



**Memorial Day** Today marks the final Sunday in May, a day that always coincides with Memorial Day. Memorial Day is a special national holiday that asks us to pause and reflect upon those who gave their lives for something greater than themselves, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Over 45 million veterans have served the country in wartime and **656k** members of the military lost their lives in conflict. So, we simply say, to those who gave the ultimate sacrifice, thank you. And as we worship today, we worship the one who gave the ultimate sacrifice on the cross for us that we might have true and ultimate freedom.

**1st Christian Martyr** For those who trust in Jesus Christ, days like today have even greater significance. For we are reminded that all around the world, our brothers and sisters are dying for their faith in King Jesus. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that one Christian dies for their faith every **six minutes**. During our time of worship twelve persons will die as martyrs. Researcher David Barret estimated that **70 million** have been killed.

Today we remember, not deify, those who gave their lives for Jesus. Today we continue our series called the Model Church: A study in the book of Acts. And will look at the life of a man named Stephen, the world's 1<sup>st</sup> Christian martyr.

**Big Idea: Why should Stephen's faith be any different than yours?**

**[Why Not You? Acts 6:8-15; 7:51-60]**

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Stephen's faith was **not** any different in kind than the faith that **all** Christians have. What makes Stephen's exceptional is the extent in which he was willing to **trust** Jesus. To take the Messiah at his word and risk all for Christ's sake. We will unpack this passage in two ways: the grace filled **ministry** of Stephen and then the powerful **message** of the gospel.

***Faith Leads to a Life that Honors Him (6:8-15)***

Now Stephen, a normal man transformed by faith in the son of Man, was filled with **grace and power**. This is the same grace and power to all who believe. **Why not you?** This is not a "charm" or super power. Stephen had let God's grace impact him so much that it made him a gracious person. That's what grace does, it makes you gracious.

**John Newton** was also a man full of faith and grace. After leaving the British navy he involved himself in the lucrative Atlantic slave trade. Following a violent storm one night, which his life was in jeopardy, he cried out for mercy to the Lord. Several years later he found that **slavery was incompatible with the Christian life.** Slavery is the opposite of freedom, so he gave up his career. As the grace of Jesus continued to shape his life he wrote a song about this transformation: "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." Full of grace and power, why not you?

Because of this filling of grace and power, **opposition** arose in the local synagogue. In many locations, the synagogue was the fixture and center of community life. If you go to Israel, you will have the opportunity of walking through these ancient synagogues. In this place of worship, freedmen from numerous areas gathered. Particularly northern Africa, Cilicia, and Asia. It's important to remember that the most prominent town in Cilicia is a place called Tarsus, Paul's hometown. This is a profound reminder, **not everyone** will embrace God's grace in and through your life. **Faith in Jesus will invariably lead to frustration for others.** The gospel is an offense to those who don't believe. Jesus is worth it! **A life that honors him**

And finding **nothing in his life** to accuse this man of faith, they secretly pursued some men. This is the **1<sup>st</sup> time in Acts that people revolt** against Christians and not just Christian leadership. Right here in the Word, our hero worship is shattered. The local synagogue attenders stir up some people to bear false witness. Because of Stephen's **faith filled life**, they resort to and ask the riff raff to break the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment you shall not lie! **Faith will always lead to a pure and holy life.**

1 Pet. 3:16 Yet do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame. **Are you growing in purity and holiness today? This week? Holiness...consists of that internal change or renovation** of our souls whereby our minds, affections and wills are brought into harmony with God. -A.W. Pink **Why not you?**

**And all who looked intently at him (6:15).** The verb **intent** is the same word used when the Eleven watched Jesus ascend into heaven and when Stephen looked intently up to the throne: a purposeful gaze. **And they found his faith will give him an angel face and will do the same for you.** I know what you are thinking, some of you are looking around thinking "if faith gives angels faces, then that person must have a demon!"

**What a unique phrase, so unique its only used once in the entire NT.** It suggests that Stephen has the appearance of one inspired from a touch with God, reflecting a touch of God's glory. The same was said of Moses thousands of years ago (Exod. 34:29-35). Why not you? **Where is your angel face?** To have the faith that causes your life to radiate the glory of Messiah. The faith that causes others to put on sunglasses. **Church, put on your faith face!** This is the faith offered to you through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

## Faith Leads to Lips that Glorify Him (7:51)

**Here is Stephen's message.** This is by far the longest monologue in the entire book of Acts and it occurs at a point where the entire Scriptures turn to focus on issues outside Jerusalem. The Gospel is moving to the nations. And this is how Stephen ends his message: You **stiffed** necked people with uncircumcised **hearts and ears!**

Because he was filled with grace and power, **Stephen had an all-consuming desire for others to hear the truth!** Here is the truth! The people were **stiff necked- stubborn:** unable to turn their heads. This was the same thing the Lord said all the way back in Exod. 33:3. **I have a friend who has a stiff neck and its dangerous, especially when you are trying to drive because you are not able quickly see dangers.** Spiritually when we inoculate ourselves to the voice of the Lord, it always leads to ruin. Church, turn quickly from your sin! **Why not you?**

**Indictment #2 uncircumcised.** If turning away from sin is not enough, Stephen reminds the people that they have been coventally unfaithful. Both their hearts and ears are unresponsive. ***It is an eternally perilous position when you hear the Word of the Lord and say "blah."*** This charged can easily be levied against the modern church: **the covenant has not affected your inner disposition.** You call me Savior but reject me as Lord, **therefore you reject me as Savior.**

Charge #3 always resisting (**antiptete**) it's a verb that means to resist something continually: to oppose God again and again and again. **And this is where some of you are.**

**And how do they respond when confronted with their sin?** They were enraged, literally it **ripped their hearts in two.** And they gnashed their teeth, a sign of **hostility and rage,** often against the righteous (Even in hell people will rage against the glory of God).

**We all have a choice.** When you hear the gospel, in this moment, they could have repented and would have received abundant life. But they raged. What will you choose today? Jesus offers you new life and freedom from your sin. **Why not you?**

And because of His faith, God gave Stephen a beautiful glimpse into the heavenly realms. He sees the glory of God and verbalized: **I see the Son of Man!"** **Other than Jesus Christ himself, Stephen is the only person in the NT who uses this phrase.** **Faith will you give an eternal perspective that others don't and can't have.**

**And he sees Jesus standing.** Why is Jesus standing? I thought he was sitting at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:20). We don't fully know. **But most likely Jesus was standing as a judge arises from his bench to issue a righteous decision.**

If a judge, Jesus is standing as Stephen's advocate and witness. **Jesus is literally standing for Stephen who is taking a stand for the true King.** And in his standing, Jesus judges those who refused to repent of their sin and find that the Messiah is the on way truth and life.

### **Why will Jesus be standing for you?**

**We need faith like Stephen.** Faith and trust that rejects religious mediocrity and leads us to ultimate devotion, even to give up our lives for the sake of the Gospel. ***Faith that lives out and speaks up.***

We need faith in Christ that overflows in love for our enemies even in death: **"a rare example of a man dying in a godly and holy way" – Calvin**

You need faith that you are willing to die for. And even if you die, faith in the Messiah says "welcome home."

**Why not you?** We don't need Stephen's faith. Stephen can't give you faith. Radical saving faith is not for the super spiritual. Radical faith is a gift- it's the gift Stephen received. **It's the same faith offered to the whole world, if you trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior.**

**8 For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—**

**Do you need to received eternal life today?**

**Do you need to return to the radical life altering lip glorifying faith? I want to live a life taking a stand for Christ, who will one day stand and say "well done, good and faithful servant."**

## Conclusion

**How does this all end?** 31 When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly.

Are you ready and willing to let Jesus Christ shake your life?

## Conclusion (Head-Heart-Hands)

It has been said that **Christianity is Christ**. Peter's message at Pentecost give us an

# Notes

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Stephen: “His faith was not different in kind from the faith that all Christians have, but exceptional in the extent to which he was willing to trust Christ, to take him at his word and to risk all for Christ’s sake” (Williams).

The first part of the Stephen cycle summarizes the impact of his ministry, which leads to his arrest. Cycle one ministry, cycle two message.

**Acts 6:8** Now Stephen, **full of grace and power**, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

## Grace and power

The grace in view here is probably not just a “charm” that Stephen exhibits; more importantly, he ministers through the enabling power of grace, as his emphasis on miracles and his speech later show (ECNT, 269).

Grace refers to the divine favour shown in the empowerment of his ministry (Peterson, 238).

Stephen had let God’s grace impact him so much that it made him a gracious person (Fernando, 244).

The Spirit’s powerful presence is experienced in a range of gifts and ministries in Acts (1 Cor. 12:7-11).

**9** 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. **10** But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

The most important town in Cilicia was Tarsus, Paul’s hometown (Fernando, 245).

## Synagogue

In many locales, the synagogue became the center of community life. Most likely these “freedmen” may have descended from Jews imprisoned by Pompey in 63 BCE.

Archeology evidences at least one synagogue prior to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. There was no sacrificial ritual, but the primary object was instruction in the law of God, which meant the

study of Scripture, together with the oral law, which in Talmud and Midrash, finally was written down (Peterson, 240).

**Acts 6:11** Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.” **12** They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin.

This is the first time in Acts that people rise up against Christians and not just Christian leadership (ECNT, 272).

### **Persuaded**

Bearing false witness is prohibited in Scripture (Exod. 20:16), and so their testimony is portrayed as unreliable and offensive to God (Peterson, 242).

Stirred- means arousing or exciting someone emotionally. Idiomatically, it would mean to get them ‘worked up’ (ECNT, 272).

To speak blasphemous words against God is to speak against the temple (Peterson, 241).

**13** They also presented false witnesses who said, “This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the law. **14** For we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.”

This man- the complainers demean Stephen by referring to him as this man (ECNT, 273).

There is an effort to discredit Stephen and Jesus by noting that Stephen affirmed that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs of the law (ECNT, 273).

Nowhere does Jesus declare that he will destroy the temple, only that if the temple is destroyed, he will raise it up in three days, which according to John 2:19-21 is a reference to the body of Messiah.

**15** And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Three accusations: blasphemy, temple in association with the law, and Jesus (ECNT, 268)

Jesus made similar claims about the temple (John 2:19; 4:21-24).

## **Intently**

The verb is used of how the Eleven observe Jesus as he ascends into heaven, how Stephen looks into heaven at the end of his speech, how Peter gives careful consideration to the vision he receives, and how Paul looks at the council when testifying (ECNT, 274).

## **Face**

It is possible that there's a link here with Moses' shining face in Exodus 34:29-35. The description of Stephen paves the way for his speech, implying that it is an inspired utterance (Peterson, 243).

This phrase is unique in all of the NT. It suggests that Stephen has the appearance of one inspired by and in touch with God, reflecting a touch of God's glory (ECNT, 274).

In this narrative and the chapter that follows, Stephen is both contrasted with his opponents and compared to Moses. He is viewed as praiseworthy because of his association with Moses (Peterson, 244).

**Acts 7:51** “You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also. **52** Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. **53** You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it.”

These charges use three terms that appear nowhere else in the NT.

## **Stiff-necked**

Stubborn, unable to turn their head to see. The expression looks back to texts such as Exod. 33:3

## **Uncircumcised**

They are covenantally unfaithful. Both their hearts and their ears are unresponsive.

The charge implies that the covenant has not affected their inner disposition or their ability to hear God's word (Peterson, 264).

## **Always resisting (antiptete)**

This present-tense verb means to oppose or resist something continually, a point emphasized even more with the adverb. The verb's force is imperative; they are opposing God again and again.

This speech is tremendously important in Acts. First, it is by far the longest monologue in the Book. Secondly, it appears at a point where the focus of the narrative is turning to issues outside Jerusalem (ECNT, 269).

Stephen's speech is not Law or temple critical, it is people critical on the basis of a proper theology of God's presence and transcendence and so a proper theology of God's dwelling place (Peterson, 265).

**Acts 7:54** When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. **55** Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56** He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

### **When they heard**

A bitter reaction to Stephen is expressed only when he accuses the Sanhedrin of being as obtuse and rebellious as their ancestors (Peterson, 265).

### **Enraged**

They are ripped in their hearts, which describes a visceral, emotional reaction of anger (ECNT, 310).

Literally their hearts were torn in two.

### **Teeth**

In the OT, gnashing the teeth is a sign of hostility and rage, often by the wicked against the righteous (Psalm 35:16, Lam. 2:16)

### **Saw**

In their view, Stephen is attacking the very uniqueness of God by suggesting that there is one standing next to him in heaven (ECNT, 309).

God dwells in all glory, a glory that Jesus shares (ECNT, 309).

### **Son of Man**

It is remarkable that Stephen is given such a vision and that he is the only person in the NT apart from Jesus who specifically uses the title the Son of Man (Peterson, 266).

## Why is Jesus standing?

Most likely Jesus arises as the judge and the receiver of Stephen's testimony. If Jesus is a judge, then he is Stephen's advocate and witness (ECNT, 312).

**Acts 7:57** They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. **58** They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** While they were stoning Stephen, he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" **60** He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he died.

### Covered Ears

A traditional and characteristic response to blasphemy.

For his courageous testimony, Stephen is stoned to death.

Stephen dies that parallels Jesus: Stephen makes claims about the Son of Man, utters a final cry, and asks that his opponents be forgiven (ECNT, 309).

### Glory

### Stoning

Stoning outside the camp was the punishment for blasphemy under the law of Moses, which required the witnesses to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly to stone him (Peterson, 268).

Luke does not present this story of the first Christian martyr to encourage his readers to seek martyrdom. Stephen's death is shown to be the inevitable outcome of his courageous testimony to Christ (Peterson, 269).

When Judea became a Roman province in AD 6, capital punishment was allowed only by decree of the Roman governor, except for offenses by word or deed against the sanctity of the temple (Fernando, 246).

# Illustrations

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Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, according to a Christian think-tank.

The [Center for the Study of Global Christianity \(CSGC\)](#) says 900,000 Christians have been 'martyred' in the last decade, equating to 90,000 a year and one every six minutes. (From the Independent)

In his book, *Against the Flow*, Oxford professor John Lennox notes that when God calls us to do something difficult he gives us the strength when we need it, not before we need it. Lennox illustrates this biblical principle with a story about an encounter with a Russian follower of Jesus who spent years in a Siberian labor camp for the crime of teaching his children about the Bible. Lennox writes:

He described to me that he had seen things that no man should ever have to see. I listened, thinking how little I really knew about life, and wondering how I would have fared under his circumstances. As if he had read my thoughts, he suddenly said: "You couldn't cope with that, could you?" Embarrassed, I stumbled out something like: "No, I am sure you are right." He then grinned and said: "Nor could I! I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood, let alone that of others. But what I discovered in the camp was this: God does not help us to face theoretical situations but real ones. Like you I couldn't imagine how one could cope in the Gulag. But once there I found that God met me, exactly as Jesus had promised his disciples when he was preparing them for victimization and persecution.

Lennox adds, "We can be confident, then, that the Lord will give us a sufficient amount of grace to handle whatever comes our way, whenever it comes our way—and not necessarily a moment before!"

## Application

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Stephen dies expressing faith in Christ and love for his enemies: "a rare example of a man dying in a godly and holy way." --Calvin

The death of Stephen causes various of his fellow Christians to flee Jerusalem and persecution, which in turn leads to the evangelizing of other places (BW3, 252).