

# THE MURDERED SERVANT

## + SESSION OUTLINE

1. Sharing the gospel requires wisdom (Acts 6:8-15).
2. Sharing the gospel requires boldness (Acts 7:51-53).
3. Sharing the gospel requires sacrifice (Acts 7:54-60).

Background Passage: Acts 6–7

## + WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Stephen preached the gospel with wisdom and boldness and was faithful to Jesus even at the cost of his life.

## + HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

In his death as the first Christian martyr, Stephen followed in the footsteps of his Savior. Both Jesus and Stephen were falsely accused and charged with blasphemy. Both prayed for their executioners. And both entrusted their spirits to God as they died. As a follower of Jesus Christ, Stephen reflected his Master in life and in death.

## + HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been saved through the sacrifice and death of Jesus, we bear witness to His great glory, even when we are maligned or persecuted for our faith.

# GROUP TIME

**Group content** found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



## SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

## INTRODUCTION

**ASK:** As participants arrive, ask: **How can we prepare ourselves to boldly witness for Christ while facing persecution?** (look for ideas from countries where fellow Christians are being persecuted; read Christian biographies to help us see the faith of others; know the Bible well)

**TRANSITION:** Throughout the book of Acts, opposition to the church rose as the church continued to grow. Instead of squashing the early church, the opposition did the opposite. The persecution drove the church to growth. In Acts 6–7, Stephen—one of the seven deacons chosen to serve the Hellenistic widows—faced hostility from the religious leaders. Instead of backing down, however, Stephen boldly testified to Jesus's role as the Messiah. This bold witness led to Stephen being put to death for the sake of Christ.

**SUMMARIZE:** Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- Persecution of the early church was increasing in the book of Acts. The leaders in the early church had been imprisoned, beaten, and threatened with murder, but so far none of them had been put to death. However, all of the opposition boiled over in Acts 6–7. The religious leaders took extreme measures to stop the spread of the gospel. Stephen's account teaches us that even through suffering, God is sovereign and on His throne. Stephen preached the gospel faithfully, yet the religious leaders responded with hate and murder.



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# POINT 1

## SHARING THE GOSPEL REQUIRES WISDOM (ACTS 6:8-15).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 6:8-15** from his or her Bible.

**8** And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. **10** But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. **11** Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” **12** And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, **13** and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, **14** for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” **15** And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

**INTERACT:** Ask, “Do you know of any stories of believers who have been martyred? How has their great sacrifice encouraged you?” (Beforehand, research a few Christian martyrs like Jim Elliot or Dietrich Bonhoeffer.)

**TEACH:** Use **verses 8-10** to teach the following (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 38):

If sharing the gospel with wisdom and the Spirit, nothing can withstand it.

- As the church grew in Jerusalem, new leaders emerged in reaching the lost. Stephen, one of the Hellenistic Jews chosen to serve in caring for the widows, was “full of grace and power . . . doing great wonders and signs among the people” (v. 8). God blessed Stephen’s ministry in a great way, and this led to members of the Freedmen’s Synagogue opposing Stephen.
- Stephen’s opponents were unable to “withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (v. 10). The deacons chosen to serve the widows earlier in Acts 6 needed to be full of the Spirit and wise. Stephen had those characteristics to serve in a challenging position in the church.
- In Luke 12:11-12, Jesus told His disciples not to fret about what to say when they were dragged into the courts “for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” Here we see the fulfillment of that promise in the life of Stephen. Acts 6–7 describes the great wisdom God gave Stephen in understanding Scriptures so he could point to Jesus as Messiah.

### THE FREEDMEN

The Synagogue of the Freedmen was made up of Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. They had once been slaves. Around sixty million people served as slaves throughout the Roman Empire during the time of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> These Jews were likely Hellenistic Jews, just like Stephen.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 38)

**Why is it important to have both wisdom and the Spirit?** (to guide you in what and how to share the gospel; to make sure you are relying on God and not your own efforts; to discern when to speak and when to be quiet, when to ask a question or when to speak truth)

**LIST:** Guide a volunteer to read Matthew 26:59-66. Compare Jesus's trial before Caiaphas with Stephen's trial. Make a list on the board as people call out similarities or differences. Mention to your group that, like Stephen, we are to model Christ in all we do and say.

**EXPLAIN:** Using **verses 11-15**, explain the following (DDG p. 38):

In response to the gospel, some will accept it as truth and others will deny it with lies.

- In verse 11, the religious leaders “secretly instigated” other people to make accusations about Stephen. The central accusation was that Stephen spoke “blasphemous words against Moses and God.” Here Moses represented the Old Testament law. To speak against Moses would be to speak against the law itself. To speak against the temple would be to speak against God Himself. Luke further explained these accusations in verse 14: “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.”
- Luke specifically noted these witnesses' accusations were false (v. 13). Stephen described Jesus as the fulfillment of the law in Acts 7. While the Jews would reject this teaching, Stephen spoke the truth about Jesus Christ with the power of the Spirit.
- In verse 15, those who saw Stephen's face “saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” This is likely an allusion to Moses's face shining in Exodus 34:29-35 when he received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 38)

From Day 1 in the DDG: **What lies against the gospel, God, the Word, or His people are prevalent today?** (that God and His people are hateful or intolerant; that everyone is essentially good; that the Bible is wisdom but nothing else; that the Bible is a fairy tale; that God is not real)

**TRANSITION:** Stephen's Spirit-led teaching drove the religious leaders to hate Stephen and the gospel more. Unlike those who took the advice of Gamaliel in Acts 5, the religious leaders here chose to persecute Stephen. Nevertheless, Stephen would continue to declare the gospel with boldness.

# POINT 2

## SHARING THE GOSPEL REQUIRES BOLDNESS (ACTS 7:51-53).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 7:51-53** from his or her Bible.

**51** “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. **52** Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, **53** you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

**DIG:** Stephen’s speech to the religious leaders in Acts 7:1-50 is a great explanation of how Jesus fulfilled three important aspects of the Old Testament: the promised land, the giving of the law, and the tabernacle. In his speech, Stephen described how Jesus is the fulfillment of the land, the law, and the temple. Form groups of 3-4 and divide Stephen’s speech among the groups. In their groups, encourage them to read and discuss ways that the Jews rejected God’s plan for them. (the patriarchs became jealous of Joseph [7:9]; the people rejected Moses [v. 35]; God’s people rejected His commands and instead built idols [v. 39-40]; ultimately, the Israelites viewed land, the law, and the temple more important than God Himself)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Look at Stephen’s conclusion in **verses 51-52** and explain the following (DDG p. 38):

Stephen boldly proclaimed that salvation could not be found in the land, law, or temple, but in Jesus Christ alone.

- In verse 51, Stephen’s tone changed, and he directly applied what he had taught to the religious leaders. Stephen explained that Israel had constantly rejected God’s Word and His prophets throughout its history, and now Israel had rejected the Messiah—Jesus, the fulfillment of Scripture.
- Stephen called them “stiff-necked” people. This is likely an allusion to what God had said of the people of Israel in Exodus 33:3 immediately after they worshiped the golden calf. Stephen also called them a people with “uncircumcised” hearts and ears. In Jeremiah 4:1-4, God called upon the Israelites to not trust in the circumcision of the flesh but the inward change that the outward circumcision was supposed to represent. Like Jeremiah, Stephen pointed out that the people might have been outwardly circumcised, but inwardly they were like foreigners, not part of God’s people.
- Since the religious leaders had rejected God’s messengers, they were rejecting the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets who foretold of Jesus and then through the apostles who proclaimed

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“The deepest things that I have learned in my own life have come from the deepest suffering. . . . the greatest gift of my life have also entailed the greatest suffering.”<sup>2</sup>

–Elisabeth Elliot  
(1926–2015)

Jesus as the Messiah. Throughout history, the people of Israel, however, persecuted and killed many prophets. Even worse, these same religious leaders murdered the “Righteous One” (v. 52).

- The title “Righteous One” refers to Jesus in Acts 3:14 and 22:14. This title was used in the Old Testament to describe God and His righteousness (2 Sam. 23:3; Prov. 21:12; Isa. 24:16) and points to Jesus as God and Messiah.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 38)

**What are some examples of things we might find “salvation” in other than Christ?** (a good life; a Christian nation; money; fame; power; family; relationships; self-worth)

**EXPLAIN:** Use the below points and **verse 53** to explain (DDG p. 38):

Stephen boldly rebuked the religious leaders for disobeying God.

- Stephen reminded the religious leaders how Israel’s ancestors had persecuted and killed the prophets who had foretold the coming Messiah. However, Stephen’s final accusation against the religious leaders was that they had received God’s law from angels, but they had failed to keep it. Similarly Jesus told the religious leaders, “if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:46-47). Despite their vast knowledge of Old Testament law, they rejected what it said about Jesus being the Messiah.
- In Acts 6:11, Stephen was accused of “speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.” However, in Acts 7:53 he pointed out to the religious leaders that they were the ones who failed to believe and follow what Moses wrote in the law.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 38)

**Why is it important to acknowledge our sin and disobedience as a main part of the gospel message?** (we must know that we have a holy God who cannot allow sin; we must humble ourselves and submit to God’s will in Jesus; we must know that we need a savior and that Savior is Christ Jesus)

**TRANSITION:** Stephen had been accused of blasphemy; however, he responded to these false accusations by boldly showing the religious leaders how they failed to correctly understand the Old Testament. However, boldness didn’t mean that Stephen wouldn’t face persecution, and it’s the same for us.

# POINT 3

## SHARING THE GOSPEL REQUIRES SACRIFICE (ACTS 7:54-60).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 7:54-60** from his or her Bible.

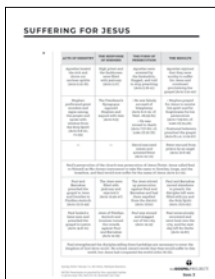
**54** Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. **55** But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56** And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." **57** But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. **58** Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." **60** And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

**CONTRAST:** Write on the board "The Religious Leaders" and "Stephen." Suggest the group contrast the tone and spirit of the two and how we are to engage in conversations with those who oppose us. (the leaders were angry, hateful, out of control, overly passionate; Stephen was bold but gentle, ready to die for truth, trusting in God, focused on Jesus, forgiving)

**EXPLAIN:** Pass out anew (or call attention to) **PACK ITEM 3: SUFFERING FOR JESUS**, highlighting Stephen's suffering, mentioning how many believers today still suffer for the gospel. Using **verses 54-58**, explain the following idea (DDG p. 38):

Boldly sharing the gospel will require some, or a lot, of sacrifice.

- The religious leaders "gnashed their teeth" at Stephen. These verses allude to Psalm 37:12, which states: "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him."
- At the very beginning of his sermon, Stephen referred to the God of glory appearing to Abraham in Haran (v. 2). And now, Stephen got a glimpse of Jesus in glory as well (Acts 7:55).
- Jesus was "standing at the right hand of God." Jesus is usually described as sitting on His throne in heaven because His saving work was finished (Luke 22:69; Heb. 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Col. 3:1). Here Jesus stood, possibly because He was interceding for Stephen and would receive Stephen into heaven.
- The religious leaders yelled and covered their ears. Luke did not record any official ruling by the Sanhedrin. Rather, they rushed at Stephen, dragged him outside of the city, and stoned him to death as they laid their garments at Saul's feet.



### SON OF MAN

Stephen used the title "Son of Man" when describing Jesus. This description of Jesus as the Son of Man is referencing Daniel 7:13, a Messianic prophecy. Jesus used this title to describe Himself (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Stephen is the only person (other than Jesus Himself) in the New Testament to directly call Jesus the Son of Man.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine in their DDG (p. 39):

**Key Doctrine #41: Sin and Death:** The ultimate consequence for sin is death—physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death (Rom. 6:23). God was clear to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Gen. 2:17). The type of death that would result from the fall in the garden of Eden wasn't only physical death but spiritual death as well, the separation of a person from God. Spiritual death continues in a permanent state when someone dies apart from the reconciling work of Christ, who defeated death through His own death on the cross and subsequent resurrection.

- Christians do not need to fear death because Jesus is at the right hand of God as an advocate for all those who have trusted Him as their Lord and Savior.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 39)

**What kinds of sacrifice do believers endure today to spread the good news of Christ?** (mocking; rolled eyes; being misunderstood; lost relationships; in antagonistic countries: death, imprisonment, deportation)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Discuss **verses 59-60** and the following idea (DDG p. 39):

Like Jesus, we are to forgive those who persecute us.

- Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (v. 60), similar to what Jesus prayed on the cross in Luke 23:34. Stephen appealed to Jesus as the divine Judge who can condemn or forgive his murderers. The religious leaders ironically fulfilled what Stephen accused them of—they resisted the Holy Spirit and killed God’s messenger.
- We are reminded in conversations with those who disagree with God and His Word that we still are to remain gentle and loving. We should grieve and not be angered by their hostile or apathetic response. God desires that all should come to Him in His timing and so should we.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 39)

**How should Stephen’s response serve as a model for how we respond to those who persecute Christians?** (we should focus on Jesus; we should be bold and courageous, gentle and kind; we should pray for people’s hearts to be changed and their sins to be forgiven)

### SAUL

Before he was the apostle Paul (his Roman name), he was known as Saul (by his Jewish name), the persecutor of Christians. He was a Pharisee who studied under Gamaliel, zealous for the God that he knew from the Law and Old Testament Scripture, until Christ met him on the road to Damascus.



# MY RESPONSE

**SAY:** In his death as the first Christian martyr, Stephen followed in the footsteps of his Savior. Both Jesus and Stephen were falsely accused and charged with blasphemy. Both prayed for their executioners. And both entrusted their spirits to God as they died. As a follower of Jesus Christ, Stephen reflected his Master in life and in death. Because we have been saved through the sacrifice and death of Jesus, we bear witness to His great glory, even when we are maligned or persecuted for our faith.

## HEAD:

Stephen's sermon pointed to man's sinfulness and rejection of God's Word. Instead of seeing how the law of God was meant to drive them to Christ, the religious leaders rejected Jesus. By rejecting Jesus, the leaders were rejecting God. God clearly revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. To reject Jesus is to reject our Creator. As Stephen was being killed, he entrusted himself to Jesus.

**How have you come to entrust yourself to Christ as Savior and Lord?**

## HEART:

The religious leaders plugged their ears and yelled to keep from hearing the gospel. It is easy to pick on them for their sinful rejection of Jesus and His messenger Stephen. However, what are the areas of your life where you are blind to your sin, and conviction of that sin leads you to anger? Instead of responding in sinful anger to those around us, our hearts should be broken by sin. This brokenness should first drive us to repent of our sins and to pray for those who reject the gospel.

**How can we pray for those who hate us?**

## HANDS:

Stephen was confronted by a bloodthirsty mob, yet this did not cause him to shrink back in fear of what might happen to him. Instead, Stephen boldly declared the gospel. Stephen's boldness should serve as an encouragement to us. Jesus was pleased with Stephen's boldness, and He is pleased with our bold witness for Him as well.

**How can you be a bold witness for Christ this week?**

**PRAY:** Father, thank You for Your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank You that He is our righteousness. May You fill us all with boldness to declare the life that is found in Jesus Christ alone.

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Jesus stood as a helpmate; he stood as if anxious to help Stephen, his athlete, in the struggle. He stood as though ready to crown his martyr. Let him then stand for you that you may not fear him sitting, for he sits when he judges. . . . He sits to judge, he stands to give judgment, and he judges the imperfect."<sup>3</sup>

—Ambrose (c. 333–397)

## **POINT 2: SHARING THE GOSPEL REQUIRES BOLDNESS** (ACTS 7:51-53).

### + **COMMENTARY**

“Stephen now turns to direct denunciation. ‘You stiff-necked people’ echoes the accusation of God immediately after the incident of the golden calf (Ex. 22:3, 5). Moses later indicates that this was an ongoing characteristic of Israel (Dt. 9:6, 27). The charge that they have heard and ears that are ‘still uncircumcised’ implies that the ‘covenant of circumcision’ (7:8) has not affected their inner disposition . . . or their ability to heed God’s word . . . They are no more responsive to God than uncircumcised pagans!”<sup>4</sup>

## **POINT 3: SHARING THE GOSPEL REQUIRES SACRIFICE** (ACTS 7:54-60).

### + **COMMENTARY**

“Stephen committed himself to the Jesus whom he had seen in his vision. It is a striking example of a form of words originally applicable to the Father being addressed to the Son, and shows how the early Christians placed Jesus on the same level as the Father. Then Stephen prayed for pardon for his executioners, again echoing the words of Jesus (Luke 23:34); his words stand in striking contrast to his attitude of denunciation in his speech, and illustrate how the Christian, while denouncing sin and disobedience to God in order to lead his hearers to repentance, must also have pastoral concern for them, and pray that they may be forgiven. So saying, he fell asleep (cf. 1 Thess. 4:14f.), the first Christian to die for the sake of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

#### **References**

1. Kenneth O. Gangell, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 97.
2. Elisabeth Elliot, *Suffering Is Never for Nothing* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2019), Ch. 2, ebook.
3. Ambrose, quoted in Francis Martin and Evan Smith, eds., *Acts*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 86.
4. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 264.
5. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 159.