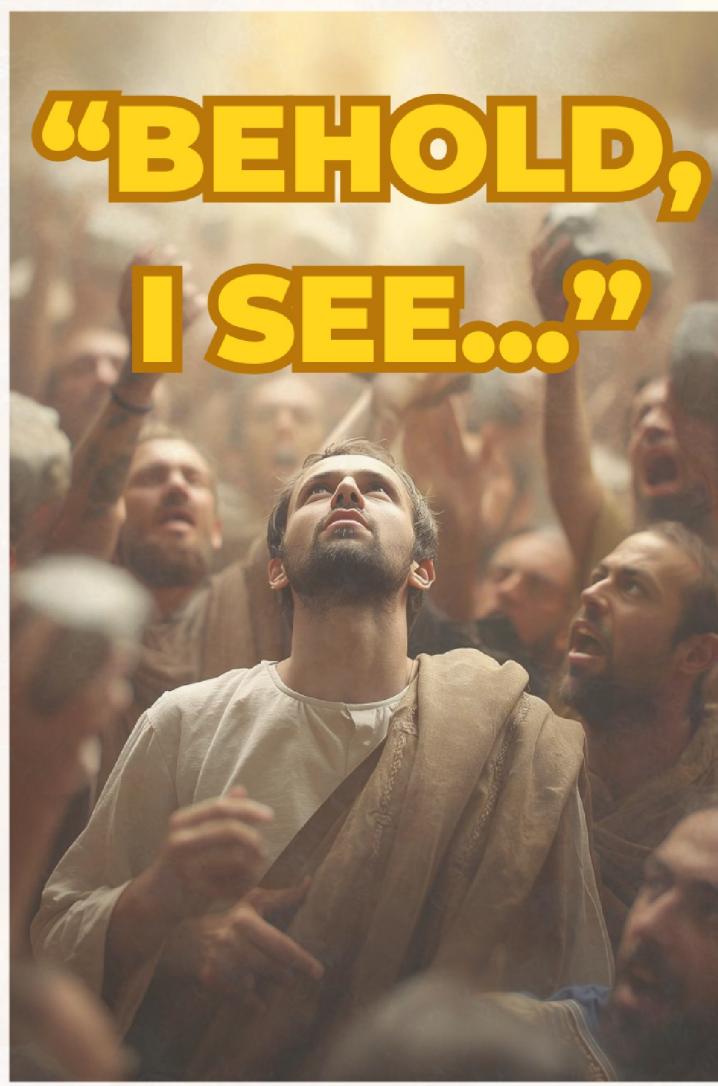


1ST QUARTER 2026



**“BEHOLD,
I SEE...”**



“Yea, and all
that will live
godly in
Christ Jesus
shall suffer
persecution”
(2 Timothy
3:12.)

The Church of God
WEEKLY BIBLE LESSONS

THE CHURCH OF GOD AT JERUSALEM ACRES
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STEPHEN: FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH — BECOMING A CHURCH OF COURAGE

Bible Lesson Series

I am deeply blessed to present this 13-part lesson series at such a pivotal time in history. Across the globe, the cost of following Christ continues to rise. According to widely cited reports from organizations tracking religious persecution, thousands of Christians lose their lives for their faith each year. In the period from 2000 to 2025, estimates indicate that tens of thousands of Christians have been martyred, with recent years continuing this troubling trend. Each statistic represents an individual who chose faith over denial, underscoring that the blood of the martyrs remains the seed of the church.

Here in the United States, we have been shaken by the tragic assassination of a young man at a University campus this past September. This event is a sobering reminder that hostility toward truth and freedom is no longer distant—it is at our doorstep. Yet this is not the time for fear. It is the time for the church to advance with boldness, filled with the Spirit, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ without compromise.

In light of these realities, I felt led of the Lord to take a fresh look at the life and message of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. His Spirit-filled witness, his fearless sermon, and his Christlike forgiveness provide us with insight and strength for the days ahead. Stephen's testimony reminds us that while the world may rage, heaven is open, and the Son of Man stands at the right hand of God to receive His faithful witnesses.

To all the churches of The Church of God, I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. May these lessons serve as both a reality check and a source of encouragement. We are called not only to endure but to overcome, not only to stand but to shine. The reward is sure for those who are faithful unto death: a crown of life that no man can take away (Revelation 2:10).

It is my prayer that this series will prepare us to carry the gospel into a hostile world with courage, conviction, and the unshakable hope of eternal glory.

In Christ's service,



Bishop Timothy Miller

STEPHEN: A CHOSEN SERVANT IN GOD'S CHURCH

LESSON 1 for Week Ending January 3, 2026

The book of Acts introduces Stephen as a man “*full of faith and of the Holy Ghost*,” chosen by the early Jerusalem church to help bridge the divide between Hebrew and Hellenistic Jewish believers. In a time when complaints about neglected widows threatened unity, Stephen’s appointment as a deacon reveals both the church’s growing pains and God’s solution: servant leadership that values every member. This lesson explores Stephen’s background, the context of his service, and the very first steps that prepared him for a legacy that would echo throughout church history.

Key Text: “*And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost... whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them*” (Acts 6:5-6).

1. The Growth and Challenges of a Multicultural Church

The earliest church in Jerusalem rapidly expanded, drawing converts from both Hebrew-speaking Jews and Hellenists—Greek-speaking Jews from across the Roman Empire. A complaint arose that the Hellenist widows were being overlooked in daily food distribution (Acts 6:1-2). The apostles, recognizing the risk of division, called the church to select seven men with outstanding reputations, “*full of the Spirit and wisdom*,” to oversee this need. The church’s willingness to listen and act provides a lesson in valuing diversity and preventing neglect. How can our churches today identify and heal such wounds among different backgrounds or groups? In what practical ways can your congregation honor diversity and ensure everyone’s needs are met?

2. Stephen’s Qualifications: Spirit-Filled Leadership

Stephen is singled out for his fullness of faith and the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5). The criteria for those appointed as deacons were not mere administrative skill, but spiritual maturity—a reminder that all ministry depends on God’s empowering presence (see also Ephesians 5:18-20). The Greek meaning of his name (“crown” or “garland”) is a subtle prophetic pointer to the reward that awaited him, even as his service put him on the frontline of conflict. What does it look like today to be “*full of faith and the Holy Ghost*” in serving others? How do we cultivate spiritual qualifications as a standard for modern church leadership roles?

3. Service and the Ministry of the Word—Maintaining the Balance

The apostles delegated the daily distribution so they could *continue “prayer and the ministry of the word”* (Acts 6:4). This division of roles highlights the need for shared responsibility—spiritual leadership is not a “one-man show.” Deacons like Stephen were not second-class citizens; in fact, his faithfulness in humble service paved the way for his bold public witness. How can servant work prepare someone for higher spiritual challenges (Matthew 25:21)? Why is it spiritually significant that Stephen served before he spoke?

4. The Laying on of Hands: Affirmation and Empowerment

After the church selected the seven, the apostles “*prayed and laid their hands on them*” (Acts 6:6)—a gesture of public affirmation, blessing, and empowerment in the Jewish tradition. In this act, the early church modeled both order and dependence on the Spirit (see Numbers 27:18-23; 1 Timothy 4:14). Our recognition and prayer for church leaders today still matters, and it links us to the church’s ancient, Spirit-led mission. In what ways can your church publicly affirm, bless, and empower new leaders or ministry workers?

FULL OF FAITH AND POWER: THE CHARACTER OF STEPHEN

LESSON 2 for Week Ending January 10, 2026

Stephen's reputation in Acts is never tied merely to his official title. Instead, the text repeatedly emphasizes his inner qualities—he is “*full of faith and power*,” “*full of grace and truth*,” and “*full of the Holy Ghost*.” These traits, displayed in everyday service, became the wellspring of his bold witness under pressure. This lesson examines the spiritual formation behind Stephen's fearless faith, challenging us to consider what kind of character truly withstands a hostile world.

Key Text: “*And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people*” (Acts 6:8 KJV).

1. Faith: The Foundation of a Courageous Life

Stephen's deep trust in God is the root from which his service and witness grow (Acts 6:5,8). True faith takes God at His word and faces uncertainty with confidence, as did Abraham, Joseph, and Moses before him—a theme that will be central in Stephen's later speech before the Sanhedrin. Hebrews 11:33-40 reminds us that faith enables men and women to endure, even when they do not receive all of God's promises in this life. What practices can strengthen your personal and congregational faith? How can we move from head-knowledge of faith to a faith that acts and endures?

2. Filled with the Holy Spirit: Source of Power and Grace

Acts features the Holy Spirit as the Pastor, Teacher, and Empowerer of all believers. Stephen's spiritual fullness was not a spiritual badge, but the secret to his “*signs and wonders*” (Acts 6:8). The Spirit empowered him to serve and to speak truth, even when it cost him everything (see also Ephesians 3:14-21). Maintaining Spirit-filled living is both a daily discipline and a remarkable source of resilience in every difficulty. What is the difference between being full of the Spirit in a moment and maintaining “fullness” as a way of life?

3. Grace and Power: A Rare Combination

Stephen's life radiates both kindness (“grace”) and strength (“power”)—attributes too seldom found together (Acts 6:8). True Spirit-filled ministry blends supernatural boldness with Christlike humility (Philippians 2:1-11). When Christians lead and witness with both, their message carries transforming credibility. Can a believer be “strong in the Lord” without being abrasive or proud? Where do you see examples of gracious strength in your church, and how can it be multiplied?

4. Signs and Wonders: Purpose and Pitfalls

God worked miracles through Stephen as a testimony to the gospel's truth (Acts 6:8; Mark 16:15-20), yet these works were never showmanship; they affirmed the Word and pointed to Christ. The response of the community was mixed—some were drawn, many leaders felt threatened. Today's church must expect both supernatural openness and opposition as it preaches Christ with boldness. It's crucial to recognize that the ultimate goal of signs and wonders is not to elevate individuals, but to glorify Jesus and advance His kingdom. Modern believers are called to remain humble, giving credit to God for any spiritual fruit, and to prioritize faithfulness over public recognition. Discernment comes through prayer, Scriptural grounding, and accountability within the community of faith. By keeping Christ at the center and seeking the Spirit's guidance, the church can navigate both excitement and opposition, staying focused on proclaiming the gospel and serving others in love.

FAITH UNDER FIRE: STEPHEN'S ENCOUNTER WITH OPPOSITION

LESSON 3 for Week Ending: January 17, 2026

Faithful service often attracts opposition. Even as Stephen ministered with grace and power, “certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines” rose up to dispute with him. This was not a petty quarrel, but part of a fierce theological and cultural contest about Jesus, the temple, and the law. Today’s churches need a reality check: genuine gospel advance will draw resistance from without and sometimes friction from within. Such opposition can come in many forms—public debates, misunderstandings, or even false accusations, as Stephen experienced. Yet, the challenges faced by faithful witnesses are opportunities to demonstrate Spirit-empowered wisdom, humility, and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Key Text: *“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. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake”* (Acts 6:9-10 KJV).

1. The Synagogue of the Freedmen: Historical and Cultural Context

The “Freedmen” (Libertines) synagogue was composed of Jews formerly enslaved, or descended from slaves, who had returned to Jerusalem from places like Rome, Alexandria, Cyrene, Cilicia, and Asia (Acts 6:9). These Hellenistic Jews were passionate about defending their traditions and identity, sometimes even more so than the local Hebrews. Stephen’s bold proclamation of Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture threatened their worldview. Understanding this social matrix helps us see why missionary advance often provokes fierce reactions. How does cultural background influence people’s willingness (or resistance) to hear new truth? In what modern ways is the gospel resisted?

2. Public Dispute and Spiritual Wisdom

Stephen engaged these synagogue members not with violence or derision, but with the Spirit’s wisdom (Acts 6:10). His arguments, rooted in Scripture and the gospel, could not be refuted. Luke’s record emphasizes that God’s messengers will face misunderstanding, yet Spirit-inspired answers remain potent (see Luke 21:14-15). Preparation, prayer, and courage are indispensable in public witness. Why is “wisdom and the Spirit” more powerful in debate than simply having the “right answers”? How can believers prepare for opposition?

3. False Accusations: Repeating Jesus’ Story

When they could not win by logic or persuasion, Stephen’s opponents “suborned men” to accuse him falsely of blasphemy against Moses, the temple, and the law (Acts 6:11-14). This dishonest strategy echoes the false witness strategy used against Jesus (Mark 14:55-59). The faithful must expect similar tactics: when truth challenges entrenched interests, opponents often turn to slander and misinformation. How should Christians respond to character attacks or false accusations in the public square?

4. A Face Like that of an Angel

As Stephen stood before the council, his face shone “as the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). This echoes the glory seen on the faces of Moses (Exodus 34:29-35) and Jesus at the transfiguration. God gives His servants a peace and authority that no earthly attack can erase. Often, the Spirit’s inner presence is most visible—and most needed—in moments of greatest pressure. What is the significance of Christian countenance in times of trial? How might our demeanor witness to Christ today?

HIS SHINING WITNESS: STEPHEN BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

LESSON 4 for Week Ending: January 24, 2026

Dragged before the Sanhedrin—the very same court that sentenced Jesus—Stephen faces fierce accusers and a hostile religious jury. Alone? Not at all. The presence and wisdom of the Holy Spirit empower him to communicate not merely in defense, but in proclamation. This lesson examines the opening stages of Stephen’s defense, drawing connections between his approach and Jesus’ model in His own trials.

Key Text: *“Then said the high priest, Are these things so? And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham...”* (Acts 7:1-2 KJV).

1. Respectful Address and Connection to Heritage

Stephen opens his defense with respect: “Men, brethren, and fathers...” (Acts 7:2), modeling humility and bridging divides. He roots his faith in Israel’s history, standing within God’s covenant people. This echoes Paul’s courteous addresses before authorities (Acts 22:1; 26:2-3), Peter’s instruction to respond, “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15), and Jesus’ respectful answers before the Sanhedrin (John 18:19-23). Together, these passages show that Christian witnesses should demonstrate respect even to their opponents, fostering constructive dialogue in a polarized world.

2. Beginning with the God of Glory and Abraham

Stephen highlights “the God of glory” who met Abraham in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2), showing God’s presence beyond geographic or religious boundaries. This truth appears throughout Scripture—Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:2), Moses at the burning bush in Midian (Exodus 3:1-4), and Jesus teaching that true worship transcends location (John 4:21-24). Recognizing God’s work “outside the walls” encourages churches to avoid narrow thinking and embrace a broader mission.

3. Scripture as Both Defense and Offense

In quoting and recounting the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and others, Stephen demonstrates deep scriptural fluency. Scripture is his defense, his argument, and ultimately his source of hope. His method challenges us not just to know Bible stories, but to connect them to Christ and contemporary obedience (Acts 7:3-8, see also Joshua 24:2-14). How can believers grow in their ability to use Scripture wisely in challenging situations?

4. Personal Presence: Full of the Spirit Under Pressure

Stephen’s Spirit-filled demeanor is not erased by his circumstances. Luke portrays him as both bold and gentle—a combination producing “good reputation” among believers and a compelling witness to unbelievers. For those facing trials, this is a reminder: the Spirit’s presence is our secret strength (Ephesians 3:16). A “full-of-the-Spirit” witness speaks with wisdom, grace, and conviction, going beyond the mere exchange of arguments to reveal Christ’s love and truth through words and actions. This kind of witness is marked by patience under pressure, compassion for opponents, and a courage that does not rely on personal power but on God’s sustaining presence. Today, we see these qualities in individuals who respond to hostility with kindness, choosing understanding over retaliation, and who maintain their integrity even when misunderstood or marginalized. For further study, see Galatians 5:22-23, which describes the fruit of the Spirit that should characterize every believer’s life.

THE PATTERN OF REJECTION: ABRAHAM, JOSEPH, AND MOSES

LESSON 5 for Week Ending: January 31, 2026

Stephen's long speech is not a "history lesson" for its own sake. Instead, it carefully traces a pattern: God's chosen deliverers—Abraham, Joseph, Moses—are repeatedly rejected by their own people before eventually being recognized as God's instruments. The past, Stephen argues, casts a bright spotlight on the present situation, warning his hearers (and us) against resistances to God's new work in Christ. This recurring cycle of rejection and ultimate vindication challenges us to reflect on how we respond to God's messengers today. By understanding this pattern, we are encouraged to remain open to God's movement and avoid repeating the mistakes of those who came before us.

Key Text: *"And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him, And delivered him out of all his afflictions..."* (Acts 7:9-10 KJV).

1. Abraham—Faith Outside the Land

God's call to Abraham in Mesopotamia underscores that His promises are not bound by geography or tradition, highlighting that true worship is anchored in faith rather than location (Acts 7:2-8; cf. Genesis 12:1-7). Abraham's willingness to leave the familiar—his homeland, family, and comforts—demonstrates the essence of obedience: trusting God's character and responding to His guidance, even into uncertainty. His life challenges believers to step out in faith when God leads, reminding us that genuine obedience flows from a heart willing to act on God's promises, regardless of where or how He directs. In what ways might God be calling you to step out in faith today, and how can Abraham's example encourage your response?

2. Joseph—Rejected but Raised as Deliverer

Joseph's own brothers, out of envy, sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with Joseph in his exile, not just later in the land (Acts 7:9-16). Joseph, the rejected one, ultimately becomes the savior of Israel—a clear picture pointing forward to Jesus. Why do God's chosen often face rejection at the hands of their own people? Who are today's "Josephs"? This story reminds us that rejection can be a part of God's plan to bring about greater purposes. It challenges us to recognize and support those whom God is raising up, even if their path includes adversity or misunderstanding.

3. Moses—Deliverer Unrecognized and Misunderstood

Despite his privileged upbringing and God's clear favor, Moses was first rejected by his fellow Israelites ("Who made you a ruler and judge over us?"—Acts 7:25-27). Only after years in Midian does he return as their deliverer (Acts 7:35-36). This pattern reminds us that God often uses periods of waiting and adversity to prepare leaders for greater influence. In our lives, we may resist new ideas or people God sends, especially when they challenge our expectations. It's vital to stay open to God's work, even when it looks different than we expect. If you feel overlooked or misunderstood, remember that God can use those experiences to strengthen and equip you for future service. Churches and individuals should be patient and discerning, supporting those whom God may be preparing—even if their journey includes setbacks (John 1:11).

4. Rejection, Patience, and Ultimate Vindication

God's purpose can be delayed by human resistance, but it is never defeated. Even after rejection and suffering, deliverers like Joseph and Moses are still exalted by God. Jesus sets the perfect example: "the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner" (Psalm 118:22; Acts 4:11). How should churches respond to leaders or prophets who are ignored or resisted? How can we help one another discern God's voice?

MOSES, THE LAW, AND THE PROMISE OF ANOTHER PROPHET

LESSON 6 for Week Ending: February 7, 2026

Stephen devotes much of his speech to Moses, not to diminish him, but to present him as a forerunner of Jesus—the ultimate Prophet. He exposes a recurring pattern: Israel’s resistance to Moses reflected a deeper struggle to trust and obey God, preferring idols and outward traditions over a living relationship with Him. By connecting Moses to Jesus, Stephen shows that rejecting God’s messengers ultimately leads to rejecting Christ. This challenges modern believers to examine our own lives: Are our traditions, routines, or personal preferences standing in the way of truly hearing and obeying God’s voice? We are invited to move beyond empty rituals and continually seek the living presence of God, staying open and responsive to what He is doing among us today.

Key Text: “*This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear*” (Acts 7:37-38 KJV).

1 Moses as Deliverer and Prophet

Stephen highlights Moses’ unique role as both “ruler and deliverer,” but he notes that Moses predicted God would one day raise up another Prophet, “like me”—Jesus Himself (Deuteronomy 18:15; Acts 7:37). Jesus is thus the true and better Moses. How does Jesus fulfill and surpass the ministry of Moses? Why is it crucial that we “hear Him”?

2. Living Oracles versus Dead Ritual

Stephen’s argument centers on Moses as the bearer of “living oracles”—the Word of God meant to stir living faith, not dead tradition (Acts 7:38). By highlighting how Israel’s resistance to Moses foreshadowed their rejection of Jesus, Stephen challenges us to move beyond ritual and embrace a dynamic relationship with Christ, the ultimate Prophet (Hebrews 1:1-2). The New Testament urges believers to let Christ’s Word dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16) and to worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24), calling for hearts that are alive and responsive rather than hardened by routine. Considering Stephen’s warning, how will you guard against empty practice and ensure your faith remains vibrant and open to God’s living voice?

3. Idolatry in the Wilderness—Rejection of True Worship

The pattern of resistance culminates in the golden calf incident and the worship of “the works of their own hands” (Acts 7:41). Stephen warns that idolatry is always a present danger, even for those who have tasted God’s deliverance. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul echoes this warning, teaching that greed, materialism, and anything that takes God’s rightful place in our hearts can become a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5; 1 John 5:21). Modern forms of “worshiping the work of our own hands” might include prioritizing careers, technology, possessions, or even religious traditions above a true relationship with God. To guard against these, believers are called to continually examine their hearts, set their minds on things above (Colossians 3:2), and let Christ rule as Lord in every area of life. Regular self-reflection, prayer, and a willingness to surrender anything that competes with God’s place in our lives help us avoid the pitfalls of modern idolatry and keep our worship centered on Him.

4. The Promise of Newness through the Greater Moses

God’s plan always pointed forward to Christ—the greater Prophet and Redeemer, who would bring a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13). Stephen’s speech calls his hearers to embrace the newness of Christ rather than clinging to shadows. What does it mean to welcome “new wine” when God brings it to His people? What hinders acceptance?

THE TEMPLE AND TRUE WORSHIP: WHERE DOES GOD DWELL?

LESSON 7 for Week Ending: February 14, 2026

One of the main accusations against Stephen was that he spoke “against this holy place.” In response, Stephen traces the story from the tabernacle in the wilderness to Solomon’s temple, making a radical claim: “the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” True worship, he insists, is not about sacred buildings but the presence of God with His people. Stephen urges the community to move beyond rituals and embrace a living, dynamic relationship with God, reminding believers that worship is found wherever God’s Spirit is welcomed.

Key Text: *“Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands... Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord”* (Acts 7:48-49 KJV).

1. Tabernacle, Temple, and the Heart of Worship

The tabernacle, a portable sanctuary, journeyed with Israel through the wilderness—God’s presence dwelling among a pilgrim people. Later, Solomon’s temple stood as a majestic symbol of permanence and national pride (Acts 7:44–47). Yet even Solomon questioned, “But will God really dwell on earth with men?” (2 Chronicles 6:18). This shift from tent to temple reveals that worship is not about location or architecture, but about communion. The heart of worship is not confined to structures—it’s the surrendered heart, aware that God desires to dwell within us, not just among us. Worship begins where God is welcomed.

2. Quoting the Prophets: God Cannot Be Contained

Stephen uses Isaiah 66:1-2 to underscore that God is far greater than any building: “Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool.” Limiting God to manmade structures is folly—the Spirit is given wherever He chooses, not just at special altars or sanctuaries. Too often, we equate sacredness with physical spaces and traditions, forgetting that God’s presence is not confined to walls or rituals. True worship flourishes when we invite the Spirit to move freely in our hearts and communities, allowing God to surprise us with His grace in unexpected places. In what ways do churches today risk “containing” God? How can true worship stay open to the Spirit’s leading?

3. Jesus: The True Temple

Jesus Himself taught that He was the true Temple—John 2:19-21 makes this explicit. After His resurrection, the Church—His body—becomes the new dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22). Stephen’s message points us to worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). What is the risk of confusing the church as an organization or building with the living Church as the people of God?

4. Tearing Down Idols—Building True Relationship

The passion for temple traditions among Stephen’s audience was unable to shield them from the danger of idolizing structure over substance. Jesus and Paul both warned against making ritual and tradition more important than authentic relationship with God (Mark 7:8; Colossians 2:16-17). Even acts of religious service can become obstacles if they replace genuine love for Christ, as seen in Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:23) and Christ’s warning to Ephesus not to lose their “first love” (Revelation 2:2-4). To remain open to God’s Spirit, the church must continually examine its practices, stay focused on Christ, and ensure that all traditions serve as channels—not barriers—to His living presence.

RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT: THE ROOT OF RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION

LESSON 8 for Week Ending: February 21, 2026

After retracing Israel's stubborn pattern, Stephen turns the focus sharply onto his audience. He accuses them of being "stiffnecked" and "always resisting the Holy Ghost." This is more than a mere theological disagreement; it is a confrontation with spiritual pride that refuses to yield to God's voice. In facing our own temptations to resist the Spirit, we learn how to cultivate humble, receptive hearts. By acknowledging our own areas of resistance, we open ourselves to genuine transformation. Only when we surrender our pride can the Holy Spirit truly work within us, shaping us into people who reflect Christ's love and character.

Key Text: "*Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye*" (Acts 7:51 KJV).

1. Stiffnecked and Uncircumcised in Heart

Stephen borrows language from the Old Testament prophets, notably Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to accuse his hearers of being as hard-hearted as their ancestors. Outward religious marks mean little if the inner person remains untouched by God (Jeremiah 9:25-26; Deuteronomy 10:16). True openness begins when we honestly examine our resistance to God's promptings and recognize our need for continual spiritual renewal. By seeking God's guidance daily and remaining teachable, we invite His Spirit to soften our hearts and shape our lives toward Christlike character. What are "stiffnecked" tendencies in our spiritual lives? How can we cultivate receptive, humble hearts?

2. A History of Rejecting God's Messengers

"Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" Stephen asks, reminding the Sanhedrin of Israel's tragic history of silencing and attacking those sent by God (Acts 7:52). The church must be honest about its own resistance to prophetic voices—past and present. In the New Testament, Jesus laments Jerusalem's rejection of prophets and Himself (Matthew 23:37), and Paul urges believers not to despise prophecies but to test all things (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). Churches can become more welcoming to true prophetic challenge by cultivating humility, fostering open dialogue, and prayerfully discerning the Spirit's voice in correction and guidance. How willing are we to let God's truth disrupt our comfort and reshape our community, even when it comes through unexpected or uncomfortable messengers?

3. Receiving the Law, But Not Keeping It

The leaders prided themselves on receiving God's law "by the disposition of angels" (Acts 7:53), but Stephen exposes their failure to obey it. The New Testament echoes this, as Jesus warns against honoring God with words while hearts are far from Him (Matthew 15:8-9). Paul teaches that true faith works through love (Galatians 5:6), and James urges believers to be doers of the word, not hearers only (James 1:22). The real challenge is to move beyond outward religion and permit the Holy Spirit to transform us from within, producing authentic obedience that shapes our lives and witness.

4. Resisting vs. Yielding to the Spirit

The difference between resisting the Spirit and yielding to the Spirit is the difference between empty religion and transforming faith. When we yield—like Saul becoming Paul (Acts 9:17-18)—God's Spirit changes our hearts and produces real spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22-23), moving us from pride and formality to living out Christ's love in everyday life.

VISION OF THE RISEN JESUS: ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION

LESSON 9 for Week Ending: February 28, 2026

As the Sanhedrin boils with rage, Stephen looks up and sees “the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.” In this moment of revelation, Stephen becomes the first person in Scripture (outside of Jesus Himself) to see with unveiled eyes the glory of the ascended Christ. His courage, hope, and joy in suffering become an enduring witness to all of God’s persecuted people. Even as threats and violence close in, Stephen’s gaze is lifted above earthly turmoil to the eternal reality of Christ’s victory. This vision not only assures Stephen of God’s presence but also proclaims to the church that Christ stands in solidarity with His faithful followers. In lifting his eyes to heaven, Stephen finds strength, assurance, and a glimpse of the glory that awaits all who remain steadfast in faith.

Key Text: *“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... I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God”* (Acts 7:55-56 KJV).

1. The Son of Man: Hope for the Future

Stephen’s vision uses the “Son of man” language from Daniel 7:13-14, linking Jesus directly to God’s promised ruler. The risen Christ’s position “at God’s right hand” signifies both authority and advocacy. That Jesus is standing (rather than sitting) may picture His readiness to receive His faithful witness—or to intercede for him (see Hebrews 7:25). This vision points to the ultimate triumph of Jesus, despite earthly opposition. What does it mean for us that Jesus is “standing” for His people? How does this vision offer hope in hardship?

2. Full of the Holy Ghost in the Face of Death

Stephen’s courage is not his alone; it is the fruit of being “full of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:55). In persecution, the church must depend on the Spirit’s ability to illuminate Christ and bestow supernatural endurance (John 14:16–17). How does the Holy Spirit comfort and empower believers under threat or attack? He reminds us of Christ’s promises and anchors our hearts in eternal hope. He strengthens our inner man with boldness that transcends fear (Ephesians 3:16). He fills our mouths with wisdom that adversaries cannot resist (Luke 21:15).

3. The Heavens Opened: Connecting Suffering and Glory

The “open heavens” signify that God’s presence is not distant. For Stephen, earthly loss dissolves before ultimate gain. Paul echoes this with “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed” (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17). How does an eternal perspective affect our response to suffering?

4. Witnessing Christ as Our Advocate

Jesus’ advocacy for Stephen anticipates His ongoing role as our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14–16). Christ never abandons His witnesses—He is with them in the fire (Daniel 3:24–25; Matthew 28:20). How can our prayers connect with Christ’s advocacy? When we pray, we join in agreement with the intercession Christ is already making at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34). He pleads for His people with perfect knowledge of their trials, and our prayers rise as incense before God, strengthening the persecuted (Revelation 8:3–4). Prayer is not passive sympathy—it is active partnership with the ministry of Christ in heaven. As we intercede, we become channels of His comfort, courage, and sustaining grace to those under attack. The church must never underestimate the power of united prayer to release heavenly strength into earthly suffering.

STEPHEN'S LAST WORDS: FORGIVENESS AND FAITH IN THE FACE OF DEATH

LESSON 10 for Week Ending: March 7, 2026

As stones rained down, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” and “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” These words, echoing Jesus on the cross, reveal the gospel’s heart—trust and forgiveness, even in the face of death. Stephen’s radical mercy challenges vengeance and demonstrates grace’s power to transform. His faith and love under fire not only strengthen the church’s witness, but also plant seeds for future gospel growth. In violent death, Stephen shows hope and unwavering trust. The legacy of forgiveness endures beyond suffering.

Key Text: *“And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. ... He kneeled down... Lord, lay not this sin to their charge”* (Acts 7:59-60 KJV).

1. Imitating Jesus: Parallels in Death

Stephen’s final prayers directly mirror those of Jesus in His final moments (Luke 23:34, 46). Both entrust their spirit to God (or Jesus) and intercede for their persecutors. It is Christ’s life within that makes such self-forgetful love possible. The New Testament repeatedly calls believers to “follow his steps” (1 Peter 2:21), showing mercy even when wronged. This imitation of Christ at the point of suffering reveals the transforming power of the gospel—it is not natural, but supernatural. Such mercy disarms hatred, softens hardened hearts, and testifies that Christ is truly alive in His people. The blood of martyrs, offered in forgiveness, becomes seed for future believers, as seen in Saul’s eventual conversion. When the church suffers with Christlike mercy, the gospel spreads with unstoppable force, proving that love is stronger than death.

2. Forgiveness as the Ultimate Witness

Stephen’s dying plea—“*lay not this sin to their charge*” (Acts 7:60)—stands as both a challenge to vengeance and a radiant testimony of grace. His words echo the mercy of Christ on the cross and reveal the Spirit of Jesus living within him. The record of Saul standing by at the stoning (Acts 8:1) hints at the hidden power of such love to plant seeds of future gospel fruit, later blossoming in Saul’s dramatic conversion (Acts 9:1–6). Forgiveness disarms the power of evil by breaking the cycle of hatred and exposing the weakness of sin’s grip. It advances the kingdom of God by demonstrating a love that the world cannot explain and by opening hardened hearts to the transforming grace of Christ. The church’s greatest weapon is not retaliation but Spirit-filled mercy that points directly to Jesus. How can we, in our daily conflicts and in times of opposition, allow the Spirit of Christ to so govern our hearts that forgiveness becomes a witness to the power of the gospel?

3. Dying Well: Faith’s Triumph Over Fear

Stephen “fell asleep”—the biblical euphemism painting death as temporary for those in Christ (Acts 7:60; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14). He faces death not with dread, but in confidence of resurrection hope. How can believers prepare to “die well”? How does this influence our daily life?

4. Prayer for Persecutors and the World

The witness of praying for one’s enemies is as vital today as it was then (Matthew 5:44). True revival and church growth are watered by intercessory love—even for those who hate. How does your church pray for opponents, critics, or even persecutors? What creative ways can we show Christlike love to our “enemies”?

THE LEGACY OF STEPHEN: SCATTERED BUT IGNITED

LESSON 11 for Week Ending: March 14, 2026

Following Stephen's martyrdom, persecution erupts. Instead of crushing the church, the pressure spreads believers out—carrying the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and beyond. The death of one servant becomes the catalyst for unstoppable mission. Christ's words that His witnesses would reach “the uttermost parts of the earth” are set in motion. What can today's Church of God learn about crisis, bravery, and God's sovereign advance?

Key Text: “*And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; ... Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word*” (Acts 8:1,4 KJV).

1. Persecution as a Force for Growth and Change

“At that time there was a great persecution...” (Acts 8:1). Hardship, far from being a sign of God's absence, repeatedly becomes the seedbed of greater effectiveness for His people. Early Christian writers saw Stephen as the “seed” from which a hundredfold harvest grew. The scattering of believers after his death carried the gospel into Judea, Samaria, and beyond, fulfilling Christ's command in Acts 1:8. Throughout history, from the Roman arenas to the underground churches of modern times, persecution has purified faith, emboldened witness, and expanded the reach of the gospel. Even today, in nations where believers suffer imprisonment or violence, the church often grows stronger and more vibrant. What the enemy intends for destruction, God turns into multiplication for His kingdom (Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20). In what ways can the modern church learn from these examples to see opposition not as defeat, but as an opportunity for greater witness and mission?

2. Devout Lamentation and Ongoing Witness

Even in grief, the church honors Stephen (“devout men ... made great lamentation” — Acts 8:2), yet the mission does not stop. True mourning coexists with unstoppable hope. The narrative urges us to grieve losses—but never to let loss silence proclamation. How can churches hold space for both lament and mission? What helps move from mourning to action?

3. From Saul the Persecutor to Paul the Apostle

Saul's participation in Stephen's death (Acts 8:1; 22:20) indirectly sets up his eventual conversion. Many have remarked that “the prayers of the martyr” are answered in Saul's transformation, as the persecutor became the preacher. Stephen's cry of forgiveness was not wasted—it became a seed that God would water in His time. This shows us that God repurposes the church's greatest enemies into its mightiest witnesses, turning opposition into opportunity. When believers pray for their enemies, they are cooperating with Christ's own intercession, and their mercy may prepare the ground for future “Pauls” in our generation. Praying for those who oppose the gospel today becomes a means of preparing tomorrow's boldest witnesses.

4. Multiplication Through Adversity

“They that were scattered ... went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). Ordinary believers, not just apostles, carried Christ's message further than they'd ever imagined. Adversity unleashes latent gifts and callings, often awakening courage and boldness that remain hidden in times of ease. When comfort is stripped away, believers discover the Spirit's power to speak, serve, and endure in ways they never thought possible. What looks like loss to the world often becomes the very means by which God multiplies witness and expands His kingdom. How can adversity activate gifts in your congregation that may never emerge during times of comfort?

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH: MARTYRDOM AND THE PROMISE OF THE CROWN

Lesson 12 for Week Ending: March 21, 2026

The term “martyr” means “witness”—first describing Stephen. Early Christians saw martyrdom not as defeat, but as victory—a badge of honor, a sharing in Christ’s sufferings, and the guarantee of a “crown of life.” This lesson explores the meaning of Christian martyrdom as a pattern, a warning, and an invitation for all believers to count the cost and pursue eternal reward.

Key Text: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: … be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10 KJV).

1. Martyrdom: Testimony in the Face of Death

From Stephen forward, the early church embraced suffering for Christ as both a sign of fidelity and a powerful witness (Acts 7:59–60; Revelation 12:11). “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” (Tertullian). Yet martyrdom is not limited to the shedding of blood—it is the daily surrender of self for the sake of Christ. To live as a witness means dying to pride, comfort, and worldly approval, choosing instead to bear reproach for His name (Luke 9:23). Every act of obedience that costs us something becomes a form of martyrdom, declaring that Jesus is worth more than life itself. Whether through enduring persecution, sacrificing personal ambition, or forgiving those who wrong us, believers testify that Christ reigns supreme. Martyrdom, then, is not only about how we die, but how we live—faithfully, sacrificially, and unashamedly for the gospel. In what ways does the concept of “martyrdom” apply beyond literal death today, and how can we live as faithful witnesses in the ordinary trials of daily life?

2. The Crown of Life and Eternal Perspective

The promise of reward recurs repeatedly: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10; James 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:7–8). The martyr is assured “to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Such hope empowers courage no threat can crush. A clear vision of eternal reward lifts the believer’s eyes above present pain and anchors the heart in what is lasting and unshakable. It reminds us that trials are temporary, but glory is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:17–18). This perspective transforms suffering into testimony, enabling believers to endure with joy, knowing that every sacrifice for Christ will be honored in His presence. How does a clear vision of eternal reward transform the way believers endure trials in their daily walk with Christ?

3. Imitation of Christ: Martyrdom as Christlikeness

Martyrs consciously embrace Jesus as model—preferring suffering with Him to comfort without Him (Romans 8:17; Philippians 3:10). Their attitude challenges both complacency and cowardice, calling the church to bold witness. In what areas do you sense a call to more Christlike sacrifice? What holds you back from courage?

4. Martyrs as Intercessors and Examples

The Early Church honored martyrs as role models of faith and perseverance (Hebrews 12:1–3). Their stories preserved the church from shallow faith, reminding believers that discipleship is costly yet eternally rewarding. One such example is Polycarp of Smyrna, who, at age 86, refused to deny Christ and was executed, declaring, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” Remembering such testimonies stirs us to endurance, holy ambition, and deeper devotion. Honoring persecuted believers—past and present—strengthens our prayers and challenges us to live with the same bold witness. How does your church remember, honor, and learn from persecuted believers, past and present, in ways that inspire deeper faith and commitment?

FAITHFUL WITNESSES IN A HOSTILE WORLD

LESSON 13 for Week Ending: March 28, 2026

Stephen's witness, message, and martyrdom reverberate through the centuries, challenging the modern church to bold compassion and unflinching truth. Under the pressure of today's "negative world"—where biblical faith is often seen as a social disadvantage—the Church of God must recover both courage and grace. The series closes by urging believers to live with eyes fixed on Jesus and eternity, equipped to carry the gospel into whatever cultural climate lies ahead.

Key Text: *"Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ... and in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God"* (Philippians 1:27-28 KJV).

1. Hostile Context—Timeless Calling

Western societies have shifted from viewing Christianity positively to increasingly seeing it as a threat or liability. Nevertheless, our calling remains unchanged: "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), regardless of consequence. The earliest Christians did not wait for favorable conditions; opposition often advanced the gospel further. What new forms of "hostility" must believers recognize today? How can we prepare to witness with courage and wisdom?

2. Faithful Witness and the Power of the Spirit

Like Stephen, the key to effective witness is being "full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 6:5). Staying filled with the Spirit requires intentional practices that keep believers strong, bold, and ready for faithful testimony.

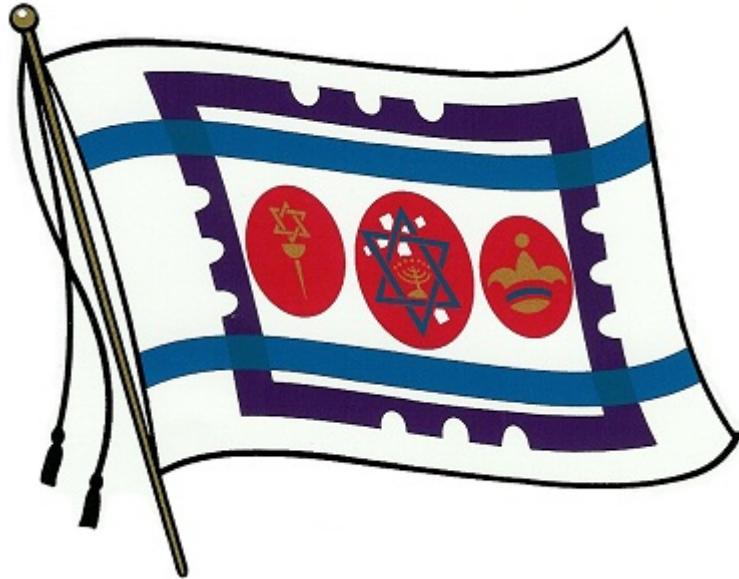
- **Continual Filling:** Believers are commanded to "be filled with the Spirit" as a daily posture of surrender (Ephesians 5:18).
- **Prayer and Boldness:** The early church prayed, and the Spirit gave them courage to speak the Word with power (Acts 4:31).
- **Scripture Saturation:** God's Word equips us for every good work and strengthens our witness (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- **Fellowship and Encouragement:** Meeting together stirs us to love and good deeds, even under pressure (Hebrews 10:24–25).
- **Worship and Song:** Singing psalms and hymns keeps Christ's Word dwelling richly in us (Colossians 3:16).

3. The Cost and Joy of Obedient Witness

Witnessing may mean misunderstanding, career cost, social ostracism, or even danger. But as with Stephen and the early martyrs, God meets us in the furnace, sometimes using our sufferings for glory and growth we cannot yet see (2 Corinthians 4:17). Where do you feel tempted to shrink back? How can your group strengthen one another for courageous witness?

4. Eyes on Jesus: The Author and Finisher of Our Faith

As Stephen fixed his gaze on Jesus, so must we. Christ's approval, not the world's applause or even our own safety, is the greatest prize. Only with "the joy set before us" will we press on through every trial and finish our race well (Hebrews 12:1-3). What vision of Jesus motivates you to serve and witness with costly faith? How can the promise of eternal reward focus our priorities today?



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