

Stephen, an Early Interpreter of Christianity

Lesson Scripture: Acts 6:1–7:60

Focus Scripture: Acts 6:7-10; 7:54-60

Key Verse: Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.
Acts 6:8

ACTS 6:7-10; 7:54-60 (NRSV UE)

Acts 6:7-10

7 The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

8 Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen.

10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

7:54-60

54 When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.

55 But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

56 "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

57 But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.

58 Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

ACTS 6:7-10; 7:54-60

Acts 6:7-10

7 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

7:54-60

54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Key Terms

- **Orthodox Jews** – Believe in and practice traditional Jewish (religious) laws.
- **Martyrdom** – A person suffering physical harm or murder for their faith beliefs.
- **Blasphemers** – People who treat the sacred as trivial, false, or with mockery.

Introduction

At times, we wonder why Christians don't take a more aggressive stance against the ills in society. We demand a doctrinal statement from the bishops every time we hear a position that seems to violate our cherished

Christian beliefs and practices. So, we ask why there is a reluctance to speak truth to power. Stephen's story answers those questions. Speaking truth to power carries a very certain risk. The speaker must be sure of his footing before he speaks and understand that speaking may cause serious backlash.

Speaking truth to power carries a very certain risk. The speaker must be sure of his footing before he speaks and understand that speaking may cause serious backlash.

In public debate, people are rarely interested in truth. The crucial consideration is public image. And to protect their image and interest, people will take whatever measure they can – including murder – to silence the criticism. Put bluntly, publicly challenging a position can result in serious retaliation, including unemployment, physical beatings, imprisonment, or death. And unlike

Stephen, we wonder how many leaders are at the level where they are ready to die for Christ.

Telling the Bible Story

All we know for certain about Stephen is from Acts 6 and 7. But reading between the lines, Stephen was offering much more than an administrator in the

community food program. The speech he gave in Acts 7 shows he was religiously mature, versed in the scriptures, and a good debater. He not only knew Israel's history but also understood it and how God saw the nation. Act 6:8 showed he was also an anointed teacher.

At times, we hear the view that all was perfect in the early church. They set the tone for what churches in this age should be like. But passages like Act 6 tell us that human tensions were always in the church. Wherever a group of people interact, relationship challenges will arise. This is especially true when the group includes people of varying cultures.

We cannot be certain to what extent cultural factors played a part in creating the problem reported. But orthodox Jews saw the Greek Jews (Hellenists) as contaminated by the Greek culture. Still, the Hellenists likely felt they were being denied a fair share of the distribution.

See Acts 7 as a well-structured defense to the charge that

Christians promoted Jesus by defaming the temple and law (Acts 6:8–7:1). This mix-up and apparent conflict developed as believers shifted from a rigid temple-centered worship culture to a Christ-centered one.

Stephen's speech would have enraged

any good orthodox Jew. For in that speech, he exposed their hypocrisy, highlighting their unfaithfulness to the God they claimed to revere.

The way the enraged Jews dealt with Stephen was established practice. The blasphemers were dragged out of the city (7:58) and pushed over a ledge to be crushed and buried by heavy stones hurled down upon them. "The witnesses"

were legally required to cast the first stones. See Leviticus 24:14 and Numbers 15:35-36.

Stephen's death reminds us that martyrdom comes as part of the package of living for Christ. The claim that God will always save us doesn't always hold. Appreciate Philippians

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1:21 here.

Sankofa

Today, in the western world where laws protect freedom of speech and religion, it is often difficult to feel what Christians in other parts of the world must undergo to practice their faith. According to reports

from organizations like Open Doors, which follow Christian persecution cases, Christians in many parts of the world suffer greatly for their faith. One reported case is from Nigeria about a pastor named Emmanuel Na'aliah.

Pastor Emmanuel Na'aliah was noted for his ministry of peace. According to the reports, he was highly respected in his community for his fearless opposition to violence. In July 2025, militants attacked his church, killed him and a friend, and kidnapped another worshiper. This event would not be so painful if it were an isolated case. But apparently it is not. Many Christians are slaughtered in that part of the world for no other crime than being Christians.

Hence, Stephen's martyrdom is not just another lesson we read and move on from. It is a reality that surrounds Christians every day. While we struggle with such grave matters as to what color to paint the altar rails, or which hymn is truly sermonic, people in other parts of

the world must practice their faith with one eye on the Bible, and the other on the door, praying militants don't storm the church to slaughter them. A hard reality!

Case Study

For anyone interested in the sad stories of Christian persecution and martyrdom, sites like opendoors.org give useful reports. According to one report, over

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300 million Christians around the world face persecution and martyrdom for their faith. Based on the reported statistics, one in five persons in Africa and two in five in Asia face religious discrimination, violence, and martyrdom. As a fellow believer, does this concern you?

These statistics challenge us to have

a broader worldview of Christianity than the narrow lens focus we often hold. For a fellowship that shouts, "God can," what can we do along with God to address this problem? Is there any way we can contribute to make life just a little easier for our Christian brothers and sisters in

countries like Nigeria? What is the Holy Spirit urging in these matters? What is our attitude to it? Such questions Stephen's witness should prompt.

Life Application

It is easy to think that as individuals, we can do little to help Christians facing persecution for their faith. But is that really

the case? As members of a Connectional fellowship, we must have links to locations where Christians find life harsh. A greeting card with an encouraging message can do wonders for people living under the threat of the sword or the bullet.

We often rally our friends and family for political causes.

Can we do the same to motivate our leaders in parliaments and Congress to take stands against religious persecution around the world? The USA is in a great position to drive change in this regard, as it gives massive aid to some of the countries with horrible records of Christian harassment.

If this lesson raises your consciousness of the harassment of Christians around the world, then it would have achieved its purpose. As people who believe in an unlimited, all-powerful God, our answer to what we can do to help persecuted Christians can't be nothing.

Questions

We often rally our friends and family for political causes. Can we do the same to motivate our leaders in parliaments and Congress to take stands against religious persecution around the world?

1. Against verses like Isaiah 41:10, how do we explain Stephen's martyrdom?
2. What message is Paul conveying in Philippians 1:21 – to live is Christ, to die is gain?
3. In what ways can we assist Christians living under the threat of death for their faith?

Closing Devotions

Closing Hymn: "Great

Is Thy Faithfulness" (AMECH #84)

Closing Prayer: Dear Father, open my heart and eyes to ways I can encourage myself and others to live our Christian faith boldly in hostile environments. Asking in the name of Jesus. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**August 10-16**

Monday	Psalm 36:1-9 (The Fountain of Life)
Tuesday	Galatians 1:13-24 (Proclaiming the Faith)
Wednesday	Philippians 3:3-9 (Losing All to Gain Christ)
Thursday	Exodus 34:5-9 (A Merciful and Gracious God)
Friday	2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (A New Creation in Christ)
Saturday	Psalm 32 (Rejoicing in God's Forgiveness)
Sunday	Acts 22:3-15 (Sent to All the World)