



**Stephen, the First Martyr**  
Acts 6-7

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We are children of God, possible through the love and sacrifice of Jesus. So, we're here to celebrate Jesus. We're here to express our gratitude, to affirm our faith, and to renew our commitment to Jesus. And we get to do that in freedom and in comfort. But that's not the experience of many Christians in the rest of the world.

Last year, hundreds of Christians in Egypt were celebrating Palm Sunday, when bombs went off in two different churches north of Cairo. ISIS proudly took responsibility for the attacks, which left 49 dead and over 100 injured. These people just went to church. With their families. And bombs went off. And people died. A month later, 26 more Christians were gunned down on their way to church. Going to church in Egypt is dangerous. A lot of Christians in the world live under the threat of persecution every day.

Today, Coptic Christians in Egypt are recognized as the most persecuted Christians in the world, to the point that Coptic Christians have been nominated for Nobel Peace Prize. ISIS has called this group their "favorite prey." David Saeed, one of these Christians, has said, "We're used to this kind of violence in Egypt. Every church in Egypt just prepares for this. Everyone knows that some time you will get bombed, and you will be killed."<sup>1</sup> For them, it's normal.

And it's been normal throughout history. On the screen is a list of names of people who have died for their faith in Jesus Christ. Martyrs from the 1st century to today. These names deserve our respect. They died in the name of Jesus.

But the issue this morning is not if we're willing to die for Jesus. Our circumstances are different. We worship in freedom and comfort. We don't live under the threat of a bomb going off. ***The issue for us is not if we are willing to die for Jesus, but if we are willing to live for Jesus.*** That's the challenge in our study of the book of Acts.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. And it was the resurrection that inspired the first Christians and that sparked a movement. They believed He was the Son of God and that everything He said was true. ***They were convinced it was true, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to a take stand at great risk.*** These first Christians are our mentors, and we need their 1st century passion for our 21st century world. Our prayer is that their passion would revive our passion, that their courage would revive our courage. The story continues, and it's still about Jesus. The mission continues, and today, in our generation, it's up to us to take the gospel across the street and around the world.

This morning, we look at Stephen, the first martyr of the church.

**STEPHEN WAS CONVINCED**

Acts 6 describes Stephen as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit ... and full of grace and power, performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:5, 8). Stephen was a

man of great reputation. His peers observed his character, respected his integrity, and chose him as a responsible leader. Stephen was “full” of faith, “full” of the Holy Spirit, “full” of grace, and “full” of power. And Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. ***Stephen was convinced it was true.***

But his public preaching and miracles drew attention, and opposition.

“But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’ And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. They put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.’ And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:9-15, NAS).

The accusation was that “this man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law” (Acts 6:13). Stephen was a threat to their religious system. So they “dragged him away” to be interrogated before the Council. John Stott writes, “Nothing was more sacred to the Jews, and nothing more precious, than their temple and their law.”<sup>2</sup> The religious leaders viewed themselves as guardians of both. To get to God, you had to do it their way. Peter had been arrested twice for talking about Jesus and challenging the religious system, and now it was Stephen’s turn.

And Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God and that everything He said was true. He was so confident that it was obvious on his face. “Fixing their gaze on him.” The religious leaders studied Stephen, and “his face was like the face of an angel.” His countenance was so distinct that it was recorded in Scripture.

Like Stephen, Paul was convinced, and once said to Timothy, “I suffer ... (and) I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced” (2 Timothy 1:12, NAS). Paul was convinced. Stephen was convinced. And I know we are convinced. But that’s not where our faith ends.

#### STEPHEN WAS COMPELLED

***Stephen was convinced it was true, and he was compelled to talk about it.*** Stephen was compelled like Peter and John who went before him.

- “Peter, taking his stand ... raised his voice and declared ... Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you, listen carefully to what I say” (Acts 2:14, NIV). Then Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah. The one the people crucified and the one whom God raised.<sup>3</sup>
- Peter and John were compelled to declare, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name ... by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, NAS).

- Threatened by the religious leaders, Peter and John were still compelled to speak up. “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20, NAS).
- And when threatened a second time, “They went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:41-42, NAS).

Now it was Stephen’s turn. Stephen showed his knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures by tracing the history of Israel. He listed the great spiritual leaders of Israel, and cited how, time and time again, the people refused to listen.

Stephen began with Abraham. “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham” (Acts 7:2). God “promised” to make a great nation of Abraham’s descendants. Abraham was Israel’s father. Then Stephen mentioned Joseph. The favorite son of Jacob, whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery, and “yet God was with him” (Acts 7:9). Joseph became a trusted leader in the eyes of Egypt’s pharaoh, proving that God was sovereignly working in Joseph’s life and in the life of Israel. Even when the Hebrews lost favor with Pharaoh and became slaves, God had not forgotten them. Stephen pointed to Moses, chosen by God to be their deliverer and to lead their exodus from Egyptian slavery. But due to idolatry and disobedience, the Lord postponed His promised and made the Hebrews wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Eventually, Joshua led them into the Promised Land. In spite of these great leaders, time and time again, the people drifted, disobeyed, and rebelled against God.

Then Stephen mentioned King David and King Solomon. David had a desire to build a great temple for God, but it would be his son Solomon who built it. It was grand and meant to honor God. But Stephen recited the prophets, through whom God spoke, rebuking them for creating a religious system that distorted true worship. Stephen said, “The Most High doesn’t live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?’ ” (Acts 7:48-49, NLT). The Jewish leaders controlled the temple, and the place of worship had become more important than the heart of worship.

In spite of great spiritual leaders, in spite of every spiritual advantage, in spite of divine guidance, time and time again, Israel strayed, disobeyed, and rebelled against God.<sup>4</sup> And Stephen held nothing back. “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it” (Acts 7:51-53, NAS).<sup>5</sup>

God had been speaking to Israel for generations, and time and time again, Israel did not listen. And it happened again. Jesus came. He spoke. He performed miracles. He died and rose again, proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said was true. But they did not listen!

Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. And he compelled to talk about it. So was Paul. “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16, NIV). Peter and John were compelled. “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20, NAS). So what about us? Is the gospel compelling for you? I know you believe it. I know you are convinced, but are you compelled to talk about it? Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God, and he was compelled to shout to people, “Don’t miss Jesus!”

### STEPHEN WAS COURAGEOUS

*Stephen was convinced it was true. He was compelled to talk about it. And he was courageous to take a stand at great risk.*

Stephen attacked the foundation of their religious system, and he used their Scriptures to do it. “When they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him ... They cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen ...” (Acts 7:54, 57-59, NAS).

“They went on stoning” him. Imagine that. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? How big were the rocks? How many rocks did it take? Rocks coming from all directions; hitting every part of his body. It was brutal. It was violent.

“But being full of the Holy Spirit, (Stephen) gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’ ” (Acts 7:55-56, NAS).

“Jesus standing!!” Everywhere else in the New Testament, we read of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God.<sup>6</sup> But here we read that Jesus stood in honor of Stephen’s faith and sacrifice. Just as the Scripture says, “Those who honor Me, I will honor” (1 Samuel 2:30, NAS). Men on earth condemned Stephen, but the Lord of heaven applauded him.

Then “(Stephen) called on the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’” On the cross, Jesus said the same thing.<sup>7</sup> “Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60, NAS). On the cross, Jesus said the same thing.<sup>8</sup>

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna. So when the Romans wanted to do away with Christianity, who better to execute than their leader? Polycarp was dragged into the arena as the crowds cheered. The captain of the guard begged the old man to vow allegiance to Caesar and save his life. But Polycarp refused. History records his final words. “Eighty and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”<sup>9</sup> Polycarp wasn’t about to deny Jesus with heaven so close.

Also martyred was the bishop of Antioch, Ignatius. In the middle of the Roman Coliseum he said, “Now I begin to be a disciple ... Let me be thrown to the wild beasts, through them I can

reach God. I am God's wheat. I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may become the pure bread of Christ."

In 2015, ISIS terrorists beheaded 21 Coptic Christians, and their last words were the same. "Yeshua! ... Yeshua! ... Yeshua!" Twenty-one times, "Yeshua!" They were martyred chanting the name of Jesus Christ. Of the 21, one was not a Christian, a worker from Ghana. When he saw how the other twenty men died, all crying out to Jesus, his final words were, "Their God is my God." This May, the beheaded bodies were finally returned to their families. The widow of one victim said she felt both sadness and joy. "We feel inner peace because we are sure that all of our martyrs went to a good place in Heaven. They were simple and humble people on Earth and they have become great in Heaven now. They have lifted the heads of all Christians up and we are proud of them."

I believe Jesus is saying the same thing to us that He said to a large crowd who followed Him. Jesus turned to crowd and said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-36, NIV).

In his new book, Francis Chan urges us to understand the call of Jesus. "The call to follow Jesus was a call to die. The price tag was front and center. Jesus laid it out from the start and told people to count the cost before they got themselves into something they weren't ready to commit to. Nowadays we just talk about the good part – the grace and blessings. And of course, grace, forgiveness, and mercy are central to the gospel, but at the same time Jesus was very truthful and up-front about the costliness of the gospel, a concept that we completely neglect."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say, "We've lost something so central to the essence of what it means to be a Christian. Becoming a Christian is a complete and total surrender of your own desires and flesh to the higher purpose of serving God's glory. It means you die to yourself and put on Christ ... following Him will cost you everything."<sup>11</sup>

Francis writes about the church in Iraq. Membership to a secret underground church in Iraq is a little different from membership in our church. To become a member in our church, you sit through a class and eat donuts. To become a member of the underground church in Iraq, a person must sign a covenant declaring their willingness to lose their property, be thrown in jail, or be martyred for their faith.<sup>12</sup>

Francis writes about the church in China, listening to Christians tell their stories of persecution. But it was their prayers that got to him. "In their prayers, they were screaming out to God to take them to the most dangerous places. 'I want suffer for You. I don't want to go to a safe place. I don't. Please! I want to be counted worthy to die in Your name.'<sup>13</sup> They were praying for God to send them to dangerous places.

The Bible is clear. "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12, ESV). "Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you" (1 John 3:13, ESV).<sup>14</sup> "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Philippians 1:29, ESV). Or, as another version reads, "You have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ, but also the privilege of suffering for him" (Philippians 1:29, NLT). Peter said, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are

blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you ... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:14, 16, NIV). There is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name of Jesus, the name Christian.

### CONCLUSION

When most pastors preach on persecution, the application usually sounds something like this. “If they were willing to die for their faith, you ought to be willing to work with 5th grade boys!” Or, “If they were willing to die for their faith, you ought to be willing to tithe to the church!” I don’t think that’s the application Jesus had in mind.

So what does Jesus want us to get out of this story? What does Stephen’s life have to do with us? How can we apply his life to our life?

***Stephen was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God, he was compelled to talk about it, and he was courageous to take a stand at great risk.*** And he died for it. I don’t think Jesus is asking if we’re willing to die for Him. I think He’s asking us if we’re willing to live for Him!

Most of us stand in the circle of conviction. We really do believe Jesus is the Son of God. We are convinced that it’s all true. But are we compelled enough to talk about it. Do we have a sense of urgency to share the gospel? Many of us need to move from being convinced to being compelled. And some of us will face more challenging situations, and will need to be courageous to take a stand, even at great risk.

Again, the question for us is not if we are willing to die for Jesus, but are we willing to live for Jesus? At school. At work. In your neighborhood.

This morning, we have looked at Stephen’s sacrifice. Now we are going to observe the Lord’s Supper, also called Communion, and remember Christ’s sacrifice. And, may we also think about our own sacrifice. The issue is not if we’re willing to die for Jesus, but if we’re willing to live for Jesus.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Martin, “Persecuted Coptic Christians Nominated for Nobel Peace Prize,” *Church Leaders*, September 28, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), page 128.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 2:23-24.

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Corinthians 10:1-5.

<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 23:13-37, where Jesus had said the same thing.

<sup>6</sup> See Mark 16:19, Luke 22:69-70, Romans 8:34, Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2.

<sup>7</sup> See Luke 23:46.

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 23:34.

<sup>9</sup> William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Volume 1, The Daily Bible Study Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), page 76.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2018), pages 129-130.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, page 130.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, page 133.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, page 134.

<sup>14</sup> See Luke 21:12-19.