

The Story Of Us

Acts 6:8-8:3 | *The Story Of Stephen*

As we begin a new year, we continue our journey through *The Book of Acts*, which began in September and will take us to the end of June. If you're new to the Bible, *Acts* is the book that immediately follows the 4 gospels – *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* – which detail the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from four unique perspectives. *Acts* is the sequel to the gospel of *Luke*, telling the story of how, after ascending to heaven's throne, Jesus continued to live and work through a newly-formed community called *the church*; the ongoing embodiment of Jesus' life and ministry, empowered by The Holy Spirit to continue all that Jesus began to say and do. Last fall, we explored the earliest stories of the church: its inception with the arrival of the Holy Spirit, its early formation around the teachings and practices of Jesus, and the growing tensions between the church and leaders of the Jewish religion, out of which the church was born. We left off with a story about how, as the church grew, it faced new challenges and needed new and more diverse leaders to maintain focus on both the *message* and *mission* of Jesus. As we pick the story back up again, *Acts* now zooms in on *one* of those leaders: a guy named *Stephen*.

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.” (Acts 6:8-10)

Luke begins by describing Stephen as being ***“full of God’s grace and power,”*** someone who ***“performed great wonders and signs among the people.”*** (Acts 6:8). Stephen was a bit of a legend! Earlier, he’d been involved in serving those experiencing food insecurity in Jerusalem, but God had increasingly been doing miraculous things through him. But he wasn’t known only for these powerful *works*; he’d also become notorious for his persuasive *words*. Luke says that,

when people challenged him, ***“they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”*** (Acts 6:10) Luke’s description of Stephen as full of *power, grace, and wisdom* is intended to sound familiar. These are the exact words Luke uses in his earlier gospel to describe *Jesus*, saying ***“he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.”*** (Luke 2:40) and ***“the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick.”*** (Luke 5:17) Luke is not-so-subtly saying that Stephen, also described as ***“full of the Holy Spirit”*** (Acts 6:5), was so in sync with God that he spoke and acted *just like Jesus*. His life, words, and actions reflected Jesus so clearly, that the resemblance was uncanny. This shouldn’t surprise us, given that *Acts* is all about how ***“all that Jesus began to do and teach”*** (Acts 1:1) was continued through a community of Spirit-filled, committed Jesus-followers, like Stephen. That said, while Stephen’s Christ-like example inspired many, it also drew a negative response from the religious and political leaders of the day.

“Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’ So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, ‘This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.’” (Acts 6:11-14)

Now, this too should feel familiar. These are the exact same accusations that these exact same religious leaders levelled against *Jesus*; that he didn’t follow the customs of *Moses*, that he broke *The Law*, and threatened to destroy *The Temple*. Any astute reader should recognize the pattern and playbook here, and anticipate that this story isn’t going to end well for Stephen.

Now the charge against Stephen is essentially that he’s being disloyal to the Jewish faith and, therefore, to the God of Israel. Stephen, they lied, had spoken against *Moses* (*considered equal to speaking against God*) and against *The Temple* and *The Torah* or *The Law* (what we call the Old Testament books of *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*). *Moses, The*

Torah, and *The Temple* were the cornerstones of the Jewish religion; they were seen as the *pages* that contained the *promises* of God, the *place* that contained the *presence* of God, and the *person* who was the definitive *prophet* of God. Rejecting *Moses*, *Torah* and *Temple* was seen as religious treason. Now, to our twenty-first-century minds, this is no big deal. But in first-century Jerusalem, these were federal crimes with fatal consequences. *Stephen was in trouble*. Yet, the more tried to *demonize* him, the more he *angelic* he began to appear.

“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked Stephen, ‘Are these charges true?’”

The Acts Of The Apostles 6:15-7:1ff

Angel is the Greek word for *messenger*, and Luke includes this detail to show that even his accusers recognized that, unlike their false-witnesses, Stephen was a true messenger of God. This wasn't just an honest disagreement about beliefs; it was a standoff between true and false witnesses, between a divine messenger and dishonest manipulation, between someone who was so clearly *full of the Holy Spirit*, and a group of people so clearly full of... *something else*.

Accused of speaking against *The Torah*, rather than defend himself, Stephen retells the entire Old Testament story, starting with the Jewish founding fathers: *Abraham*, *Isaac*, *Jacob*, and *Joseph*. He not only reveals a deep understanding of Torah, but shows how these scriptures are a trail of breadcrumbs that lead to *Jesus*. For example, he tells the story of how Joseph (of *Technicolour Dream Coat* fame) was hated by his brothers who plot to kill him. Left for dead, Joseph ends up in an Egyptian prison cell, from where he rises to become the most powerful person in the land. When famine struck, Joseph's siblings go to Egypt to grovel for *bread* but find their *brother* instead, alive eager to forgive their treachery and able to provide them with life-saving food. Joseph's life-story mirrors God's cosmic redemption story, a story fully realized

in Jesus, who was also rejected and killed by his own brothers – *these very Jewish leaders* – but who rose again to forgive and provide life-saving grace to the very ones who’d betrayed him.

Accused of speaking against *Moses*, Stephen retells *Moses’* whole life story – *how a baby born of mysterious circumstances became the liberator of God’s people* – and reminds them of an obscure prediction *Moses* made in *The Book of Deuteronomy*, saying, **“*This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your countrymen.’”***

(Acts 7:37) In the *Deuteronomy* passage he’s quoting, God goes on to say to *Moses*:

“*I will raise up for them a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them everything that I command him.*”

Deuteronomy 18:18

Who could *Moses/God* be talking about? He’s clearly referring to some *future* prophet who would one day be *Israel’s true* leader, but as *Deuteronomy* (the last book in *The Torah*) concludes, it ends by saying, **“*Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses.*”** (Deut 34:10) It’s the kind of cliffhanger-ending that left ancient priests wondering when and how this *prophet* might arise. Scholars believe this ending was added as commentary centuries after the original scroll was written, likely near the end of the Old Testament period, a time when *Israel’s* prophets were trying to stoke *Israel’s* hope in this long-awaited prophet and saviour – a figure they’d begun to call *The Messiah*. Stephen explains that this prophet had finally come in *Jesus*.

Finally, having been accused of rejecting *The Temple*, Stephen doubles down, saying,

“*The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: ‘Heaven is My throne, and the earth is the footstool of My feet; What kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord, ‘Or what place is there for My rest? Was it not My hand that made all these things?’*” (Acts 7:48-50)

Stephen quotes the prophet *Isaiah* who sensed that the Creator of the Cosmos couldn’t be caged in a building, but that the temple was a sign pointing to something more. By quoting

Isaiah, Stephen corners his accusers into either agreeing with him, or disagreeing with their own Scriptures; an example of the wisdom mentioned earlier. Rather than defending himself, he uses this opportunity to show these religious leaders that the *Moses, Torah and Temple* they were so protective of were merely foreshadows of something (or someone) much greater. *They* were the shadows; but the substance was *Jesus*. Jesus is the true Word of God made flesh, *not The Bible*. Jesus is the true temple in whom God dwells, *not a building of bricks and mortar*. And Jesus is the true prophet, the one Moses had told them to listen to all along. Stephen explains that their entire religious system had been intended to set them up to receive Jesus but, because they'd missed its true meaning, they'd missed the Messiah. Finally, Stephen lands one final blow:

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised (suggesting that, while they may be strict adherents to external demands of their religion, their hearts had remained unaffected). 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

Turning things against them, Stephen accuses them of not only murdering Jesus, but of resisting and rejecting God altogether, calling them a *stiff-necked people*. This isn't just a sick first-century burn; it's actually a quote from one of the most important stories in *The Torah*, the only other place in The Bible this term is used. On Mount Sinai, as God gives Moses *The Law* and all the instructions for *The Tabernacle* (a temporary version of *The Temple*) – the people on the ground make a gold statue from the jewelry they'd pocketed while escaping Egypt. God says,

“They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” I have seen these people,’ the Lord said to Moses, ‘and they are a stiff-necked people.”

Exodus 32:8-9

Stephen is accusing these leaders of being not on the side of *Moses, The Torah, or The Temple*, but on the side of those golden-calf worshippers, opposing God in service of the sacred cow of their religion. *Moses, Torah & Temple*, Stephen claims, were on the *Jesus'* side of history.

“When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 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.’ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.”

The Acts Of The Apostles 7:54-58

Spoiler: *there's no surprise ending coming*. In contrast to their animalistic rage, Stephen is once again described as *full of the Holy Spirit*, and is given a glimpse of heaven, where he sees Jesus *standing* before the throne. In Week #1 of the series, we saw Jesus ascend to God's throne to rule over Heaven and Earth. After this, Jesus is only ever described as *seated* on the throne, except here. As Stephen is about to suffer *just as Jesus did*, heaven leans in so close that the veil between earth and heaven is lifted to reveal Jesus, so moved by Stephen's witness, by the sweat dripping from his brow just as it had from his own in the *Garden of Gethsemane*, watching as the same leaders that wouldn't listen to him, again plug their ears in defiant ignorance, the same voices that led the chant, *“Crucify Him!”*, now shout for Stephen's life, the same hands that had doled out thirty pieces of silver, now reach for rocks the size of grapefruits to carry out an act so inhumane that they *gnash their teeth* like wild animals as they do it... in that moment, Jesus rises to his feet, *standing* in solidarity with Stephen, *standing* to welcome him home.

“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)

We'd've forgiven Stephen for begging for his life, pleading for them to stop, maybe even renouncing Jesus. But in what is perhaps the most gripping scene in the entire *Book of Acts*,

Stephen echoes Jesus' famous last words from the cross: ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"*** (Luke 23:34) and ***"Into your hands I commit my spirit."*** (Luke 23:46). Having *suffered as Jesus did, for living as Jesus did, Stephen dies as Jesus did*, forgiving his enemies and trusting God; a faithful and true witness to the reality that Jesus is in fact alive.

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Stephen may have been the church's first martyr, but he was not the last. In fact, all but one of Jesus' first disciples were martyred: stabbed, stoned, beaten, beheaded, even crucified upside-down. In our world today, according to *Open Doors*, an organization dedicated to raising awareness and support for the persecuted church worldwide, 1 in 7 Christians today faces high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith – roughly 365 million people, and rising. Though we don't experience it here, around the world and throughout history, those who *live* like Jesus end up being *treated* like Jesus, who warned of this kind of second-hand opposition:

"[people] will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me." Luke 21:12-17

It might seem strange that people should *hate* us because of *Jesus*, but remember that while the down-and-outers of his day loved him, people of power, wealth, and privilege hated Jesus so much that they killed him, because he represented a threat to their way of life. Think about it, Jesus and Stephen were both characterized by grace, wisdom, and power, which sound like good things but, in a distorted world, these are offensive traits. When people in our world mess up, our culture doesn't default to *grace*; we gossip, cancel, and boycott. In a world that

treats everyone's opinion as equally valid, *wisdom* (the ability to discern between what is *more* and *less* true) is arrogant, judgmental, and oppressive. Worst of all, people of *power* are viewed with suspicion and targeted for toppling. In fact, the entire Jesus Way runs contrary to the way of the world. *Generosity* subverts the belief that *money makes the world go round*, destabilizing economic systems that run on consumption and greed. *Others-Oriented Love* offends our deeply self-centred lifestyles. *Joy* undermines the pursuit of happiness and our addiction to pleasure-seeking. *Peace* threatens our impulse for violence. *Forgiveness* leaves no excuse for revenge. Patience and rest interrupt society's frenetic, highspeed, on-demand pace. Kindness rejects a look-out-for-number-one attitude. *Goodness* ruins our ability to treat each other like objects. *Unity* challenges the myth of rugged individualism. *Sacrifice* exposes the idol we've made of comfort. *Humility* mocks our obsession with celebrity. *Mercy* is totally unfair. Praying '*Your kingdom come; Your will be done*' is an act of defiance against personal empire-building. Declaring *Jesus is Lord* unseats social, economic, and political allegiances. A Jesus-shaped life swims against the current of culture and that thing in each of us that resists, even resents, and ultimately rejects *The Way of Jesus*. No wonder the world should hate us for living that way!

What I find myself wondering is, if Jesus expected us to face persecution, why don't we? Has our culture so fully embraced *The Way of Jesus*? Are our religious-freedom laws protecting us from retaliation? Or is the real reason we don't face persecution like Jesus, his disciples, or people around the world today, the real reason that people don't *hate* the Jesus they see in us because they don't really see much of Jesus in us at all? They aren't offended by the subversive, non-conformist *Way of Jesus* in us because we're so swept up in the same cultural current that we don't represent a credible threat to the cultural gods of wealth, ambition, pleasure-seeking,

and self-promotion? Is it possible we've mistakenly embraced a version of Jesus that's an easy path to a #blessed life, and missed the call of Christ to pick up our cross and follow him in self-sacrifice? Because when whole communities begin to live that way, it can't go unnoticed, and won't go *unpunished*. Now, our goal should never be to seek out persecution – *especially not by being unnecessarily offensive*. The goal isn't to be hated, but to be Christ-like, so filled with the Holy Spirit, like Stephen, that we become almost indistinguishable from Jesus. And if, as we live like Jesus, we begin to be treated like Jesus, we will then have the opportunity, like Stephen, to respond like Jesus, with forgiveness for those who mistreat us, and wholehearted trust in God.

Now, I don't know what kind of opposition, or even persecution we might face in our lifetime. In the last few years, our church has faced challenges; some of our own making, but some because of our efforts to be a more Jesus-shaped community. We were we kicked out of our denomination for trying to love the "wrong people", had dear friends leave us and, at times, even spread lies, rumours, and false allegations against our leaders, saying that we don't teach the Bible anymore, that we're not a real church, maybe not even Christians. I'm not saying all our problems have been persecution, but there's no doubt in my mind that the more we reflect the love and grace of Jesus in the power and wisdom of the Spirit, the more we will be attacked. It's not a matter of *if*, but *when*. The question is, how will we respond? Will we get angry, fight back, grow stiff-necked, or quietly slip out the back door because we didn't sign up for this? Or will we respond with grace, forgiveness, wisdom, and trust, even if the opposition worsens? Even if there are forces hell-bent on destroying us, as was the case for the early church:

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 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)

Stephen's death led to a wide-scale campaign to destroy the church. The persecution was ruthless, but it had an unintended *positive* outcome. It inadvertently scattered the church "***throughout Judea and Samaria***", the very places where Jesus had promised the movement would spread next. Just as Jesus' death had served to reboot God's vision for the world, the stoning of Stephen pushed the Jesus movement forward, causing the message and mission of Jesus to expand outward to reach those who might've otherwise been left out, including *us*. Without Stephen's death, Christianity might never have become more than a small controversial sect of Judaism in Jerusalem, we'd've remained lost, and our world would be a different place.

That's the final lesson of *The Story of Stephen*: how the path we would never choose, the pain, suffering, and even persecution is precisely what moves the work of Jesus forward in our lives, our church, and the world. In 197AD, *Tertullian* said, "*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*" The Kingdom of God is born, not of comfort, but of sacrifice. When we embrace the kind of suffering that inevitably comes from going *The Jesus Way*, it deepens our experience of the Holy Spirit, reproduces the image of God in us, and advances the Jesus movement in our world. The question is, will *The Story of Stephen* scare us off, or drive us forward, and compel us to live, speak, act, suffer, and even die, *like Jesus*? Let's pray.