

ACTS 7:54-8:3

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

- We've reached the final sermon in part 1 of our series in Acts.
- Over the next few months, our church family will celebrate some special things together—Thanksgiving, Advent, the New Year, and our Mission Conference.
- After that, we'll pick back up with part 2 of Acts in the spring.
- But for now, let's be curious about what God has to say to us today.
- And let's prepare our hearts by bowing our heads to pray.

CONTEXT

- Growing pains—that's what we've been talking about in the book of Acts.
 - The church is exploding—which is obviously good!
 - But growth brings challenges.
 - **Last week:** The church faced internal division.
 - **This week:** They face external persecution.
- In the Bible, persecution is a specific kind of suffering—unique because it comes as a direct result of witnessing for Jesus.
 - It's different to other forms of suffering—life is full of all sorts of difficulty and pain—precisely because it's tied to witnessing for Christ.
 - In fact, the Greek word for witness is *martyrs*, which, in the book of Revelation is translated as martyr.
- And all this raises an interesting question for us today—even as we remember the persecuted church: those who are beaten, imprisoned, and killed for witnessing to Jesus—what does persecution look like in your life?
 - Are there ways you're being persecuted for following Jesus?
 - What does it cost you to witness to Christ?
- I've been asking people that question this week (I'm super fun to hang out with).
 - At first, people are reluctant to answer—they don't like to compare themselves to others who've suffered in more significant ways.
 - But when I pushed them, here are some of the things they shared:
 - Turning down a financial opportunity bc of a trip they wouldn't take.
 - Losing a friend after speaking up for biblical truth.
 - Being described as odd for going to church.
 - Facing disapproval for saying you can only be saved by Christ.
- What about you?
 - Where do you feel that cultural rub?
 - Where does following Jesus cost you something?

- And what do we do with that?
 - Loss of social standing, financial opportunity, reputation, relationships—or more?
 - What do we do when faith meets opposition, when truth meets anger, or when obedience might cost us?

[Transition]

- In our text today, Stephen shows us the way.
 - Let's walk through the passage under three headings (that I owe to Tim Keller): What Stephen Said, What Stephen Saw, and What Stephen Did.
 - And then we'll consider what it all means for us today.
- And if you're not a Xn, maybe you're new to church, I invite you to listen in—I hope you'll see the Bible gives us a picture of life with God that is deeply compelling.

CONTENT¹

1. What Stephen Said

- Stephen is on trial before the council of religious leaders.
 - We've seen they're not a particularly fun group.
 - Not exactly the kind of people you invite to your party.
- But look at them in this passage:
 - **V54:** When they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.
 - **V57:** They cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.
 - **V58:** Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.
- What on earth did Stephen say that made them so mad???
 - Their initial accusation—back in **6:8-15**—was that Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against the temple and the law.
 - The temple—God's dwelling place; the law—God's word.
 - To disrespect either was to disrespect God.
 - But what really enrages them is Stephen's response to these charges.
- In a long sermon—the longest sermon in Acts—he makes two points.
 - First, God's presence has never been restricted to the **temple**.
 - He appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Joseph and to Moses.
 - In the wildness, in Egypt—even in a burning bush.
 - Second, these religious leaders never truly obeyed the **law**.
 - They talk about it a lot...
 - But they don't keep it.
- All this leads to his conclusion in **V51:** You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.
⁵²Which 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.

- They've been very religious, but they've missed the whole point.
- God has always been at work:
 - Not so he might be found in religious rituals or appeased by religious works.
 - But that he might save the world through the Righteous One—his Son.
- And when this Jesus came, these leaders didn't receive him—worse, they killed him.
 - They are evil hypocrites...
 - They have blood on their hands.
- There's something deeply counter-intuitive about the gospel.
 - It doesn't call us to be somewhere or do better.
 - It calls us to humble ourselves before a mighty God.
 - To admit we've done wrong.
 - To confess we have no hope outside of forgiveness in Jesus.
 - It's good news for people who know they've been bad.
 - But it's bad news for people who think they've been good.
 - And these religious leaders:
 - They think they've been very good.
 - They would never admit that they've been wrong.
 - So their self-righteous fury boils over.
 - And the verdict is sealed: they take Stephen outside the city and stone him.

[Transition]: Which takes us to...

2. What Stephen Saw

- It's a story of two men:
 - First, as his trial nears its end—and there's murderous violence in the air—Stephen looks up.
 - **V55:** Full of the Holy Spirit, [he] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
 - **V56:** He said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."
 - He has a vision:
 - But don't think of this as seeing something that wasn't there before.
 - Instead, N. T. Wright explains: "*Visions like this are more like what happens when you've been standing on a mountain in thick cloud, hardly able to see the person walking six feet ahead of you, and suddenly a great wind sweeps away the cloud and you can see not*

only your companions, not only the crags and peaks all around, but far away, down in the valley, the streams and trees and villages in the afternoon sun. All those things have been there all the time, but you can only see them when the mist lifts.”²

- Stephen is not hallucinating.
- He’s seeing reality, beyond the veil, things as they really are.
- When he speaks of this vision, he’s dragged out of the city and a shower of stones rains down.
 - Instinctively, he moves and ducks—but there are too many.
 - One tears into his shin, another breaks a finger.
 - Blood begins to flow, and the stones keep coming.
- In the midst of the violence—Stephen sees another man.
 - Saul—standing with a pile of coats at his feet.
 - Watching, approving, overseeing the whole scene.
- Do you see the contrast?
 - There’s an earthly court—overseen by Saul...
 - But beyond it, there’s a heavenly court—where Jesus reigns.
- And did you notice the curious thing about Jesus?
 - Where is Jesus usually in heaven?
 - We confess it in the Apostles’ Creed...
 - He is **seated** at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
 - But now he’s not seated—he’s **standing**. WHY?
 - In a courtroom, who stands?
 - Not the judge.
 - Not the accused.
 - But the advocate:
 - The lawyer who speaks in your defense.
 - The one who intercedes on your behalf.
 - As Stephen looks up:
 - He sees Saul and a human court condemning him to death...
 - But higher still, he sees Jesus and a heavenly court sentencing him to eternal life.

[Transition]: And that vision—that sight of Jesus—is what makes of...

3. What Stephen Did

- First, he has the courage to die.
 - He doesn’t step back; he doesn’t recant.
 - The sight of Jesus tells him this is worth it.
 - The church at its best—our great-grandfather Stephen showing us that we need not ever be afraid.
- But notice too—his grace:

- **V59: As they were stoning Stephen**—a rock thuds into his chest, another tears across his face, blood and dust and violence fill the air—and he calls out, **“Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit.”**
- And then, **V60: Falling to his knees**—after what must have been the fatal blow—he cried out with a loud voice, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”**
- Where does a response like that come from?
 - Do you remember what Jesus said on his cross?
 - **Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Lk 23:46).**
 - **Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Lk 23:34).**
 - Stephen knows what Jesus did for him.
 - So even in this moment, he follows his Lord...
 - Speaking the dying words he learned from Jesus.
- And with that, **V60: he fell asleep.**
 - The Bible uses sleep to describe the death of believers.
 - Why? Bc we do not truly die—we close our eyes in this world and wake up on the other side.

[Transition]

- What Stephen said, saw, and did...
- What can we learn from his response to persecution?

CONSEQUENCE

1. Expect it

- Persecution is a normal part of the Xn life bc it is the way of X.
 - J. D. Greear: *“Stephen did everything right and he ended up dead.”*³
 - Being a faithful witness often carries a cost.
 - If you lose social standing, financial opportunities, reputation, relationships—or more...
 - Jesus stands in heaven and says—Well done.
 - Look up, dear ones.
 - It’s worth it.
- But since this is the expectation, I’ve found myself wrestling with a searching question: Why don’t I face more persecution today?
 - There are many reasons—religious liberty, cultural context, Xn heritage—all of which we’re grateful for.
 - But I’ve been convicted that there’s another reason: Part of the reason I don’t face more persecution is because I don’t witness as I should.
 - I’m not suggesting we go looking for trouble.
 - But if we live and speak for Jesus, we shouldn’t be surprised when opposition comes.

- Maybe we've allowed some fears to keep us quiet?
 - Fear of losing approval.
 - Fear of being politically incorrect.
 - Fear of stepping outside the bounds of comfort.
- Let us not be afraid of Saul and the court of man—we have a heavenly advocate who stands...

[Transition]: Which takes us to the second thing—Expect it, and...

2. Expect to Overcome It

- If persecution comes—Stephen shows us that we will overcome.
 - When the mist lifts, when we see reality as it truly is—Jesus is with us.
 - And Stephen's story shows us he will be with us to the end.
- I'm not suggesting that makes the journey easy:
 - Take Jane Marczewski, the singer-songwriter who went on *America's Got Talent* and made Simon Cowell cry.
 - In her dying days—ravaged by cancer at just 31—she wrestled with the tension of finding God in pain.
 - *"I spend a lot of time squeezing my eyes shut and trying to remember what I believe; counting my breaths in the grief cloud; burying my face into God's t-shirt. I remind Him sometimes (and not kindly) that I believed Him when He told me the story He wrote for me is good, and that He never stops thinking of me. I must be a fool in love, because even from under all this debris, I still believe Him. And when I'm too angry to ask Him to sit on my bed until I fall asleep, He still stays."*⁴
- Jesus stays.
 - Through every persecution, any suffering, all grief, through death—until the end.
 - Which for those fall asleep in him will only be the beginning.
- Persecution isn't fatal—even if it kills you.
- In this life or the next—we will overcome.

[Transition]: One last takeaway about persecution—Expect it. Expect to overcome it. And:

3. Expect God to Use It in Ways You Could Never Know

- Did you catch how **chp 8** begins? **V1: And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.**
- Remember what Jesus told the disciples?
 - **Be my witnesses.**
 - Where? **In Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria...**
- Do you see what's happening?

- Stephen's death triggered a wave of persecution that scattered believers out of Jerusalem.
- But this didn't end the movement, it accelerated it...
 - As the disciples are scattered along the exact trajectory Jesus had laid out.
 - Persecution becomes the means of gospel advance.
- Once again, we see the judo of God at work...
 - He's at work behind the scenes, weaving all things—even persecution—to fulfill his plan.
 - Nothing is wasted in his hands.
- So, if persecution comes:
 - Get curious about how God is at work...
 - Once again, dear ones—look up!

THE CLOSE

- So here's the invitation from our text—this week, take a risk for Christ.
 - With a friend, a family member, or a co-worker.
 - Ask if you can pray for them, text them a Bible verse, send them a sermon, share your faith, or invite them to church—do something you wouldn't have done otherwise.
- And just see what happens.
 - Maybe it will work out!
 - I'm hearing some amazing stories of people who are being gathered to our church!
 - Members are witnessing in new ways and people are coming to Christ!
 - Maybe it won't—maybe persecution will come.
 - Expect it.
 - Expect to overcome it.
 - And expect God to use it in ways you could never know.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*.
- Ray Cortese, *The Mission: Clarified, Mobilized, Empowered*.
- Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*.
- Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*.
- Alan Thompson, *Acts: A Commentary*.
- N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone—Part 1*.

Endnotes

¹ I owe this outline to Tim Keller, *Suffering and Glory*, accessed [here](#) on 11/13/25.

² N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone—Part 1*, 122.

³ J. D. Greear, *Stephen: 5 Important Lessons from an Ordinary Christian*, accessed [here](#) on 11/13/25.

⁴ I heard this quote in Ray Cortese, *The Church Goes Viral*, accessed [here](#) on 11/14/25.