

## Session 6



# Stephen: A Faith That Advances God's Kingdom

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## THE POINT

*Bold faith helps advance the kingdom of God.*

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

I can't imagine being a high school student in 1943 from a small East Tennessee town one minute and the next being transported to Army Basic Training in a distant state. Then being put on the fast track to fight in Italy, pause in England, and fight again in Europe until the end of the war.

His training and natural abilities helped him stand out from his peers when he volunteered, earning him the nickname: "Combat." Although he never considered himself a hero, his Bronze Star and multiple Purple Hearts speak for themselves.

He rarely talked about his military adventures with his family. Like many of his generation, he volunteered to defend his country from enemies trying to rob the world of freedom. My father survived the war, but he took most of his story with him to his grave.

The book of Acts tells Stephen's story, and the Bible recounts his story fully, displaying his heroic faith during the war against the early Christian church. Once you hear it, you'll want to share his story, and I hope you'll continue his heroic fight.

### QUESTION 1:

***Who do you believe are true heroes in our world today?***

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## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

### ACTS 6:3-7

<sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. <sup>6</sup> They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Peter’s sermons, with the power of the Holy Spirit, impacted the fledgling church in a big way. The church began to grow large and suddenly. Typically, when an organization grows, its leadership is slow to expand and quick to overwork itself. The leaders of the early church were different. Jesus had given them a specific role. The disciples were to preach God’s Word and pray. Their work was critical for the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

When additional congregational needs arose, the disciples wisely expanded their organizational structure. The church leaders had unintentionally overlooked some of the widows when serving food. The disciples told the congregation to choose seven men who met high standards. Why were their standards so high for serving food? It might seem like anyone could serve food, but it seems clear this problem went well beyond food preparation or delivery.

Stephen was first on the list. He was pulled out of the crowd and then promoted to a servant.

The standards were high because delivering food required spiritual maturity to be a humble servant in God’s church. The words spoken while doing simple tasks often bring peace. We’re not of much use to God until we realize our many limitations and God’s endless supply.

I know a group of men who God has used with an organization called “Meals on Wheels.” They deliver meals to senior adults in need. Each recipient would say they appreciate the food, but the real joy comes when they can see and speak to the person bringing the meals. The client wants someone to listen to their needs and stories. What a gift to be heard when you’re alone.

Imagine being the senior adult and listening to the person who is bringing your food complaining about having to deliver meals. Their attitude would give the clear impression that this ministry was somehow beneath them. On the other hand, a humble servant brings the food, gives their undivided attention, and lovingly moves

on to the next client. From what Scripture tells us about Stephen, he must have blessed the widows with kindness and love.

Scripture teaches us that Stephen moved beyond feeding widows. The humility he developed as a servant leader was important for at least two reasons. First, as a servant leader, Stephen learned how to submit to God's will, even during difficult times. Also, servant leadership taught Stephen how to be more like Jesus—the ultimate example of servant leadership. Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth, served, and died so the ones He served could have eternal life. Every Christ-follower should desire to be more like Jesus. Serving with a humble heart will bring you great joy.

The other six men must have been like Stephen because the impact was huge. The Bible says that great numbers of people became obedient to the faith (v. 7). When church leaders serve in the areas of their call and giftedness, God will do great things to His glory and honor. That's really true of all of us.

#### QUESTION 2:

***Who are some people in our church whose ministries impact the community?***

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## Acts 6:8-10

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

Our passage doesn't indicate how much time elapsed between Acts 6:7-8, but many things changed. Stephen didn't just stand out among his fellow deacons; now, his faith really soared. His faith is described as full of grace and power.

Imagine if your faith were like Stephen's faith. Do you wish he had written a book describing how he did it so you could do the same? Keep this simple truth in mind: It's not what Stephen did; it's how God used Stephen's faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will also empower you to do what God is calling you to do. Don't forget that the Holy Spirit resides

in everyone who places their faith in Jesus. All of us can have a life of faith that invites God to work through us.

God wants to use us to accomplish His purposes. It starts with obedience to His Word and spending time in prayer. Reading and obeying Scripture is necessary in the life of a Christ-follower. It might be as simple as asking God to provide you with an opportunity to tell someone how they can have a personal relationship with Jesus. Our faith thrives when we invite God to work in our lives.

God can even work through you against your

will, but I don't think you want to spend three days in the belly of a fish! Consider the example of Jonah. God gave Jonah specific instructions: "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it" (Jonah 1:2).

What did Jonah do? He completely rejected God's plan and traveled in the opposite direction! He ran from God and the mission given to him to preach in Nineveh. Jonah got on a boat in Joppa, wanting to end up in Tarshish. God threw a great wind upon the sea as Jonah slept, creating a massive storm. The ship's crew tried to get their gods to stop the storm. Finally, the captain approached Jonah, pleading with Jonah to call out to his God to stop the storm. Ultimately, Jonah admitted the storm was his fault and volunteered to be tossed overboard to save the crew from certain death.

As Jonah entered the water, a fish swallowed him. While remaining in the fish, he considered his actions for three days and was finally spit up at Nineveh. Jonah preached to the entire city, and everyone turned from their evil ways. What an amazing blessing God performed through Jonah! But even then, Jonah didn't celebrate.

As a matter of fact, he was angry. So, God taught Jonah a lesson about His compassion.

We don't want to follow Jonah's example; we want to be like Stephen. Some people from the synagogues began to argue with Stephen. Synagogue officials didn't accept his interpretation of Jewish history and the identity of Jesus as God's Son. They believed Jesus was a menace, not the Messiah. Still, Stephen's faith invited God's work through him. When God tells us where to go and what to do, we want to step in the right direction, regardless of the challenges.

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, stood strong on the Word of God, remained in God's will, and continued to follow God's plan. And God can do the same through us.

#### QUESTION 3:

***When have you seen someone face opposition because of their faith?***

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## Acts 6:11-15

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin. <sup>13</sup> They also presented false witnesses who said, "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the law. <sup>14</sup> For we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." <sup>15</sup> And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

## Engage

### BEING BOLD

Do you need an extra dose of boldness? Using the acrostic below, write some ways you can be bolder in living out your faith and sharing the gospel.

Then write a prayer asking God for courage and strength for the task.

**B -**

**O -**

**L -**

**D -**

**My Prayer:**

We live in a fallen world. Since Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command not to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, mankind continues to sin and fall short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). Our sin isn't just random acts of disobedience; behind the scenes, the devil is working to disrupt the impact of the message of Jesus Christ by any means at his disposal.

Stephen faced increasing opposition as he continued to demonstrate the wisdom provided by the Holy Spirit. His enemies even provided false witnesses against him. But Stephen's faith grew as his challenges grew.

There may have been other reasons why the Jews wanted to silence Stephen. Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus crucified because they were envious of Jesus (Matt. 27:18). Stephen was a popular advocate of Jesus, and the Jewish leaders could see it. They must have been so jealous of his following.

#### **QUESTION 4:**

***What does opposition to our faith look like in our culture?***

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Why were these men so opposed to Stephen? The simple answer is that they hated Jesus. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). Jesus's arrival was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Stephen's faith had grown to the point that the religious leaders wanted him to suffer the same fate as Jesus. Stephen

continued boldly speaking out so his Jewish brethren, including the religious leaders, could repent and trust in Jesus.

Acts 7 records Stephen's opposition to the type of Judaism practiced by his contemporaries. Stephen's sermon recounted the history of Israel, and how God delivered Israel from slavery and ultimately brought them into the land of promise. Stephen finished his speech with a powerful declaration of how Israel had been opposed to God every step of their journey. The bottom line was Stephen threatened the religious status quo, so Stephen paid the ultimate price.

No story about Stephen would be complete without mentioning his death. We may not want to hear the end of his story because we can't imagine our lives ending due to how we lived out our faith. Most of us won't come close to that end. But all of us should be willing to.

After Stephen's speech, he was stoned. His death wasn't the public spectacle of the crucifixion, but it was nonetheless painful. Stephen accepted his fate while speaking and acting like Jesus. Acts 7:60 says, "He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' And after saying this, he fell asleep." Stephen's strong and proven faith set an example of faith for all of us to follow.

#### **QUESTION 5:**

***How does our group help prepare us to face opposition?***

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## LIVE IT OUT

Bold faith helps advance the kingdom of God.  
Choose one of the following applications.

- **Compassion.** Search out someone with physical or spiritual needs and strive to meet those needs with God's grace and guidance. Seek no recognition but to serve God and people with humility.
- **Companionship.** Never forget that the Holy Spirit resides in every believer, including you. Know that He will be with you and guide you to carry out your mission to tell others about Jesus, regardless of the consequences. Trust Him by reaching out to someone far from God this week.
- **Continuation.** Continue to obey God's Word and share the story of His love for the world. Help others to do the same. Challenge family, friends, or coworkers to share God's amazing grace. Gather together afterwards to give praise for what God has done.



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