

Trusting in Christ in Life and Death

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: The Holy Spirit empowers and enables God's people to preach Jesus boldly even in the face of death.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Acts 6–7

Superhero movie franchises and the latest iteration of the *Star Wars* saga show the power of a good story. Grown men and small children alike dress up in costumes, stand in line for hours, and spend roughly \$62 on a bucket of popcorn and a soda just to watch larger-than-life heroes do the unthinkable. People are riveted by a good story that seems otherworldly, and they're willing to scrounge up the money and time to invest in the experience if they're convinced they'll enjoy themselves.

The gospel, however, is the best story ever told. But in the true story of Jesus, our Hero is not a man in tights from another planet or a demigod from another realm. No, He's God in the flesh. He's not a mere superhero—He's the Creator of the universe. He came to defeat our great enemies: Satan, sin, and death. Enemies that would make the greatest comic-book villains quake in their boots.



How might the “superheroes” in your life affect the way you esteem and perceive Jesus?

Group Time

Point 1: God's people speak boldly, empowered by the Spirit's presence (Acts 6:8-10).

⁸ Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

Stephen had been chosen by the church as a deacon to help the church serve the widows who were in danger of being overlooked. He was described as a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and "full of grace and power." Stephen was an ordinary and godly man, and God performed great miracles through him. Yet the work of God amongst the people raised eyebrows and opposition. The leaders in particular wanted to squelch this Jesus movement that threatened their religious power and authority.



What are some ways you have witnessed opposition to the gospel?

Stephen had wisdom, possibly a form of wisdom he gained through life experience, training, and reading the Scriptures. But Stephen's ultimate weapon for dealing with arguments against the gospel was the wisdom from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13-16). Stephen didn't merely win a debate; he defended the work of God in their midst in a way that was inarguable and unexplainable apart from the Holy Spirit's presence and power.



What is the biggest fear you face in evangelism or in publicly identifying with Jesus, the church, and the gospel?

Point 2: God's people proclaim God's Word, empowered by the Spirit's understanding (Acts 7:44-51).

⁴⁴ “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the testimony in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses commanded him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our ancestors in turn received it and with Joshua brought it in when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before them, until the days of David. ⁴⁶ He found favor in God's sight and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ It was Solomon, rather, who built him a house, ⁴⁸ but the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries made with hands, as the prophet says:

⁴⁹ Heaven is my throne, and the earth my footstool. What sort of house will you build for me? says the Lord, or what will be my resting place? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also.

Because Stephen spoke the truth about Jesus, he was falsely accused of speaking against Moses, God, the temple, and the law. When brought before the Jewish authorities, he was given a chance to defend himself, which he did with a sermon that practically followed the storyline of the Old Testament (Acts 6:11–7:43). Stephen argued that his audience rejected the truth about Jesus because they resisted the Holy Spirit and His message through the Scriptures.



How have you seen the Old Testament point to the coming of Christ?

Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, our spiritual eyes are opened to the supernatural, life-giving truth of God's living Word. The Spirit lives within us as believers to help us understand God's will and character and to see the Son of God through the pages of Scripture.



Voices from Church History

“Divine Scripture is sufficient above all things.”¹

—Athanasius (d. 373)

Illumination of Scripture: Because of the vast difference between God's _____ and ours and because of humanity's _____ state, human beings are incapable, on our own, of fully grasping spiritual truth without being aided by the _____ through the process of illumination.

Point 3: God's people face persecution, empowered by the Spirit's filling (Acts 7:54-60).

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

⁵⁷ They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. ⁵⁸ They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he fell asleep.

When we believe in Jesus, we don't merely receive the blessings of Christ that make us excited about eternity, such as forgiveness of sin, we also receive the counter-intuitive blessings that our flesh wants to avoid—self-sacrifice, persecution, and suffering. The way of Jesus is not easy (Matt. 16:24-25; John 15:20; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12), yet the Holy Spirit empowers us to endure the persecution we sometimes face.



Why do we find it difficult to pray for and forgive those who hurt us?

The Holy Spirit lives inside of us to sanctify us through spiritual disciplines, faithful obedience, and even through the trials of life in a fallen world. Because of the Holy Spirit, Stephen didn't renounce his faith or cave to the pressure of persecution. With the Holy Spirit living in us, we can do the same, knowing our trials ultimately bless us.



How have you seen trials serve as a blessing in your life or the lives of others?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Acts 6:1-7

One of the most basic patterns of the early church was their insistence on serving others and being sacrificial not only with their resources but also their very lives. Imagine, then, that some of the most vulnerable among them—widows, who had almost zero cultural or political power or benefits—were being overlooked.

The church was growing in number and needs, but this growth became unsustainable. How could the apostles continue to be faithful to preach the gospel with the ever-growing needs of the church and community? The apostles decided to enlist more leaders, a group of seven servants called *deacons* (literally, “servant” or “minister”). The deacons’ entire job, so it seems, was to care for the widows among the community.

This passage is a reminder to us that the early church did not rely on the apostles—in our day, pastors or elders might function in a similar role—to do all of the “ministry.” Yes, they appointed leaders like deacons, but we have seen throughout Acts that the church’s ministry is a shared ministry. Everyone contributes, everyone pitches in, and everyone is accountable.



What are needs you see in your church and community that you could help meet?

Day 2: Read Acts 6:8-15

As we reflect on the beginning of Acts 6, we shouldn't think of the deacons as glorified assistants or errand boys for the apostles. Here, Stephen was still preaching the gospel. Why? Because this is the calling of all Christians, regardless of their "office" in the church or lack thereof.

Stephen also modeled for us the fact that believing and preaching the gospel will bring hardship. As the Book of Acts continues and we see the martyrdom of Stephen, perhaps what stands out most clearly is not only his boldness but his integrity. Even those who persecuted him noticed something different or peculiar about his ministry and disposition (v. 15)—he was full of the Holy Spirit, and he had been in communion with the Lord. They decided to persecute him, but they knew they were persecuting a righteous man.



In what ways do you reflect that the Holy Spirit dwells in you?

Day 3: Read Acts 7:1-43

Stephen's sermon is a tour de force of biblical interpretation. In response to charges raised by the Jewish leaders against him, he explained his claim that Jesus fulfilled the purposes of the law and the temple, thus casting Jewish laws and customs in a different light. First, Stephen reminded them of God's promise to Abraham and how quickly his descendant Joseph was rejected. Second, he mentioned Moses' rejection by his own people as he sought to help them. Third, he reminded them that Moses spoke of a better prophet who would come.

Here is Stephen's point: Israel has a history of rejecting God's messengers and prophets. So, as they held him on trial for blasphemy, he wanted them to see that *they* were the blasphemers for rejecting Jesus—just like their ancestors, who often rejected God's chosen messengers. God the Son had Himself come in the flesh to save His people. Rejecting Him is a rejection of God's work in the most egregious way.



Why is Stephen's point so important for how we read and understand the Bible, specifically the Old Testament?

Day 4: Read Acts 7:44-53

Stephen continued his sermon: Israel's rejection of God's messengers and prophets was a similar situation to that of the Jewish leaders seeking to prosecute him. Indeed, they ultimately rejected and killed the Messiah Himself, the Son of God who had come to rescue Israel and the world.

Stephen's main point was that the Holy Spirit had been speaking plainly in their own Scriptures. Jesus' life and ministry was the culmination of that. Yes, their customs and laws were changing, but Stephen's sermon was ultimately a word from the Holy Spirit, and listening to Him trumps all other priorities and perspectives. Unlike the religious leaders at the time, we should listen to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to us through the Scriptures and makes Himself known to us.



What can you do this week to make hearing the Holy Spirit speak to you through the Scriptures more of a priority?

Day 5: Read Acts 7:54-60

As we have mentioned so many times in this study, persecution is an expected part of following Jesus. Stephen stood before the Jewish crowds, pleading with them to believe their own Scriptures about Jesus. He warned them not to make the same mistake their ancestors made. And yet, they still executed another one of God's messengers in Stephen, even after having executed the Messenger Himself, God the Word incarnate.

They were so opposed to Stephen's message and to the Spirit's speaking that they covered their ears and yelled at the top of their lungs in protest. Like the Lord Himself, they dragged Stephen out of the city and killed him outside the camp. This story is a painful picture of those who reject the gospel. In various ways, both believers and non-believers today figuratively close their ears and open their mouths in order to drown out the Spirit. But He cannot be tamed, drowned out, or ignored—not even the gates of Hades can stop the kingdom's advancement.



Who is someone in your life who continually rejects the gospel and needs to hear your Spirit-filled pleas to come to Christ?

Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- God's people speak boldly, empowered by the Spirit's presence (Acts 6:8-10).
- God's people proclaim God's Word, empowered by the Spirit's understanding (Acts 7:44-51).
- God's people face persecution, empowered by the Spirit's filling (Acts 7:54-60).



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



When have you been helped through a time of persecution or suffering by fellow Christians?



What practices can we pursue in order to obtain a familiarity with the breadth of Scripture as Stephen exemplified in his speech?

Notes
