

Unit III: Faithful Witnesses Spread the Good News

A Dirty Job

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 23:32-43
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Acts 6:1-7:60
PRINT PASSAGES: Acts 6:7-10; 7:54-60

KEY VERSE

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

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

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- **Reconstruct the broader story of Stephen's courageous and potent witness to Jesus Christ.**
- **Meditate on one's own courage and call to be a witness to Jesus Christ.**
- **Emulate Stephen's courageous and potent witness to Jesus Christ.**

*Key Terms

Multiplied (6:7)—Greek: *pléthunó* (play-thoo'-no): expanded; "increased" (NIV).

Obedient (6:7)—Greek: *hupakouó* (hoop-akoo'-o): to listen attentively; hearken to; to heed.

Signs (6:8)—Greek: *sémeion* (say-mi'-on): indications; marks; miracles.

Synagogue (6:9)—Greek: *sunagóge* (soonag-o-gay'): a bringing together; an assembling; congregation.

Withstand (6:10)—Greek: *anthistémi* (anth-is'-tay-mee): to set oneself against; oppose; "resist" (KJV); "stand up against" (NIV).

Wonders (6:8)—Greek: *teras* (ter'-as): marvels; portents.

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)



The Biblical Context

John MacArthur suggests that the book of Acts could be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles” because Luke describes how God’s Spirit supervised, guided, and expanded the church through them (MacArthur, J. [1994]. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 1–12*. Moody Publishers). Acts is the first volume of the history of the early church, written by Luke, a Gentile physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul. Although the book is a historical account, Luke also includes doctrinal truths regarding salvation, Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Holy Spirit, and other theological themes prominent in apostolic teaching and preaching. However, Luke’s primary purpose was to provide a detailed account of the early church’s birth, growth, and expansion after Christ’s resurrection. Structurally, Luke presents the book according to Jesus’ pre-ascension instructions to the apostles to be His witnesses starting in Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-8:4), then in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:5-12:5), and finally to the earth’s remotest areas (Acts 13:1-28:31). The passages covered in this lesson focus on the numerical and spiritual growth of the early church in Jerusalem after Pentecost, as it gained Jewish converts from Judaism and Hellenistic Jews (those influenced by and embracing Greek culture) from the diaspora and internal conflicts that surfaced between them.

Introduction

At some point in their spiritual journey, Christians may encounter challenges that compel them to defend or stand up for their faith, driven by a combination of social, religious, cultural, emotional, relational, and intellectual factors. For example, today’s world often questions Christianity, with skeptics and critics challenging beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and salvation. Nevertheless, God’s Word encourages believers to always be ready to explain the hope they have, emphasizing the importance of defending their beliefs clearly and graciously (1 Peter 3:15). For those who follow Christianity, defending or standing up for their faith is not a new concept. Since the church’s beginning on the Day of Pentecost, the early church faced opposition from Jews who refused to accept Christ as their Messiah, as well as from those who opposed the message of salvation through faith in Him alone. As the church grew, including both converts from Judaism in Judea and Hellenistic Jews from the diaspora (Jewish communities outside Judea), internal persecution and conflicts between these groups became more intense, as seen in Acts 6 when the Hellenists accused the Hebrews of neglecting their widows in the distribution of alms. One of the earliest and most significant internal clashes involving the defense of the faith was between Stephen, one of the most prominent Hellenists, and members of the Synagogue of Freedmen and the Sanhedrin Council, who accused him of teaching against Moses, the Mosaic Law, and the Temple. Stephen systematically and boldly defended the faith before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, despite opposition, which ultimately cost him his life and made him the first Christian martyr.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

A Faithful Witness’s Defense (Acts 6:7-10)

KJV

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.

NIV

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.

Verse 7 summarizes the event after the apostles appoint seven men to oversee the distribution of alms to Hellenistic Jewish widows (verses 1-6). This resolution of conflict renews and strengthens the early church's ability to serve. The phrase "spreading of God's Word" highlights the church's geographical growth and its increased spiritual influence in Jerusalem. Notably, this influence leads some priests to convert. Verse 8 introduces Stephen, one of the seven appointed, who goes beyond his practical role by performing "great wonders and signs," characterized by grace—meaning engaging and attractive character—and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Sadly, Stephen's Spirit-filled proclamation provokes opposition from former Jewish slaves, including the Synagogue of the Freedmen, who came from regions outside Judea within the Roman Empire (verse 9). Most likely, this group opposed Stephen's messages about Jesus as the Messiah and His surpassing the need for the Old Covenant sacrificial system and the Temple itself. However, their debates with Stephen are fruitless because of his Spirit-endowed wisdom (verse 10). An essential truth for believers engaged in ministry is the necessity of being filled with the Holy Spirit and guided by His transformative power and unmatched wisdom to effectively spread the Good News as a faithful witness for God's kingdom.

🔍 WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What spiritual disciplines are essential for believers involved in ministry to emulate Stephen's boldness and grace when standing up for the Gospel?

A Faithful Witness's Sacrifice (Acts 7:54-60)

KJV

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.

NIV

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.

Acts 7:1-53 recounts Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin, after false witnesses, persuaded by his opponents, accused him of blasphemy against Moses and God. These verses follow Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin, where he recounts Israel's history and criticizes the religious leaders for resisting the Holy Spirit, just as their ancestors did, and for rejecting Joseph, Moses, the Tabernacle, and Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 7:51-53). Stephen's brave defense exposes their sins, making them angry with him (verse 54). "Gnashing their teeth" describes their uncontrollable rage. In this moment, Stephen remains Spirit-filled and is granted the privilege of seeing God's glory and Christ standing at His right hand in His glorified state (verse 55). Jesus' standing is often understood to mean that Stephen is assured of His presence and is being

welcomed into heaven. Stephen's verbal testimony of what he's seen (verse 56) further enrages the religious leaders, who cover their ears, cry out loudly, rush toward him in anger, drag him outside the city, and stone him (verses 57-58). At the same time, the witnesses laid their coats at Saul's feet, who is later known as the apostle Paul after his miraculous conversion. Reminiscent of words spoken on the cross, Stephen prays that Jesus will receive his spirit, echoing Jesus' forgiveness on the cross, and then he dies (verses 59-60). Stephen was executed for standing up for his faith. Still, his death sparked a period of opposition against Christians in Jerusalem that led to the Gospel spreading throughout Judea, Samaria, and the known world, as Jesus commanded (Acts 1:8).

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What lessons can the faith community learn from Stephen about remaining faithful witnesses despite opposition?

A Closing Thought

Stephen, one of the seven chosen to oversee the fair distribution of resources to the overlooked members of the early church, became a courageous and powerful witness to Jesus Christ and a role model to follow. The source of his bold witness was the Holy Spirit's presence in his life and his submission to Him, who provided the wisdom needed to defend the faith confidently in the face of opposition. Notably, Stephen was continually "filled with the Spirit," as evidenced by his being endowed with supernatural power to perform wonders and miracles, thereby verifying his calling. Stephen also demonstrated a grace-filled character that highlighted Christlike compassion even as he faced death. Consequently, those who desire the courage to stand firm amid adversity and opposition as faithful witnesses of the Gospel are challenged to present themselves as living sacrifices and submit to the Holy Spirit's transformative power daily, as demonstrated in Stephen's life.

Your Life

Every believer is called to be a witness for Jesus Christ, a task that requires confident faith and boldness to defend it with unwavering courage. Stephen's example was clear: rely on the Holy Spirit's power, desire, seek, and yield to His guidance daily, know and internalize God's Word, and witness with grace-filled compassion even in the face of difficulty and adversity.

Your World!

Many have yet to hear the Gospel, the Good News, and faithful witnesses are needed who are spiritually and doctrinally prepared to serve them. Stephen's witness was highlighted by mirroring Christ's compassion and God's grace in serving others and boldly sharing the Gospel. Therefore, reflect on your readiness and courage to follow his example this week and in the future. Then, seek the Holy Spirit's filling and submit to His guidance to become an effective and faithful witness capable of defending the faith courageously.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we aim to faithfully witness to Jesus Christ and the message of salvation in the Gospel, following the example of Stephen. Therefore, we dedicate our lives as living sacrifices to You, so that we may be empowered and encouraged to defend the faith fearlessly, even when facing opposition. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Conclusion

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's lesson examines Paul's testimony, confirming the truth of his transformed life from persecutor to church advocate (Acts 22:3-15).

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, August 10	"The Fountain of Life"	(Psalm 36:1-9)
TUESDAY, August 11	"Proclaiming the Faith"	Galatians 1:13-24)
WEDNESDAY, August 12	"Losing All to Gain Christ"	(Philippians 3:3-9)
THURSDAY, August 13	"A Merciful and Gracious God"	(Exodus 34:5-9)
FRIDAY, August 14	"A New Creation in Christ"	(2 Corinthians 5:17-21)
SATURDAY, August 15	"Rejoicing in God's Forgiveness"	(Psalm 32)
SUNDAY, August 16	"Sent to All the World"	(Acts 22:3-15)

Notes
