

THE FIRST MARTYR AND MISSIONARIES ACTS 7:54-8:4

By now in our study of the Book of Acts you should be able to identify the Holy Spirit's agenda. What is it? To expand the kingdom of Jesus. Everything He is doing through the apostles, through the church, through individual Christ-followers like Stephen is to make Jesus known as God's Messiah who died on a cross and then rose from the dead then ascended into heaven where He took His seat at His Father's right hand, awaiting His Father's word to return to the earth to consummate His kingdom. Meanwhile the kingdom is expanding and advancing primarily through Spirit-filled Christ-followers who are known as His Church.

So, the Spirit's agenda is to grow the Church, because as the Church grows the kingdom grows. This morning we are going to look at one of God's most effective methods of Church growth, though it is not a method that either you or I would have ever thought of. But He is still using this method today to great effect. In fact, does anyone know in what country of the world the church is growing the fastest? Iran.

In our study of Acts the last couple of weeks, we have been looking at the account of a Christ-follower named Stephen, who is described in chapter 6 as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5), *and* full of grace and power (6:8). Even though Stephen had a specific role in the early church, he had made himself available to be filled and used by the Spirit for whatever He wanted to say or do through him. Consequently, the Spirit used him to do miracles (6:8) and to speak the Word of God with great power.

Opponents of the Jesus movement attempted to debate with Stephen but could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he spoke. Frustrated and embarrassed, they tried to get the upper hand by reporting to the Jewish officials—falsely—that they had heard him publicly blaspheme God and Moses and profane the Temple, accusations which, if proven, were punishable by death. They pressed this trumped-up case with such energy that they succeeded in having Stephen arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin (Supreme Court) to stand trial.

At his hearing, witnesses swore under oath that he had proclaimed that the Jesus whom they crucified would destroy the Temple and change the customs delivered to them by Moses. Having heard the charges, the high court allowed Stephen to speak in his own defense.

Last week we looked at most of chapter 7, the content of Stephen's defense. Carefully summarizing critical events in Jewish history from the time of Abraham to the building of the first Temple, he highlighted Israel's rejection of God's representatives who, after their deaths, would be hailed as heroes.

But Stephen also drew a connection between the ancient rites of the Temple and the new order of things brought by Jesus, offering the new as the fulfillment of the old. While the rites of the Temple were, in their time, essential, it was absurd to think that the Creator of the universe would dwell solely in a building made by human hands. Quoting from Isaiah, Stephen directly challenged the continuing role of the Temple as the center of God's power and the only proper place for worship to occur.

Stephen's theological reasoning and his interpretations of prophetic passages would have raised some red flags in an audience that was already hostile and suspicious. But it is what he said next that sent them over the edge. **Verses 51-53**, ⁵¹ *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.* ⁵² *Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who*

announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ *you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*

The Sanhedrin had falsely accused Stephen of being a heretic. They believed him to be a threat to the institutions God had established that *they* were guarding. But Stephen turned the tables on them, accusing *them* of being God’s adversaries, accusing *them* of profaning and rejecting God’s provisions for their salvation, and accusing them of being just like their forefathers who exasperated Him. In fact, they were even worse because they killed the Messiah!

Not surprisingly, **verses 54-55**, ⁵⁴ *Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.* ⁵⁵ *But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

The Greek literally says, “But *being* filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven...” In other words, *because* Stephen was filled with the Spirit—because the Spirit was in possession of Stephen’s faculties—his eyes were opened so that he could see a dimension of reality that mortal human beings are otherwise unable to see. The Spirit enabled him to see heaven. He saw God’s glory and he saw Jesus standing at God’s right hand.

Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit throughout his Christian life, enabling him to serve the Lord with extraordinary power and effectiveness. But up until this time that filling, as far as we know, was primarily for the benefit of others. Here, however, it was for his own benefit. The Spirit filled Stephen in order to give him comfort and assurance and courage in a life-threatening circumstance situation when he might otherwise be terrified.

And what could be *more* comforting and assuring than seeing the very One who purchased you with his own blood; the very One who forgave your sins and reconciled you to God and gave you eternal life; the very One you have been serving and whose name you have been proclaiming? What could be more comforting and assuring than to see the risen and exalted Savior, in all His glory, standing—not sitting, but standing—at God’s right hand?

Stephen was beside himself. For not only was he experiencing the goal of his existence, which is seeing Jesus’ face, but Jesus was giving *him* His undivided attention. And Stephen was so excited that he blurted out, **verse 56**. ⁵⁶ *...“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

Incidentally, this is the only time in Scripture where Jesus is said to be *standing* instead of sitting at the right hand of God. That is significant. Why was He standing? Was He standing to applaud or salute Stephen? Was He standing with outstretched arms so that He could welcome him into His presence with an embrace?

One interpretation is that Jesus was standing as Stephen’s lawyer or defender. Stephen is in a courtroom, after all, and, from a temporal perspective, it appears as though he is alone surrounded by a hostile judge and jury. But Jesus wants Stephen to know that he is *not* alone. He is standing up for him, testifying on his behalf before the only Judge that really matters—his heavenly Father.

But this vision is also a validation of a prophecy Jesus had made only a few months before this when He was on trial before the same group of men. This same high priest had asked Him, “Are you the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the Blessed One?” and Jesus had replied, “I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). For that Jesus was pronounced guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death (63-64).

Stephen’s vision was a confirmation that Jesus had, indeed, taken His place at God’s right hand, and unless they were willing to admit they were wrong about that verdict they had no choice but to condemn Stephen, too. Which brings us to their response. **Verses 57-58.**

57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

At this point, all the pretense of a fair trial vanished. Without reaching any formal decision or pronouncing a verdict, the angry officials rushed upon Stephen and ordered that he be stoned to death.

The Old Testament laid out in detail the procedure for stoning, and if Stephen's executioners followed it to the letter, they would have taken him outside the city (Lev. 24:14). They would have stopped at an open field that was scattered with stones of the proper size and heft—not too large to throw but heavy enough to inflict fatal injury. As Stephen's captors stripped him, a group of witnesses would have been appointed and charged with two duties. They would have approached Stephen, who was still standing, and laid their hands on his head. That symbolic action was followed by their second obligation: they would be the first to throw stones, and, therefore, would be held responsible if the execution later turned out to be unjust (*The Veil is Torn*, 57-61).

Once the witnesses had completed the ceremonial stoning the rest of the crowd picked up rocks from the ground and hurled them at Stephen. Keep in mind, death does not occur with the first few rocks. Even after they knocked him unconscious, it would have taken a while to finish the job. They pounded him with stones; opening cuts in his flesh and bruising his face and head, and they kept it up until he was dead.

Standing beside the pile of cloaks shed by the witnesses, a young Jew was watching Stephen's execution with keen interest and wholehearted approval. His name was Saul.

Some of us read the account of Stephen's stoning and say, "Wait a second! What was Jesus doing during this time? If, indeed, He was Stephen's defender why didn't He actually defend him? Why did He allow him to be killed?"

I believe Stephen's reaction answers these questions. **Verses 59-60.** *59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

What does this tell us about Stephen? One thing is for sure: while being stoned he was still filled with the Spirit, for the Holy Spirit enabled him to respond just like Jesus did when He hung upon the cross and prayed for His murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Another evidence that Stephen was filled with the Spirit is that he possessed a peace that passed all understanding—a peace more potent than any anesthesia. Stephen was so focused on Jesus' face, so consumed with His beauty and majesty and glory, that I sincerely doubt if he could hear the insults being hurled at him or feel the full force of the stones pelting his body.

Stephen had turned his eyes upon Jesus and was looking full in his wonderful face, so that the things of earth had grown strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace—even the physical pain, even the hostility of enraged men, even death itself. He was at peace because his fellowship with Jesus transcended the most frightening, threatening circumstance of his life.

On Friday, Pastor Tim Keller went to be with the Lord after a three-year battle with pancreatic cancer. In the moments before his death, surrounded by his loved ones, his last words were, "There is no downside for me leaving, not in the slightest." And he's right. Seeing the Lord Jesus and being in His presence is the goal of our existence as followers of Christ.

So, how do we interpret Stephen's martyrdom? Was it a setback for the Jesus'

movement? Certainly, Saul and the Judaizers viewed it as a significant shift in momentum, and they took every opportunity to launch an all-out assault on the church. Look at **verse 1**. *¹And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

Let's be clear: this persecution was not a smear campaign in the local newspaper. This was a violent, forceful, systematic attempt to exterminate the church, and it was so intense that Christ-followers in Jerusalem had to scatter in order to survive.

The word translated "scattered" is the same word that was used of a dam that bursts so that the water in the reservoir gushes into the ravines and valleys below. The followers of Jesus didn't *trickle* out of Jerusalem; this was a massive, full-scale evacuation. So much so that the text says "*all except the apostles were scattered...*"

Try to put yourself in the sandals of these early believers. This was traumatic, to say the least. They were forced to leave homes, possessions, friends, family members, businesses, and all that was comfortable and familiar, and settle in places where they didn't know anybody, where they had to start over and make new lives for themselves. They were forced to leave the Christian community where they daily experienced Christ's love through one another, where they were filled with awe and joy, where they saw frequent demonstrations of God's power, and where they were exposed to the soul-nourishing, life-transforming teaching of the apostles.

I wonder what these drastic changes in their circumstances did to their faith. Did it shake that faith? Did they become disillusioned? Were they saying, "Whoa! Does this mean that Jesus' power is not as great as the political power of the Jewish authorities? Does this mean that Jesus is not able to protect His followers?"

Those are reasonable questions, and we'll come back to them in a bit. But first, let's look at **verse 2**. *²Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.*

Stephen was deeply loved in the Christian community, and his sudden death had a profound effect upon those who knew him. They felt the sting of death acutely and, appropriately, they grieved his loss deeply—not as those who have no hope, but as those who were lamenting their temporary separation.

Look at **verse 3**. *³But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

Saul was a highly educated, up-and-coming member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin. He was also a Pharisee, a right-wing fundamentalist, known for his uncompromising convictions and zeal. Today we would call him a jihadist or a terrorist.

It is evident from the verse 3 that Saul was determined to take advantage of the vulnerable state of the Christian community after Stephen's death. The word translated "ravaging" connotes "sadistic cruelty." It was used of a wild boar tearing a victim's body apart (Hughes, 109). Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 3 this way: "Saul just went wild, devastating the church..." (MSG). So intent was he on destroying the church that he literally went house to house, looking for Christians. If he found any, he arrested them and dragged them to prison, which tells us that he had the legal backing of Jewish authorities.

Once again, it raises the question of Christ's power and sovereignty. Is this persecution, which succeeded in dismantling the Christian community in Jerusalem, evidence that the power of His resurrection is weaker than the Jewish political and religious establishment? Or, worse yet, is it an indication that Jesus is unable to take care of His flock?

Look at **verse 4**. *⁴Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*

Remember Jesus' prophetic statement in chapter 1? "*You shall be my witnesses in*

Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth” (1:8). Now look back at verse 1: “...They were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.”

These scattered Christians were not refugees; they were missionaries. Stephen’s death and the persecution that followed were not random events that merely demonstrated the cost of discipleship. They were events that catapulted the church out of Jerusalem so that the church could be established in new places. In other words, this was Jesus’ method of church growth. He uses what appears to be His enemies’ victories to expand His territory and His kingdom.

I know what some of you are thinking. “Why does Jesus use death and persecution as a method of church growth? Why can’t He just say, ‘I want you to go here, and you to go there, and so and so to go to this city, and so and so to go to that region...?’”

The text doesn’t tell us why. In this particular circumstance, I wonder if God allowed the believers to be persecuted and scattered to various places because they wouldn’t have gone to those places otherwise. I mean, who would want to voluntarily leave the church at Jerusalem? The *apostles* were there, *miracles* were abounding, people were getting *saved* regularly, people were sharing everything with each other, the fellowship was sweet...who wants to leave all that?

And think about this: when you’ve got a large group numbering in the thousands, and the apostles are doing most of the preaching and teaching, and you’ve got so much of the Spirit’s power concentrated in one place, isn’t there a tendency to get complacent and to think, “I don’t really need to do anything. I can just observe and soak it all in and bask in the glow of God’s glory in this place”?

But the Spirit has an agenda. To expand the kingdom of Christ. So, the church is not primarily about congregating; it’s about going into all the world to preach the gospel. The church isn’t a collection of spectators; it’s a group of ambassadors who have been assigned to speak for Jesus by the power of the Spirit who lives in each of us to all nations.

And the only way that is going to happen is if we spread out and go to those nations. That’s the principle of verse 4, which Eugene Peterson paraphrases, “Forced to leave home base, everyone became missionaries” (*The Message*).

Everyone became missionaries. By the way, these were not professional, seminary-trained missionaries. These were not people who had taken a course on how to prepare a sermon or how to share the four spiritual laws. They were common, ordinary folk who had been transformed by the gospel, who had been instructed by the apostles, and who were filled with the Holy Spirit simply opening their mouths to proclaim the gospel in their new residences.

And keep in mind these were people who had been thrust into a new environment against their will *because* they had previously made a public stand for Christ. You would think they’d be guarded and reticent, inclined to keep their mouths shut and blend into the scenery without making any waves.

Yet it’s as if they *couldn’t* keep their mouths shut. They were compelled to enter the marketplaces and neighborhoods and proclaim Jesus as the risen Lord. And I’m absolutely positive that this message proceeded from their mouths naturally and spontaneously. They weren’t performing a duty, or playing a role, or going into “witness” mode. It’s as though Christ in them was oozing out of them.

Why? One reason. They were filled with the same Spirit as the Apostles and Stephen. And the Spirit has an agenda. Spread the word, preach the gospel, so that Christ’s kingdom can expand and advance.

Brothers and sisters, the application of this passage to us is no different than the application from most of the other passages we have studied in Acts. We need to be filled with the Spirit! We must be filled with the Spirit. If you have been born again, if you have been made a new creature in Christ, you have the Holy Spirit living in you who wants to express Christ and the gospel through you.

So let the Spirit fill you, control you, and take possession of your faculties. Because when you are filled with the Spirit, you are His vessel through whom He speaks and acts. And because when you are filled with the Spirit you are filled with peace, joy, and love you will be compelled to share Christ no matter what, for His glory and His kingdom.

The First Martyr and Missionaries

Acts 7:54-8:4

Main Idea: God uses harassment, persecution, and even death to spread his Word and advance his kingdom.

An Enraged Council (7:54)

A Glimpse of Heaven (7:55-56)

The standing Son of Man

Stephen's Defender

The Death Penalty (7:57-58)

An abrupt adjournment (57)

The method of execution (58)

On the threshold of heaven (7:59-60)

Resting in Jesus

Forgiving Like Jesus

Being with Jesus

Forced to Leave Home Base (v.1)

A wave of persecution

A thorough scattering

Stephen's funeral (v.2)

Saul's rampage (v.3)

The futile attempt to extinguish the Church

Government sanctioned terrorism

Missionaries, not Refugees (v.4)
The Gospel crosses borders

Natural and spontaneous witness

Application Questions **Acts 7:54-8:4**

What does the apparent “passivity” of the standing Son of Man (7:56) tell us about Jesus’ view of the death of his servants? Why was it better for Stephen to die rather than keep serving on earth? How can this understanding help us when we are presented with the unexpected, “untimely” deaths of Jesus’ followers?

What does the fact that “those who scattered went about preaching the Word” (8:4) tell us about the mindset of the early church?

Is there a lesson for EBC or you individually about “scattering” so the Word can be preached and the kingdom advanced in other places? How do you know when to “scatter”?