

A Life That Looks Like Jesus

I. Introduction

- A. There are certain people whose lives seem to bear an unmistakable resemblance to someone they have spent a great deal of time with. Their language, their mannerisms, even the way they respond to situations begins to look familiar. And I think that is one of the most compelling things about Stephen. We don't actually know very much about him. He appears suddenly in Acts 6, and by the end of Acts 7, he is dead—the first martyr of the church. But in those two chapters, something becomes remarkably clear: **Stephen's life looks like Jesus.**
- B. And that resemblance didn't begin when the stones started flying. Long before Stephen died like Jesus, he had learned to see Jesus, to trust Jesus, and to be formed by Jesus. What we discover in Stephen is a picture of what discipleship can look like when Jesus becomes the defining reality of a person's life. **Stephen saw Jesus clearly. Stephen became like Jesus increasingly. And Stephen followed Jesus courageously.** Seeing. Becoming. Following. And as we look at Stephen's life, the invitation isn't simply to admire his courage. It is to ask whether the same Jesus who transformed Stephen is increasingly taking shape in us.

II. A Life That Looks Like Jesus

- A. SEEING — Stephen saw Jesus clearly.
1. The primary issue with Stephen is his preaching—he is seeing Jesus and his work in a very particular way that is creating tension with his audience.
 2. Look at the accusations being made against Stephen. Acts 6:11 says, "Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'" And then in verses 13–14, "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.'" Luke is very clear that these are false witnesses. Their accusations are distorted. They are twisting Stephen's

words. But from these accusations we can discern aspects of Stephen's preaching. There are two things that keep coming up: **the Law and the Temple**.

3. Stephen is accused of speaking against Moses—against the Law and the customs Moses had handed down. And he is accused of speaking against “this holy place”—the Temple, the place associated with the presence and dwelling of God. It is hard for us to understand the significance of these two things. There were three great pillars of Jewish identity and piety: **the land, the Law, and the Temple**. These weren't peripheral issues. They were at the center of Israel's understanding of itself as the people of God. The Law was God's gracious gift to Israel through Moses. It told them how to live as God's covenant people. And the Temple was the place where God had chosen to dwell among His people. It was the place of worship, sacrifice, forgiveness, purity, and the presence of God—the place where heaven met earth. So when Stephen begins saying things that sound as though they are challenging the permanent significance of the Law and the Temple, this is not some minor theological disagreement. It appears to be turning their world upside down.
 - a) Notice who is arguing with Stephen. Verse 9 tells us that some of them belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen, along with people from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. These are Greek-speaking Jews from around the Roman world, many of whom had come to Jerusalem precisely because of their devotion to Israel, to the Law, and to the Temple. Some of these people had left the places of their birth and come to Jerusalem because this was the place where Israel's God had chosen to dwell. And now Stephen is preaching Jesus, and the implications of his preaching seem to be that **God is doing something new**.¹ Not because the Law was bad. Not because the Temple was bad. Not because Moses was wrong (which he will point out in his sermon). But

¹ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Acts: Rediscovering What the Church Was and Is* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 42.

because what all of these things had been pointing toward had finally arrived in Jesus. This is what Stephen sees so clearly, and that has radically changed his life. Stephen understood that **Jesus changed the way he and his contemporaries understand the Law and the Temple.**

4. Stephen didn't invent this idea. He learned it from Jesus. Jesus had already said some remarkable things about the Temple. In John 2, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And John tells us that Jesus was speaking about the temple of His body. In John 4, when the Samaritan woman wants to debate the proper place of worship, Jesus tells her, "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father." Something is changing. In Mark 13, Jesus looks at the magnificent Temple complex and says, "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And, of course, Jesus had walked into the Temple courts and disrupted its activities, overturning tables and pronouncing judgment on what was happening there. Stephen isn't coming up with some radical new theology—Jesus himself spoke of these coming realities.
 - a) He said in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." That's the key: **fulfill**. Jesus doesn't say, "The Law was bad, so I'm getting rid of it." Jesus doesn't say, "The Temple was a mistake, so let's tear it down." The Law and the Temple were good gifts from God. But they were also **signposts**. And you don't confuse the signpost with the destination. The sign matters because of what it points toward. And when you finally arrive at the destination, you don't turn around and say, "But what about the sign?" The sign has done its job. As the author of Hebrews will later point out, the Law and the Temple were pointing forward to something better—and Stephen understood that **Jesus is the substance to which the shadows had been pointing all along.**²

² Wright, 43-44.

- b) Think about the Temple. Why did the Temple matter? Because this was where **God dwelt with His people**. But then John says of Jesus, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God’s presence is no longer ultimately identified with a building in Jerusalem. **God has come to dwell among us in Jesus**. And what happened at the Temple? Sacrifice. Atonement. Forgiveness of sins.³ And what does the gospel announce? That forgiveness is now found through the life, death, and resurrection of **Jesus Christ**. The sacrifices pointed forward to Him. The Day of Atonement pointed forward to Him. The blood pointed forward to Him. The priesthood pointed forward to Him. The holiness and purity regulations pointed beyond themselves toward the work God would ultimately accomplish through Him. And now Jesus has come. He has died. He has risen. He has been exalted to the right hand of the Father. So the question Stephen and the early church are beginning to wrestle with is unavoidable: **If Jesus really is who we say He is, what does that mean for everything that came before Him? For Stephen the answer is it all finds its fulfillment in Jesus.**
- c) This is what made Stephen’s message so threatening. Because if Stephen is right, then Jesus isn’t simply one more religious teacher to add to Israel’s story. **Jesus is the One in whom the whole story finds its meaning**. The Law. The sacrifices. The priesthood. The Temple. The presence of God. The forgiveness of sins. The hope of Israel. **It was all moving toward Him**. Stephen saw clearly what his opponents could not: **Jesus didn’t come to destroy God’s story. He came to fulfill it.**
5. **This is the first thing we take from Stephen’s life—the clarity with which he saw Jesus**. He had come to see that Jesus wasn’t an addition to his life. Jesus wasn’t one religious commitment among many. Jesus wasn’t

³ Nicholas Perrin, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 20 vols., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 348.

something to fit neatly into the framework Stephen already possessed.

Jesus became the framework through which Stephen understood everything else.

6. **Do we see Jesus that clearly?** Because what we believe about Jesus matters. If Jesus is merely a teacher, we'll listen to Him when His teaching is helpful. If Jesus is merely an example, we'll imitate Him when His example is convenient. If Jesus is merely an addition to an already full life, we'll make room for Him wherever He fits. But if Jesus is the One in whom the whole story of God reaches its fulfillment—if He is the true Temple, the presence of God among us; if He is the fulfillment of the Law; if He is the sacrifice through whom our sins are forgiven; if He is the crucified, risen, and exalted Lord—then Jesus doesn't simply occupy **a place** in our lives. **He becomes the center around which everything else must be reordered.**
7. Reflection Question: We all have old ways of viewing life, places and beliefs that we used to center our world around. What parts of my life need to be reordered around Jesus?

B. BECOMING — Stephen became like Jesus increasingly.

1. What we behold begins to shape who we become. If the first thing we see in Stephen is that he **saw Jesus clearly**, the second is that the Jesus Stephen saw was increasingly shaping the person he was becoming. Stephen didn't simply believe the right things about Jesus. The life of Jesus was beginning to take shape in him. His theology was becoming his character.
2. Notice how Luke introduces us to Stephen. In Acts 6:5, Stephen is described as "a man **full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.**" Then in verse 8, he is "**full of grace and power.**" And when his opponents argue with him, verse 10 says, "they could not withstand the **wisdom and the Spirit** with which he was speaking." Faith. The Holy Spirit. Grace. Wisdom. Luke keeps using this word **full**. Stephen was a man who was full of God.
 - a) He was **full of faith**. Stephen had developed a deep confidence in God. And that becomes important because his faith is about to be tested. It is

one thing to trust God when everything is going well. It is another to trust Him when people are lying about you, your reputation is being destroyed, and eventually your life is threatened.

- b) Stephen was also **full of the Holy Spirit**. What we see in him cannot simply be explained by natural gifting or a strong personality. The presence of God is at work within him—shaping his life, empowering his ministry, and preparing him for what is coming.
 - c) He was **full of grace**. Grace wasn't simply something Stephen believed he had received from God. Grace had begun to characterize Stephen himself. "Stephen had let God's grace impact him so much that it had made him a gracious person."⁴ Eventually, that grace will even shape the way he responds to the people who kill him.
 - d) And Stephen was **full of wisdom**. When his opponents dispute with him, "they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking." This wasn't simply intellectual brilliance, "It was inspired wisdom, in that the Spirit gave Stephen the words to speak, in keeping with the promise of Christ, "For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."⁵
3. Stephens clarity in regards to Jesus had lead to a place of deep transformation of his character. In Stephens greatest moment of challenge, what comes out of him is Jesus. Think about our most trying moments, these often become the excuse we use for our lack of character, or poor behavior. I don't think Stephen suddenly decided in that moment to imitate something Jesus had said. What comes out of Stephen is the fruit of a life formed long before the this moment. He had spent his life looking toward Christ, trusting Christ, receiving the grace of Christ, being filled with the

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World, Ivp Classics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2008), 244. Table of contents only <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0825/2008033842.html>.

⁵ Ajith Fernando, *Acts, The Niv Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 245.

Spirit of Christ—and increasingly **becoming like Christ. What we behold begins to shape who we become.** What captures our attention shapes our affections. What shapes our affections begins to shape our character. And our character shapes how we respond when the pressure comes.

4. Reflection Question: When life pressures come, what comes out of me—and does it look like Jesus?

C. FOLLOWING — Stephen followed Jesus courageously.

1. There is something remarkable about the final moments of Stephen's life: **his life begins to look almost unmistakably like the life of Jesus.** The parallels are difficult to miss. Stephen's opponents lie about him, just as false witnesses testified against Jesus. He is dragged before the council, just as Jesus was. He is accused in connection with the destruction of the Temple, just as Jesus was. He is charged with blasphemy, just as Jesus was. He is questioned by the high priest, just as Jesus was. And eventually, Stephen is rejected and killed by the very religious leaders he is trying to call back to God.
2. But the similarities go even deeper. It isn't only what happens to Stephen that resembles Jesus. It is how Stephen responds to what happens to him. And that may be the most remarkable part of the story: the more Stephen is treated like Jesus, the more Stephen responds like Jesus. By the end of Acts 7, the resemblance is unmistakable. As they are stoning him, Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." You can hear the echo of Jesus on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Then, as the stones continue to fall, Stephen drops to his knees and cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And again, we hear Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
3. Stephen isn't simply dying because he believes in Jesus. Stephen is dying like Jesus. 1 Peter 2 gives us some language for understanding what is happening. Peter writes, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an **example**, so that you might **follow in his steps**. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”

- a) That word Peter uses for “**example**” is fascinating. The Greek word is *hupogrammos*. It carries the idea of something written or sketched out **to be copied or traced**. Think about how a young child learns to write the alphabet. Before they can form the letters on their own, someone puts the letters in front of them, and the child learns by tracing over them. Again and again, they follow the lines that have already been drawn until eventually those shapes become familiar. Peter says, in a sense, Jesus has given us a life to trace.
- b) He has gone before us. He has shown us what faithfulness looks like. He has shown us what love looks like. He has shown us how to respond when misunderstood, mistreated, rejected, and reviled. Jesus has drawn the lines, and discipleship means learning to trace our lives over His.
- c) Jesus is more than our example. Peter has just said that **Christ suffered for us**. Jesus does something for us that we could never do for ourselves. His death is saving and redemptive in a way Stephen’s death could never be. But the Jesus who dies **for us** also leaves a pattern **for us**. And when I look at Stephen, that is exactly what I see. Stephen laid his life over the life of Jesus and began tracing the lines. False accusation? Stephen traces the life of Jesus. Rejection? He traces the life of Jesus. Suffering? He traces the life of Jesus. Entrusting himself to God? He traces the life of Jesus. Forgiving the people hurting him? He traces the life of Jesus. And eventually even death itself becomes another place where Stephen follows in the footsteps of his Lord.
4. That is what makes Stephen’s life so inspiring. Stephen had become so captivated by the person of Christ, so convinced of the truth of Christ, and so transformed by the beauty of Christ that **his own life began to take the shape of Jesus**. And that brings all three movements of Stephen’s story together. Stephen saw Jesus clearly. Stephen became like Jesus

increasingly. And then Stephen followed Jesus courageously. Seeing led to becoming. And becoming prepared him for following. It is relatively easy to talk about following Jesus when His footsteps lead somewhere we already wanted to go. It is another thing to follow Jesus when His footsteps lead through misunderstanding, rejection, sacrifice, forgiveness, or suffering.

5. Most of us will never face what Stephen faced. But all of us will encounter moments when following Jesus costs us something—when forgiving is harder than retaliating, when faithfulness costs us approval, when obedience requires sacrifice, when loving someone means absorbing an offense rather than returning it, when entrusting ourselves to God means surrendering our need to vindicate ourselves. Those are the places where the lines of Jesus' life become the pattern for ours.
6. Reflection Question: Where is Jesus inviting me right now to trace my life over His—even if following His pattern costs me something?

III. Closing Thoughts

- A. Stephen's story is brief, but his life bears an unmistakable resemblance to Jesus. He saw Jesus clearly. He became like Jesus increasingly. And he followed Jesus courageously. That is the invitation of discipleship for us as well: to fix our eyes on Jesus until His life increasingly takes shape in ours—and then to follow Him wherever His footsteps lead, even when it costs us something.
- B. So our prayer is simply this: Jesus, help us to see You clearly, become more like You, and follow You courageously.

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