of Jesus, the chief disciple, the leader of the church. **He isn't Paul** in the book of Acts – the special apostle, singled out by God himself for a special mission to the Gentiles. **No...he's us!** He's an everyday guy.

- ***But everyday men and women are supposed to look like Jesus!***

You should recognize this truth no matter where you are reading in your New Testament.

- **Jesus** makes the **connection** with his followers and their **self-sacrifice**

*“And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and **take up his cross** daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:23–24, ESV)*

- **Jesus** makes the **connection** with his followers and their **attitude**

““The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”” (Luke 10:16, ESV)

- **John** makes the **connection** with his fellow Christians’ **view of Jesus**

“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” (1 John 4:15, ESV)

- **Paul** makes the **connection** with his fellow Christians’ **actions**

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:27, ESV)

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1, ESV)

These is **no true discipleship** that **ends with you looking differently** than Jesus! **Imitation** is the goal. We should all be **looking to each other to help one another** look more like Christ. The pattern is found all over the place in the New Testament. Not enough? There’s more...

- **2 Thessalonians 3:7** says “imitate US.”
- **Philippians 3:17** talks about patterning your life after godly leaders, and also “from those who follow our example.”
- **Hebrews 13:7** says to follow the example of your leaders’ faith
- **1 Timothy 4:12** shows a spiritual leader expecting his follower to be an example to imitate
- **Titus 2:7** shows a spiritual leader expecting his follower to be an example to imitate

Here’s the **bottom line**: everyone in the **New Testament** who **worked with** the disciples and **shared faith** with the disciples was **expected to imitate Christ** in their **example to other disciples**.

Like Stephen, it is not asking for the spotlight to turn to ourselves – it is a desire to turn the **spotlight onto Jesus**. While not an explicit statement in the passage, it is a truth we should recognize as it plays out in the story. **We are supposed to look like Jesus**.

Do you believe that you can pull off that look? Can you be **so focused on Christ** that people **can’t help** but see Him in you? It’s easier than you think. Consider how it happens in other situations. I find that people I spend time with start to influence my actions:

- The way that I stand [DEMONSTRATE]... is from my dad.

- The way that I count coins [x3]... is from a former boss.
- The way that use my computer [keyboard shortcuts]... is from an old roommate.
- The jokes I share with my family...and more

These all happen because of proximity and longevity: closeness and time. The same is true with Jesus. The closer you are to Him and the longer you spend with Him, the more you'll look like Him. The more you hang out with people who love Him, the more you'll love Him. The more you talk about Him, the more you'll understand Him.

If that happened, by the way, then all the other sermon ideas wouldn't need to be preached.

- *If we looked like Jesus, then...any of us in a challenging circumstance would see it as a catalyst for creating Christians and changing the church!*
- *If we looked like Jesus, then...we would always be prepared, be willing, and be bold to share the gospel with others!*
- *If we looked like Jesus, then...because of our love of God, we would never resist the work of the Holy Spirit!*

Stephen himself, to say nothing of his speech, should inspire us to look like Jesus.

It is my prayer that we would take this idea of imitation seriously. I pray that, as a church, we would be intent on pursuing Jesus...that our love for Him would surpass everything else people know about us. That they would look at our words and actions and recognize the Name that is Above All Names.

But it starts with you. And it starts now. It's time to update your look!

[PRAYER]

Invitation

Share with the church. Is there someone you've seen looking like Jesus in their words, their actions, their presence? Or someone who is inspiring you to follow Christ for the first time?

Let's share a time of praise, thanking God for those followers of Jesus. I invite you to come up and share a name or situation as we sing together.

The Story of Stephen - Acts 6:8-8:1

The Process of Preaching

Bonus Material

A Passage of Transition (Acts 7:58-8:1)

- *Challenging circumstances can be the catalyst for creating Christians and changing the church!*

An Example of Boldness (Acts 7:1-60)

- *Be prepared, be willing, and be bold to share Jesus with others!*

An Awareness of the Spirit (Acts 7:2-53)

Assignment: Read Acts 7 Today!

- *For the love of God (literally), don't resist the work of the Holy Spirit!*

He's Got the Look (Acts 6:8-8:1)

- *Stephen looks like _____!*
- *Everyday men and women are supposed to look like _____!*
(Luke 9:23–24, Luke 10:16, 1 John 4:15, Galatians 3:27, 1 Corinthians 11:1)

Discussion Questions

Fellowship

- If you could look like any celebrity, whose look would you want? How do you think it would affect your life? Why?

Digging Deeper

- Look at Acts 6:8-15. What words would you use to describe Stephen?
- Stephen's speech is long, but worth reading. Read Acts 7:2-53. What points are most impactful as you read? What are the key verses?
- Notice the locations mentioned. Why would Stephen intentionally focus on places outside the Promised Land? How would this challenge the Jews' notion that God was most concerned with their country? Where is God at work today?
- Who is shown rejecting God's plan or God's people? List the situations.
- Do you think the Jews thought they were misaligned with God's plans? How can we avoid their error?
- Was Stephen's speech intended to help him avoid prosecution? What do you think was his (and/or the Holy Spirit's) purpose?
- Based on what he saw in 7:56 and what he said in 7:59-60, what do you imagine was Stephen's demeanor while being stoned? Would yours be similar? Why?

Prayer

- Pray that others would look at our words and actions and recognize Jesus.
- Pray for those across the globe who are facing persecution for their faith in Jesus. Ask for boldness and courage to continue speaking about Him.