

STEPHEN - THE FIRST TO DIE FOR THE NAME

Scripture References: Acts 6:1-15; 7:1-60; 8:1-3

The Problem Nobody Wanted to Talk About

The church in Jerusalem was exploding. Thousands of people had come to faith in Jesus. The twelve apostles were preaching daily in the temple courts, and miracles were happening everywhere. It was exciting, electric, amazing, but it was also messy.

You see, when you go from a few dozen believers to several thousand in a matter of weeks, practical problems start to pop up. And one of those problems was this: The Greek-speaking widows weren't getting their fair share of food.

Now, this might not sound like a big deal to us, but in the ancient world, widows had no social safety net. No Social Security. No retirement fund. No way to support themselves. If the church didn't take care of them, they would starve.

The twelve apostles could see that this problem wasn't going away. They needed help. So they made a decision that would change the course of Christian history:

"Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3-4)

The congregation chose seven men. The first name on the list? Stephen. Here's what Luke tells us about Stephen:

"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8)

Wait a minute. Stephen was supposed to be serving food to widows. How did he end up performing miracles?

This is one of the beautiful truths of the Kingdom of God: When you're faithful in the small things, God often uses you in big things. Stephen didn't complain that he was "just" serving food while the apostles got to preach. He served faithfully. And God noticed.

Stephen wasn't content to just hand out bread. He also spoke about Jesus with such wisdom and power that people couldn't resist his arguments. The Greek-speaking Jews (called



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"Hellenists") would debate with him in the synagogue, trying to prove he was wrong about Jesus. But they couldn't win.

"But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke." (Acts 6:10)

Here's a truth you need to know: When people can't defeat your argument, they often attack your character instead. That's exactly what happened to Stephen. Since his opponents couldn't win the debate, they did what people have done throughout history—they lied about him.

"Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.'" (Acts 6:11)

They dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin—the same religious council that had condemned Jesus to death just a few years earlier. They brought in false witnesses who claimed Stephen had said Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs Moses had given them.

It wasn't true, but the mob didn't care. The high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

What happened next is one of the longest speeches in the book of Acts. Stephen didn't defend himself. Instead, he gave them a history lesson—a sweeping overview of God's faithfulness to Israel, from Abraham to Solomon. But Stephen wasn't just reciting history. He was building a case. With each story, he showed a pattern: God's people had always rejected God's messengers. They'd rejected Joseph. They'd rejected Moses. They'd rejected the prophets. And now, Stephen said, they'd rejected the Righteous One—Jesus Himself.

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:51-53)

Can you imagine the tension in that room? Stephen wasn't asking for mercy. He wasn't backing down. He was calling them out, and they hated him for it. Right before Stephen gave his speech, something remarkable happened:

"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 6:15)

Even in the face of false accusations and certain death, Stephen's face glowed with the presence of God. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't defensive. He was filled with peace, and at the



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end of his speech, while his accusers ground their teeth in rage, Stephen looked up to heaven and saw something they couldn't see:

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

This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is described as "standing" at the right hand of

God. Everywhere else, He's sitting. Why was Jesus standing for Stephen? Some scholars believe

Jesus stood to welcome His faithful servant home. Others think He stood as a witness on Stephen's behalf— as if to say, "I see you, Stephen. I'm here. You're not alone." Either way, the image is powerful: Even in our darkest moments, Jesus sees us. He stands with us. We are never alone.

Stephen's vision enraged the religious leaders even more. They covered their ears, rushed at him, dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him. Stoning was a brutal way to die. The condemned person would be thrown into a pit, and the witnesses would hurl large stones at them until they died. It was slow, agonizing, and humiliating. Even in his final moments, Stephen did something extraordinary:

"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:59-60)

Do those words sound familiar? They should. They're almost identical to Jesus' words on the cross:

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46)

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Stephen didn't just preach about Jesus. He died like Jesus. He forgave like Jesus. He loved like Jesus. He was the first Christian martyr, but he wouldn't be the last.

There's one more detail in this story that we can't ignore:

"And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison." (Acts 8:1-3)



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The witnesses who stoned Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. He watched Stephen die. He heard Stephen's prayer. He saw Stephen's peace, and it haunted him. Years later, when Saul (now called Paul) recounted his story, he couldn't stop talking about Stephen's death. He mentioned it multiple times. It clearly affected him deeply.

Stephen never knew that his death would plant a seed in the heart of the man who would become the greatest missionary in Christian history. He never knew that his forgiveness would echo in Paul's letters for centuries to come.

1. But God knew. Sometimes our greatest impact comes not in what we accomplish, but in how we die— how we love, how we forgive, how we trust God even when everything falls apart.

In your walk with Christ, you will face opposition. Maybe it won't be as severe as Stephen's, you probably won't be stoned for your faith. But you will encounter people who misunderstand you, criticize you, or actively oppose your commitment to Jesus.

Stephen's story reminds us that our accusers don't define us. God does.

When people lie about you, God knows the truth. When people reject you for following Christ, God stands with you. When people try to discourage your faith, God has already planned your vindication.

And here's the key: Stephen didn't defend himself. He didn't argue. He didn't try to prove his innocence. He told the truth about God and left the results to God.

In discipleship, we learn this same principle: We are responsible for our faithfulness, but we are not responsible for how people respond to us. We can't control what people say about our faith. We can only control how we respond. Stephen chose forgiveness. He chose love. He chose to trust God. Can you do the same?

Discipleship means following Jesus' example even when it costs us something. It means loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, and trusting God with the outcome.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS - STEPHEN

1. Stephen was chosen to serve food to widows, but God used him in much bigger ways. Have you ever been in a role that seemed small or insignificant, but God used it for something greater? How did that change your perspective on "small" tasks?



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2. Stephen's opponents couldn't defeat his arguments, so they attacked his character with lies. Have you ever been falsely accused or misunderstood? How did you respond? How does Stephen's example challenge or encourage you?
3. Stephen's face "was like the face of an angel" even as he faced false accusations. What do you think it means to have the peace of God so visible that others can see it? Have you ever met someone like that?
4. In his final moments, Stephen prayed for his killers to be forgiven. Who in your life do you need to forgive? What makes that difficult? What would it look like to pray for them the way Stephen prayed for his accusers?
5. Stephen never knew that his death would impact Saul (Paul). How does this encourage you when you feel like your witness or testimony isn't making a difference?
6. **DISCIPLESHIP FOCUS:** Stephen was faithful in serving widows before he was given a platform to preach. In our discipleship journey, we often want to skip to the "important" ministry. How can Stephen's example encourage you to be faithful in the seemingly small or behind-the-scenes areas of service?



Gracious Father,

Thank You for the powerful example of Stephen, who showed us what it means to be filled with Your Spirit and faithful unto death. We are humbled by his courage to stand for truth, his boldness to proclaim Your Word even in the face of opposition, and his Christ-like love that enabled him to forgive even as he was being killed.

Lord, we confess that we often lack Stephen's courage. We stay silent when we should speak. We compromise when we should stand firm. We hold grudges when we should forgive. Forgive us, and fill us afresh with Your Holy Spirit, just as You filled Stephen.

Help us to see Jesus as Stephen did—standing at Your right hand, ready to receive us and strengthen us in our own trials. Give us grace to live as faithful witnesses in our homes, workplaces, schools, and communities. When we face opposition for our faith, remind us that You are with us and that our witness may plant seeds that bear fruit we'll never see on this side of heaven.

Transform our hearts to reflect Stephen's compassion. When we are wronged, help us to pray for those who hurt us. When we are misunderstood, help us to respond with Your love. When we are afraid, help us to trust in Your presence.

May the story of Stephen's life and death not just inspire us, but change us. Use these truths we've discussed today to make us more like Jesus.

In Christ's name we pray,
Amen.



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