

STEPHEN, UNWAVERING MARTYR

Trenton was at the Salvation Army with a group from his church's outreach ministry. He adjusted the microphone, but he was focused on the men in the back of the room who looked like they might be homeless.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Trenton began. "I want to start out by sharing how I came to know Christ. I had been out of prison for seven months when I met Curtis. At first I looked past Curtis, because he was in a wheelchair and all, but he didn't let that stop him.

"I was homeless and living by the riverfront, and I was not looking for help at all when Curtis's wife showed up. She was handing out sandwiches and bottled water while Curtis rolled himself around, talking to people about Jesus. I didn't want to hear any God stuff.

"But Curtis was patient with me. The second time he came, he shared his story. The injury that put him in a wheelchair didn't seem to slow him down.

"The way Curtis talked, you just knew that he saw what was going on with me. He shared the gospel through kindness. Somehow, I would keep running into him, and he would ask how I was doing and offer to pray for me. When I saw that genuineness, I wanted to know the Lord he talked about.

"That was two years ago, and it pains me to say that Curtis went to be with the Lord about a year ago. But he left me with great faith in God, and that's what I want for all of you."

1 When have you seen someone respond to anger or insults with unexpected kindness?

2 Is the message of the gospel dependent on your delivery style? Why or why not?

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 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Disciple of Jesus

That's a good problem to have. Maybe you have faced a similar situation that is not truly a problem but requires you to strategize about handling success. In a growing church, a pastor might ask, "Should we schedule multiple Sunday morning services? Do we need a larger space? Should we hire more staff?"

That's comparable to the situation facing Stephen and the church of Jerusalem, which is growing in leaps and bounds after Jesus' ascension. At the very beginning, followers of Jesus are predominately Aramaic-speaking Jews. But at the beginning of Acts 6, we learn about newcomers to the family of faith, including many Greek-speaking people. These additions to the Christian community strain the benevolence ministry of caring for widows. Some are being overlooked, and more workers are needed (Acts 6:1). But Stephen is the sort of person so overwhelmingly gracious and beyond reproach that he is selected to be responsible for the distribution of food—and, probably, the calming of tensions (Acts 6:3).

Stephen (who has a Greek name) is distinguished among the select group of seven workers as "full of faith and of the Holy

Spirit” (Acts 6:5). He performs miraculous signs in the name of Jesus (Acts 6:8). Luke even describes a “large number of priests” who become followers of Jesus at this time (Acts 6:7).

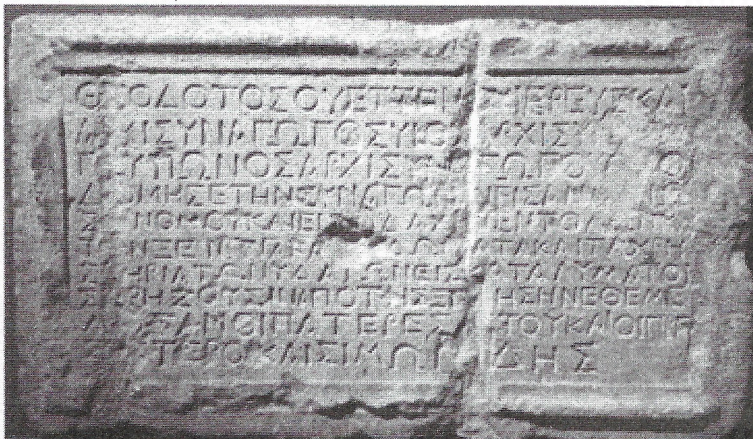
You might expect that working miracles and showing great faith would endear Stephen to everyone, but that is not the case. Luke describes a hub of opposition from a synagogue of “freedmen”—former Roman slaves who had returned to Jerusalem. They probably have an important political voice from their Greek and Roman social connections, and these Jewish worshipers find offense with Stephen. They begin to argue with him in public settings (Acts 6:9). Stephen outmatches them with the wisdom that God has given (Acts 6:10).

In the verses that follow, these opponents resort to spreading rumors about what Stephen is proclaiming. They accuse him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (Acts 6:11). Luke tells us that the accusations of attacking the Jewish law and temple are false (Acts 6:13). These false witnesses give similar testimony to the rumors that were spread against Jesus (Luke 23:1–2).

1 How should we respond when God brings growth to our ministries?

2 What does is say about the nature of discipleship to read about *opposition* to a person like Stephen?

3 How might we respond when fellow believers oppose us in a work that God calls us to do?



This first-century inscription from a priest named Theodotes dedicates a synagogue in the city of Jerusalem to the study and reading of the law of Moses.

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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 steadfastly 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.

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ 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.

Disciple Like Jesus

Stephen is a disciple of Jesus because he is like Jesus: his words and actions remind us of things that Jesus had said and done. We saw that Stephen performed signs and wonders and was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5; compare Luke 4:1). The opposition and false accusations also recall Jesus' opposition. But in Acts 7, we spot more similarities in the manner that Jesus and Stephen die.

Before Jerusalem's highest religious authorities, Stephen gives a speech that sounds like an introductory class in Old Testament 101 (Acts 7:2–53). He tells of Abraham, who received from God a “covenant of circumcision” (7:8); he describes the leadership of Moses and the expectation of a future prophet (7:37); he describes Solomon's construction of a temple (7:47). At the same time, Stephen refers to the hardness of God's people, those who “in their hearts turned

back to Egypt” (7:39). Stephen connects this history to those actively resisting the Holy Spirit and failing to observe the law right before him (7:51–53). He raises doubts about the ongoing importance of a physical temple now led by those who persecuted the prophets and conspired to kill the Messiah, the Righteous One (7:48–50, 52).

The reaction comes swiftly. Even as members of the Sanhedrin are ready to pounce, Stephen announces a vision of heaven, with “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). He has the kind of vision that his Jewish opponents are unable to see. As a way to show their unwillingness to listen, they cover their ears to what else he might say as they drag him from the city (7:57–58).

This is not a cheery text as we read of Stephen’s experience while the stones begin to strike him. Like Jesus before him, Stephen commends his spirit to God (Acts 7:59; compare Luke 23:46). Just as Jesus had done, Stephen uses his last moments to request forgiveness on behalf of his persecutors (Acts 7:60; compare Luke 23:34).

Stephen is often called the church’s first martyr. Luke doesn’t use that word here, since in Greek, the word for *martyr* first means “witness.” Only after the deaths of witnesses who point attention to Jesus would that word take on the special meaning we know for it: a witness who is willing to suffer.

1 How important is imitation in discipleship?

2 What did Stephen say that unsettled the Sanhedrin?

3 Why might the Greek word for “witness” have given rise to the English word “martyr”?

More Than Results

“What a waste!” Can you remember a time that you heard or said these words? Perhaps it was about an unwise purchase or some unused food being thrown away.

Sometimes we say things like this about a human life when tragedy strikes. We might be tempted to look at Stephen’s horrific death and say, “What a waste!” He had so much potential. He was selected as a leader in the church in Jerusalem. He was recognized for his ability to serve others in desperate need. And he was killed before his time by opponents who made up false charges. They should have recognized the source of his wisdom was from God!

Our society is often driven by bottom lines and the question “What have you done for me lately?” But the story of Stephen encourages us to ponder more deeply. If Stephen’s encounter with the Sanhedrin were evaluated for its immediate results, then we would consider it a failure. He preached the sermon of his life, but to what end? No fanfare—not even a single convert. His audience murdered him for bearing witness to the truth. If results were the only criterion, then “failure” could be the only reasonable judgment.

But in God’s eyes, Stephen’s life and testimony are not a waste. God values virtue, not only results. God sees our character, even when we fail to achieve the results that we expected. Stephen’s witness has value apart from whatever consequences came. Sometimes people full of faith, grace, and the Holy Spirit are still overcome by their enemies. “You shall receive power”—Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:8—does not mean, “You will always win.” The gospel does not depend only on the results we achieve.

1 How can we know if we are preoccupied with the results of our actions in an unhealthy way?

2 How can we encourage others to trust God to redeem situations that seem like a total waste?

3 Where can we find courage to proclaim the truth when it is unlikely that others will respond positively to the message?

I Choose to Trust

In the midst of painful seasons, we may be tempted to assume that God has abandoned us. This is just what Satan wants us to believe. But God has not left us! He is with us and He is working. This truth can be hard to believe when we're feeling especially hopeless and when God seems especially quiet, but a simple prayer can be a powerful step to build our faith during those times.

I choose to trust that You are working in _____.

Key Text

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. —Acts 6:8 KJV

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. —Acts 6:8 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 10 through August 15

Mon. Psalm 36:1–9—No Fear of God.

Tue. Galatians 1:13–24—Called By God's Grace.

Wed. Philippians 3:3–9—No Confidence in Flesh.

Thu. Exodus 34:5–9—A Stiff-Necked People.

Fri. 2 Corinthians 5:17–21—A New Creation in Christ.

Sat. Psalm 32—Rejoice in God's Forgiveness.

Next Week: Acts 22:3–15

We will discuss one of Stephen's chief persecutors. When have you made an unlikely friend?