

# Stephen

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How do you feel about evangelism and witnessing? What are your fears, worries, doubts, or concerns around sharing the gospel with others?

Read Acts 6–7.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you see the need to boldly proclaim the gospel regardless of the consequences to your own life.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

- 1) The Holy Spirit is a spirit of unity, not division; there should be no division in the church.
- 2) The Holy Spirit empowers believers to boldly speak the truth about Jesus regardless of opposition and persecution.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Those who reject the gospel are resisting the Holy Spirit. Stephen went through the history of God's relationship with Israel, how He called Abraham, was with Joseph and saved his family from the famine, called Moses to save them from slavery in Egypt, Joshua to bring them into the promised land, David to lead them, and Solomon to build a house for Him. He ended his sermon by confronting the Jewish leaders. They were stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart, just like their ancestors who had grumbled in the wilderness and rejected the prophets God sent to bring them back to Him. They rejected and killed the Messiah—God Himself. Stephen called this hard heartedness “resisting the Holy Spirit” because it is the Holy Spirit who draws us to the Father (John 6:44). This happens not only with atheists who openly reject God but also with those who claim to know God, like these religious leaders, but did not even recognize Him when He came to earth because they misunderstood who God is and what religion is all about.

## **+ MEDITATE**

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51).

### **[GETTING STARTED]**

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

**QUESTION** *How should churches respond to division in the church?*

In Acts 6:1–7, division began to creep into the church, which had been supernaturally unified up to this point. This was not a small group of people; it was a community of thousands, from many different backgrounds and cultures, yet they were completely unified by the power of the Holy Spirit. But sin had crept into the church, and now there was division between different people groups. The apostles didn’t put up with this disunity. They didn’t ignore it or sweep it under the rug or split the church into different denominations. They confronted the disunity as the sin it was and put leadership in place to rectify it.

**QUESTION** *How can Christians boldly speak the truth about Jesus regardless of opposition and persecution?*

In the rest of Acts 6–7, we see the story of the stoning of Stephen, a man chosen as one of the first deacons. He was doing signs and wonders among the Jewish people, and they brought him before the Sanhedrin and the high priest, where they brought false witnesses against him. Instead of defending himself, Stephen reminded them of the story of Israel’s relationship with God throughout the Old Testament and confronted them for their uncircumcised hearts, saying they had rejected Jesus the way their ancestors had always rejected true prophets of the Lord. Though Stephen knew he was facing death for speaking the truth, he boldly declared the gospel and confronted them with hard truths about their false empty religion.

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 6:1–7 tells the story of the first division in the church between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews. As a result, the church chose a group of deacons to oversee the distribution of food so the apostles could focus on teaching and prayer. The rest of chapters 6 and 7 tell the story of the martyrdom of Stephen. He was captured by the Jews and brought before the Sanhedrin and the high priest, whom he confronted for their rejection of Jesus. Then he saw a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God, and the people stoned him to death.

1. *Division and Deacons*
2. *Stephen's Sermon*
3. *The Stoning of Stephen*

### [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 6–7.

## 1. *Division and Deacons*

### ✚ READ ACTS 6:1–6

**QUESTION** *Why did the Hellenists complain to the apostles? What was the apostles' solution to the conflict?*

**QUESTION** *What were the requirements for the leaders chosen to serve tables?*

The opening of this story tells us that the disciples were increasing in number (6:1). When churches grow, there are often “growing pains” like division, conflicts, and disagreements. Though the church is God’s kingdom on earth. It is made up of imperfect human beings; there will always be conflicts. The question is how you handle them.

The two groups in conflict were the Hellenists and the Hebrews, both Jewish groups. The first church in Jerusalem was made up of mostly Jewish Christians with a few Gentile proselytes; Gentiles didn’t really start coming to the faith until the gospel spread beyond Israel. But even within the Jewish people, there were many different cultures and languages because Jewish people lived in different countries throughout the region, not just in Israel. This is called the Diaspora, when the Israelites were dispersed from Israel to

other lands.

When the Israelites were brought out of Egypt (1445 BC), they all lived in Israel together. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom (Israel) was overthrown by Assyria and was dispersed. Those ten tribes were “lost”; they did not maintain their Israelite identity but assimilated into the cultures of other lands. In 586 BC, the southern kingdom (Judah) was exiled to Babylon. They worked hard to maintain their identity, and their people became known as “the Jews” (not Israelites). After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, a remnant returned to Israel, but many of them didn’t, and Jews continued to disperse to many different lands over the centuries. By the time of Jesus, there were Jewish communities all over the Roman Empire. We see this reality in Acts 2, where Jews from nations all over the empire gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost (Acts 2:9–11). Within the Jewish people there were two main schools of thought about how they should relate to the culture of the nations in which they lived:

- Hellenistic Jews had adopted Greek culture, language, and ways but remained faithful to Israel’s God and the Jewish faith.
- Hebraic Jews refused to adopt Greek culture or language, maintaining cultural purity too, not just the Jewish religious faith.

You could compare Hebraic Jews to Hasidic Jews today, who reject technology, wear distinctive clothing and hair styles, live in separate neighborhoods, have separate schools, work in their own businesses, and follow traditional cultural practices on top of orthodox faith. Hellenistic Jews would be like a Jewish American who dresses like any typical American and participates fully in our culture while remaining faithful to their religion.

Most of the Jews living outside of Jerusalem in Gentile nations were Hellenized. Hebraic Jews were only in Israel, mostly in Jerusalem. When the first church started, a lot of Hellenized Jews were in Jerusalem visiting for the Passover festival. When Peter preached, both Hellenized and Hebraic Jews became Christians and joined together as the first church. When the church began, the Holy Spirit gave them a supernatural unity. Their community was unified in purpose and heart and shared everything they owned so that no one was in need. But very soon (the very next chapter!), sin began to creep in.

The church was pooling their resources so there was no one in need among them. One way they did this was by giving daily food to widows who could not provide for themselves in the Greco-Roman economy. At some point, the Hebraic Jews who led this ministry started to neglect the Hellenized widows. The Hellenistic Jews complained to the apostles, who agreed this wasn’t right. In the same way the apostles didn’t put up with sin in the church with Ananias and Sapphira, they didn’t put up with division in the church either. They didn’t ignore it or sweep it under the rug or split the church into denominations. They handled the situation, confronted the disunity as the sin it was, and rectified it.

Their solution was to have the people appoint seven Hellenized Jews to oversee the distribution to their widows. We know they were Hellenized Jews (and one Gentile proselyte to Judaism) because they were all Greek names. They were chosen by their own people from among their own people, which assured representative leadership. Though they aren't explicitly called "deacons" in the story, in the phrase "serve tables" the word "serve" is the verb form of deacon ("servant"), so this is considered the establishment of the office of deacons in the church. The apostles needed to focus on teaching and prayer, so they needed other leaders to handle the service ministries of the church. The serving ministries are no less important than the teaching ministry. These new leaders were held to the same high standards, to be of "good repute" and "full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

The apostles laid hands on these men and prayed for them, setting them apart for this position, similar to the way leaders were ordained in the old covenant by anointing with oil and prayer. This was symbolic of the Holy Spirit being laid upon them, empowering them for service.

**QUESTION** *How did the disciples' way of handling this situation include the people in the solution? What kind of leadership does this reflect?*

**QUESTION** *How did their solution keep the church unified and yet also recognize the diversity within the church?*

**APPLICATION POINT #1: UNITY IN DIVERSITY** / The apostles did not let this conflict divide the church. They confronted the conflict head on and came up with a solution that kept them together as one body while being honest about the diversity in their body and fair to all the different parts of the body. Their solution wasn't to split the church to "keep the peace." They didn't try to pretend there wasn't a cultural divide between the two groups. They recognized that both groups needed representative leadership to ensure one wasn't favored over the other.

**APPLICATION POINT #2: DIVISION OF LEADERSHIP** / The apostles recognized that they couldn't handle all the things that needed to be done around the church by themselves, so they created different leadership positions for different things. This doesn't mean serving ministries are less important than teaching ministries. It was just a wise division of labor, gifting, and calling. Scripture describes the church as a body with different jobs for different parts, all of which are equally important. The Holy Spirit gives different spiritual gifts to different people for their roles. It's important that we maintain this same attitude in our churches today. Of course, teaching/preaching is central to the ministry of the church, but the preacher/teacher is not any more important than any other "smaller" part of the body. We are all ministers, just in different ways—some big, some small. Every role in the body is equally important.

**QUESTION** *How have you seen churches build unity among diverse groups and members in their churches? How have you seen churches show equal inclusion to different cultures and groups?*

**QUESTION** *How would you describe your unique gifting and calling in the body of Christ? How have you been called and equipped to serve in ministry in the church and the world around you?*

## 2. Stephen's Sermon

### ✚ READ ACTS 6:7-53

**QUESTION** *Why did the religious leaders arrest Stephen? What does it tell us about his case that they brought false witnesses against him?*

**QUESTION** *What did Stephen accuse the Jewish leaders of doing?*

This section opens by telling us that the church continued to grow and even a great many of the priests became believers. Knowing the background of Jesus's story, this is shocking. Even some of the religious leaders who had opposed Jesus were persuaded to believe. This is amazing news, but it also created an even greater threat to the high priest and other leaders who wanted to maintain their power. The gospel will always be a threat to human power because it's all about humility and giving up your power to serve others.

Stephen was one of the seven Hellenized Jews chosen to be the first deacons/servants of the church. Acts describes him as "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and "full of grace and power" (6:8). But Stephen not only served tables at the daily food distribution to the widows, he also did great signs and wonders among the people in the community. He was not only empowered with the spiritual gift of service, but he was also given supernatural power to do miracles, along with supernatural wisdom and boldness to preach before the people, even the Sanhedrin and the high priest.

Because he was preaching the gospel and doing miracles, members of five different synagogues rose up against Stephen. The synagogue of the Freedmen was a synagogue of freed former slaves. The other four were made up of Jews from the regions mentioned. Notice the contrast between the church, who had built unity between different people groups, and the Jewish synagogues, which were divided by people groups. This detail in the text reminds us that it is only new life in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that bring unity in diversity among all different people groups.

They tried to argue with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom he was given by the Holy Spirit. This was a typical “honor challenge” in their culture. A person challenged someone with a difficult question, and if they answered well, they gained honor and the person challenging them lost it. If they answered poorly or not at all, they lost honor and the person challenging gained it. This is the same thing the Gospels say about Jesus, that people constantly tried to challenge His wisdom, but no one could beat Him.

Because they couldn’t discredit him by this honor challenge, they stirred up the people, elders, and scribes, and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court/council. Also like Jesus, having no real evidence against Stephen, they brought false witnesses who said he spoke blasphemous words against Moses, God, the temple, and the Law. When he was standing before the council, God made His supernatural presence with Stephen visible; his face was like the face of an angel! Yet they still pushed back against him. This is how closed their hearts were to the Holy Spirit.

The people accused Stephen of saying Jesus would destroy Jerusalem and change the customs of Moses. This was a distortion of the gospel message, that we are not saved by the law but by grace. Jesus said He didn’t come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Stephen responded with a long retelling of the Old Testament story, starting with the promises God made to Abraham all the way to Moses. He reminded them that their fathers refused to obey Moses in the wilderness (7:39), that the people of Israel, generation after generation, worshipped false gods and rejected the prophets God sent to bring them back to Him. Jesus didn’t reject the Law; He was actually the only person who ever kept the law of Moses perfectly.

Stephen called them “stiff-necked people” just as God had called Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 32:9). God had told them circumcise their hearts, not just their bodies (Deuteronomy 10), but Stephen said their hearts were still uncircumcised. Like Jesus, Stephen said they had persecuted all the prophets who had ever tried to speak hard truths to them (Matthew 5:12). They resisted the Holy Spirit, like God’s people had always done. They thought they were being religious, but they missed the whole point of their religion, which was to draw them near to God. It was not Jesus who hadn’t kept the Law of Moses, it was them (7:53).

Like Israel had done for generations, they were performing empty rituals, but their hearts were so far from God that they didn't recognize Him when He came and walked in the flesh among them. They rejected Jesus just like their ancestors had rejected the prophets who spoke God's true Word. He was the Righteous One, the Messiah, God-made-flesh, and they murdered Him. Stephen called Jesus's death what it really was—not the execution of a criminal, but the murder of an innocent man, the only Righteous One who ever lived.

**QUESTION** *Why did Stephen respond to their accusations with a review of God's covenant relationship with Israel from Abraham to Moses? What was he trying to show them?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Stephen call these people “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in hearts and ears”? What do those phrases mean and how are they connected to the story of the Old Testament?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Stephen's sermon challenged the emptiness of following religion yet completely missing God Himself. There were a few people throughout the Old Testament who knew God in an intimate relationship of faith (Abraham, Joseph, Moses, etc.), but most of the people followed the religious rituals and missed God Himself. How many people still do this today? How many people sit in church every Sunday but completely miss having a real relationship with Jesus? How many people think Christianity is about following a set of rules instead of following Jesus? How many of us have such a distorted view of who Jesus is that we wouldn't recognize Him if He walked into our churches today? This is the challenge of Stephen's sermon for us. If Jesus showed up in our world today, would we follow Him or crucify Him? Do we really know who Jesus is? Do we have an authentic relationship with Him? Or are we just play-acting at an empty religion?

**QUESTION** *What does a real relationship with Jesus look like in today's world? How can you know you are really following Him, not just empty religion?*

**QUESTION** *What misconceptions do people in our world today have about Jesus and Christianity? How can you show them who Jesus really is?*



### 3. The Stoning of Stephen

✚ READ ACTS 7:54–60

**QUESTION** *Why was the Sanhedrin enraged by what Stephen said?*

**QUESTION** *What are the similarities between Stephen's death and Jesus's?*

Stephen boldly confronted the Sanhedrin and the high priest with the very hard truth—they thought they were religious, even the highest religious leaders of the land, but they didn't know God at all. So much so that they didn't recognize Him when He came in human form and spoke the truth about the kingdom. But instead of causing them to repent and turn back to God, Stephen's message only enraged them. Grinding their teeth was a sign of imminent attack.

Instead of being afraid, Stephen gazed into heaven. This phrase gives us a sense of calm. He was "full of the Holy Spirit," a spirit of peace, not fear. When he looked up, he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. The right hand was the position of honor—Jesus is God the Son, king with Him over all creation. Jesus was standing, not sitting, which means His work is not yet done. A king sits on the throne to rule in peace when the battle is over. For now, Jesus has conquered sin and death, but He is still fighting the spiritual battle with the kingdom of darkness over the souls of humankind until He returns to judge all humanity and usher in the final consummated kingdom of God.

Stephen told them what he saw, but they "stopped their ears." He had called them stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart and ears, and now they proved it. They refused to listen to the truth. Even though they had visibly seen God's glory was upon him (6:15), though they had seen him do miracles (6:8), though they had heard him preach the truth (7:1–53). They refused to believe because he had called them out. They cast him out of the city and stoned him, which was the punishment for blasphemy. In their minds, saying Jesus was the Son of Man was blasphemous. The Son of Man was the figure from the vision of Daniel 7, the heavenly being who was "like a son of man" (God-made-flesh), to whom the Ancient of Days (God the Father) gave all authority, glory, and sovereign power. The one whom every nation will worship, whose dominion is everlasting, and whose kingdom will never be destroyed. But it's not blasphemy, it's true. Jesus is the God-made-flesh king who will reign forever at the right hand of the Father. But their hearts were too closed to hear it.

Stephen's vision assured him that what he was preaching was true and that even though he would die for the gospel at this moment, he would immediately enter eternal life with Jesus in His kingdom. He could see, literally, that the suffering of this present moment was nothing compared to the eternal glory to come

(Romans 8:18). If he had any fear of death, this vision would have given him the strength to endure it.

As Stephen was being stoned to death, he said two of the same things Jesus had said on the cross, but asking these things of Jesus rather than the Father: to receive his spirit and not to hold this sin against those who stoned him. This is in addition to when we saw that Stephen was like Jesus in his incomparable wisdom, in his miracles, and in the fact that they brought false witnesses to testify against him. Those who follow Jesus and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them will be like Jesus in the way that they live, the way they speak truth with boldness even in the face of death, and the way they love and forgive their enemies.

**QUESTION** *What does Stephen's death tell us about him? What did it tell us about Jesus?*

**QUESTION** *What does Stephen's death tell us about the way the world will respond when we boldly speak the truth about Jesus, especially when we call them out on their sin and hard-heartedness?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Stephen was the first martyr of the church. Like all the prophets before him, including Jesus, the hope of his message was that people would repent and turn back to the Lord, which some will do when we preach the gospel. But others, especially those whose power or status are threatened by our words, will become enraged and seek to silence us by whatever means necessary. Some, like these leaders, will even think they are doing the right thing by persecuting us; they'll think they are saving others from our "lies." Stephen's story shows us what it looks like to preach the truth boldly regardless of the consequences to ourselves and put our trust in our eternal future even if it means suffering or death in this life.

**QUESTION** *In what ways are you boldly sharing the gospel with others in your life?*

**QUESTION** *Have you encountered resistance to the message? How can you overcome those obstacles to get the message out?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

Share the gospel, even if it's unpopular. These chapters remind us that the most important thing in life is to share the gospel with others. This is the message and the mission we've been entrusted with as God's people, the church. In our culture, a lot of people are resistant to hearing about Jesus. There are very few people in our culture who haven't heard about Jesus at all. Most people have already heard the gospel message (or some false version of it) and have already rejected it (or the false version). Or they may have rejected Jesus based on a negative experience with the church. Many people are like these religious leaders; they think they are already following the right thing because they are religious, but they have missed Jesus Himself.

This week let's refocus on sharing the gospel with everyone we encounter in our daily lives in whatever ways we can. It may be in small ways here and there for certain people and situations, or you may have a full-blown conversation with someone if it feels like they're ready for it. Pray for opportunities to witness to people and then keep your eyes and ears open for ways you can share the gospel this week.

## [PRAY]

*+Use this prayer as a guide to pray through these passages this week.*

*Dear God the Father, the Ancient of Days, and God the Son, who stands at His right hand, give us the boldness to speak the truth of the gospel to everyone we encounter, even when it's hard. Even when it means confronting people who think they're religious but are missing out on Jesus. God, we pray for those who don't know you, that their eyes may be opened and their hearts may be softened to hearing the truth, repenting, and turning back to you. Give us the words to say and give us the hearts to love others, even our enemies. Thank you for the gift of salvation, by which we have the kind of secure hope in our eternal future that gives us no fear of death. In the name of the one to whom has been given all glory, honor, and dominion forever. Amen.*