



Stephen ... The First Martyr

Acts 6-7

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia
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STEPHEN ... THE FIRST MARTYR Acts 6-7

We are children of God, possible through the sacrifice and grace of Jesus Christ. Each Sunday, we gather to express our gratitude, to affirm our faith, and to renew our commitment to live for Him. And we get to do that in freedom and comfort. But that's not the experience of many Christians in the rest of the world.

Last month, an Islamic terrorist group called ADF went on a violent rampage targeting Christian villages in the Congo.¹ On May 5, 24 Christians were killed in Manzuba. On May 6, 25 Christians were killed in Beni. On May 7, 15 Christians were killed in Ituri. Over the same three days, Kathy and I celebrated her birthday and went out to dinner and movie. Over the same three days, I sat in my comfortable office preparing a comfortable sermon for a comfortable worship service.

As the terrorists tormented each village, they demanded, "Convert, pay, or die!" Then preceded to loot, burn, rape, and kill. One surviving pastor said, "The suffering is visible on every face. Everyone is in mourning. We pray for God to heal our broken hearts." Yet one woman who survived dared to say, "Yes, we are afraid, but we will still go to church." Then on Sunday, May 10, 15 more killed.

Sadly, this has been normal throughout history. On the screen is a list of names of people who died for their faith in Jesus. Martyrs from the 1st century to today. These names deserve our respect. They died taking a stand for Jesus Christ.

But the issue this morning is not if we're willing to die for Jesus. Our circumstances are different. We worship in freedom and comfort. We don't live under threat. ***The issue for us is not if we are willing to die for Jesus, but if we are willing to live for Jesus.*** That's the challenge from our study of the book of Acts.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Those who were there heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. They believed Jesus was the Son of God. They were convinced it was true. They were compelled to talk about it. And they were courageous to take a stand.

Last week, I used those three words to describe Peter and his zeal for Jesus. This morning, I use those same three words to describe Stephen. ***Convinced. Compelled. Courageous.*** Stephen deserves those three words because he was the first martyr of the church.

STEPHEN WAS CONVINCED

Acts 6 describes Stephen as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit ... and full of grace and power, performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:5, 8, NAS). Stephen was a young man of great reputation. His peers observed his character, respected his devotion to

God, and chose him as a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Stephen was “full” of faith, “full” of the Holy Spirit, “full” of grace, and “full” of power. And Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. *Stephen was convinced it was true.*

As he took his stand, his public preaching and miracles drew attention, and here’s what happened.

“Opposition arose from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.’ So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

They produced false witnesses who testified, ‘This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.’

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:9-15, NIV).

Stephen was a threat to their religious system. The accusation was “this fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law” (Acts 6:13, NIV). Theologian John Stott writes, “Nothing was more sacred to the Jews, and nothing more precious, than their temple and their law.”² The religious leaders viewed themselves as guardians of both. To get to God, you had to do it their way. Peter had been arrested twice for talking about Jesus and challenging the religious system. And now it was Stephen’s turn. So they dragged him before the council to be interrogated.

Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God and that everything He said was true. He was so confident that it was obvious on his face. As the religious leaders stared at him and studied him, “his face was like the face of an angel.” His countenance was so distinct that it was recorded in Scripture.

Like Peter before him and like Paul after him, Stephen was convinced. Paul once wrote to Timothy, “I suffer and I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced” (2 Timothy 1:12, NAS). Paul was convinced. Peter was convinced. Stephen was convinced. And we are convinced. But that’s not where our faith ends.

STEPHEN WAS COMPELLED

Stephen was convinced it was true, and he was compelled to talk about it. Stephen was compelled like Peter before him.

Acts 2 says, “Peter, taking his stand ... raised his voice and declared ... This Jesus whom you crucified, God raised from the dead” (Acts 2:14, 23-24). Then he said, “For there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name ... by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, NAS). When threatened, Peter was compelled to speak up, and said, “For we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20, NAS).

Now it was Stephen’s turn. In the longest speech recorded in the New Testament, and in great detail, Stephen showed his knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures by tracing the history of Israel.³ He listed the great spiritual leaders of Israel, and cited how time and again, the people refused to listen.

Stephen began with Abraham, saying, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham” (Acts 7:2, NIV). Abraham was Israel’s father, and God “promised” to make a great nation of his descendants.⁴ Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision, the birth and promise of Isaac, and Israel’s exile into Egypt. Then Stephen mentioned Joseph. The favorite son of Jacob, whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery, but of whom the Bible says, “God was with him” (Acts 7:9, NIV). Joseph became a trusted leader in the eyes of Pharaoh, proving that God was sovereignly working in Joseph’s life and in the life of Israel. Even when the Hebrews lost favor with Pharaoh and became slaves, God did not forget them. In great detail, Stephen recalled the life of Moses, who was chosen by God to be the deliverer to lead the exodus from Egypt.⁵ But due to idolatry and disobedience, the Lord postponed His promise and made the Hebrews wander in the wilderness for 40 years.⁶ Eventually, Joshua led them into the Promised Land.⁷ In spite of these great leaders, time and again, the people disobeyed and rebelled against God.

Then Stephen mentioned King David and King Solomon.⁸ David had a desire to build a great temple for God, but it was his son Solomon who built it. It was grand and meant to honor God. But Stephen recited the prophets, rebuking the religious leaders for creating a temple system that distorted true worship.⁹

In spite of great spiritual leaders, in spite of every spiritual advantage, in spite of divine guidance, time and again, Israel disobeyed and rebelled against God.¹⁰ And Stephen held nothing back and said, “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One (the Messiah). And now you have betrayed and murdered him (Jesus)! You received the law but have not obeyed it” (Acts 7:51-53, NIV).¹¹

Stiff-necked. Hard-hearted. God had been speaking to Israel for generations, but they did not listen. And it happened again when Jesus came. He spoke. He performed miracles. He died and rose again, proving to be the Son of God. But they would not listen! They not only rejected Jesus, the one God sent, they killed Him!

Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. And he was compelled to talk about it. So was Paul. “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16, NIV). So was Peter. “We cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20, NAS). So what about us? I know you’re convinced. You believe the Bible is the word of God. You

believe Jesus died on the cross for sin. You believe He rose again. I know you're convinced, but are you compelled to talk about it?

STEPHEN WAS COURAGEOUS

Stephen was convinced it was true. He was compelled to talk about it. And he was courageous to take a stand at great risk.

It's as if Stephen said, "You think you're putting me on trial. I'm putting you on trial!" Stephen attacked the foundation of their religious system, and he used their Scriptures to do it. "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him ... They covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him" (Acts 7:54, 57-58, NIV).

Can you imagine it? What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? How big were the rocks? How many rocks did it take? Rocks coming from every direction, hitting every part of his body. It was brutal. It was violent.

"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:55-56, NIV).

Jesus standing! Everywhere else in the New Testament, we read of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God.¹² But here we read that Jesus stood in honor of Stephen's faith and sacrifice. Just as the Scripture says, "Those who honor Me, I will honor" (1 Samuel 2:30, NAS). Men condemned Stephen, but the Lord of heaven stood and applauded him.

Then Stephen cried out with a loud voice, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59, NIV). Jesus said the same thing from the cross.¹³ Then falling to his knees, he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60, NIV). Jesus said the same thing from the cross.¹⁴

There were many others in the early church who would follow Stephen into martyrdom. Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch and was martyred in 107 AD. In the middle of the Roman Coliseum he said, "Now I begin to be a disciple ... Let me be thrown to the wild beasts, through them I can reach God. I am God's wheat. I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may become the pure bread of Christ."¹⁵

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna and martyred in 155 AD. As he was dragged into the arena, the crowds cheered. The captain of the guard begged the old man to vow allegiance to Caesar and save his life. But Polycarp refused. History records a lengthy exchange between Polycarp and the captain. But here are his final words. "I am a Christian ... Eighty and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"¹⁶ With heaven only minutes away, Polycarp was not about to deny Jesus.

Death is not the end of stories of persecution. There is always more to the story, as was the case with Ziad, a friend of my son Adam.

Ziad was raised as a Muslim. He was so devoted that he became an imam, serving as a chaplain in the Royal Jordanian Air Force. He was stationed on a military base in Zarqa, Jordan, which was known as a recruiting ground for ISIS. While serving as a chaplain, Ziad began to wrestle with deep questions. He felt something was missing, something Islam did not provide. Disillusioned, he abandoned Islam and declared himself an atheist.

That decision came with a tremendous cost. In a culture where leaving the faith is considered apostasy, Ziad became a target. He was beaten by members of the military and bears scars from those attacks. But those scars are not the end of his story.

A few years later, Ziad encountered Jesus Christ. He did seek it and it was an unexpected surprise. But the experience was so overwhelming that he could not deny it or resist it. He met Jesus. He believed and became a follower of Jesus.

This only intensified the persecution. His brothers feared the shame his conversion would bring upon the family. In Islam, honor killings are a reality and his brothers believed they were defending their family's honor. They beat him severely and left for dead.

But Ziad survived the beating. God's grace proved greater than hatred. What Satan intended for destruction, God used for redemption. Over time, the same brothers who attacked him came to faith in Jesus as well. Today, two of them are pastors. Many in Ziad's family are now believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

Ziad has planted over 300 churches in Muslim communities. His story reminds us of Joseph in Genesis 50. When his brothers sold him into slavery, he said, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." The same was true for Ziad. What others intended for harm, God used to bring salvation. What looked like defeat became a testimony of God's power. And that's often what happens with persecution. To God be the glory.

As I said at the beginning, the issue for us is not if we're willing to die for Jesus. Our circumstances are different. We worship in freedom and comfort. We don't worship under threat. ***The issue for us is not if we are willing to die for Jesus, but if we are willing to live for Jesus.***

If anyone in modern life exhibits the zeal of the early church, it's Francis Chan. He writes, "The call to follow Jesus was a call to die. The price tag was front and center. Jesus laid it out from the start and told people to count the cost before they got themselves into something they weren't ready to commit to. Nowadays we just talk about the good part – the grace and blessings. And of course, grace, forgiveness, and mercy are central to the gospel, but at the same time Jesus was very truthful and up-front about the costliness of the gospel, a concept that we completely neglect."¹⁷ Francis goes on to say, "We've lost something so central to the essence of what it means to be a Christian. Becoming a Christian is a complete and total surrender of your own desires and flesh to the higher purpose of serving God's glory. It means you die to yourself and put on Christ ... Following Him will cost you everything."¹⁸

Francis writes about the church in Iran. Membership in an underground church in Iran is a little different from membership in our church. To become a member a person must sign a covenant declaring their willingness to lose their property, be thrown in jail, or be martyred for their faith.¹⁹

Francis writes about the church in China, listening their stories of persecution. But it was their prayers that got to him. “In their prayers, they were screaming out to God to take them to the most dangerous places. ‘I want to suffer for You. I don’t want to go to a safe place. I don’t. Please! I want to be counted worthy to die in Your name.’”²⁰ They were praying for God to send them to dangerous places!

Christians in Iran and China and other places in the world understand what Peter was talking about when he said, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you ... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:14, 16, NIV). There is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name of Jesus, than being called a Christian.

CONCLUSION

When most pastors tell these stories of persecution, the application usually sounds something like this. “If they were willing to die for their faith, you ought to be willing to work with 5th grade boys!” Or, “If they were willing to die for their faith, you ought to be willing to tithe to the church!” I don’t think that’s the application from Stephen’s story.

So what does Stephen’s story teach us? For one, it reminds us that there are Stephens all over the world today. We worship in freedom and comfort, but that’s not the case for many people in the world. Persecution is real. It’s happening, and there are Stephens all over the world.

But the issue for us is not if we are willing to die for Jesus, but if we are willing to live for Jesus. But what does that mean? What does it mean to live for Him?

Three words. Stephen was ***convinced*** that Jesus was the Son of God, he was ***compelled*** to talk about it, and he was ***courageous*** to take a stand ... and he died for it.

Most of us stand in the circle of conviction. We believe the Bible is the word of God. We believe Jesus died on the cross for our sin. We believe He rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God. We’re convinced it’s true. But ... are we compelled to talk about it? Are we willing to move from being convinced to being compelled to speak up? And are we willing to be courageous and take a stand?

What does it mean to live for Jesus? Three words, and may these three words describe us. Convinced. Compelled. Courageous.

NOTES

¹ Open Doors, “Convert, Pay, or Die! In DRC,” June 1, 2026.

² John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), page 128.

³ Stephen traced Israel’s history from the patriarchs to the exile to the exodus from Egypt and to the monarchy of David and Solomon. He cited Israel’s great leaders – Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon.

⁴ See Acts 7:5.

⁵ See Acts 7:20.

⁶ See Acts 7:36.

⁷ See Acts 7:45.

⁸ See Acts 7:45-49.

⁹ Stephen said, “The Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48, NIV). And Stephen recalled the words of the Lord, when He said, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?” (Acts 7:49, NIV).

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 10:1-5.

¹¹ See Matthew 23:13-37, where Jesus said the same thing.

¹² See Mark 16:19, Luke 22:69-70, Romans 8:34, Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2.

¹³ See Luke 23:46.

¹⁴ See Luke 23:34.

¹⁵ Richardson, page 104.

¹⁶ See William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Volume 1, The Daily Bible Study Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), page 76. See also Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (Louisville, KY, and London, England: Westminster John Know Press, 1953, 2006), page 152.

¹⁷ Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), pages 129-130.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 130.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, page 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, page 134.