

## Stephen's Sermon that Changed the World

Acts 6:9-8:4

This morning we're going to unpack another large portion of scripture, and there's a bunch of golden nuggets scattered throughout it- go ahead and put your seatbelts on for a ride; I hope you're ready to drink from the fire hydrant of God's word. Pastor Dave walked us through the beginning of Acts chapter 6, where there was a problematic situation arising within the church. The Greek (Hellenistic) Jews were complaining against the native Jews concerning the neglect of their people when food was shared. This was a perceived racial problem, a group of people felt that they were being mistreated on account of their culture and ethnicity. Now this is the type of issue that could have very easily blown up and devastated the early church, tearing them apart, and damaging their testimony to the community. Fortunately, that was avoided- why? Because the issue reached the leaders of the church. And the leaders, in God's wisdom, made some good decisions to resolve the issue and counteract any future tension. They delegated responsibility and formed a team of deacons (servants), who were men of integrity, men of the Spirit, men of wisdom who would see to it that there wouldn't be any racial discrimination when it came to serving and taking care of needs within the church. Now, what's interesting is that all of the names mentioned in [verse 5](#), are all Greek names. Here you have 12 apostles, who are all native Jews, and when the Greek Jews came to them with this issue, they didn't appoint *native* Jews to fix it, they appointed all *Greek* Jews to address the *Greek* Jews complaint. Brilliant. Totally nipped the problem in the bud. And what's beautiful, is now they have leadership from two different groups of people, working in conjunction with each other in order to minister within the church, and in order to minister to those *not yet* within the church.

Now this is a really healthy reminder for us as One Church, to deal with issues, complaints, assumed discrimination- in like fashion. Don't let murmuring, disgruntled-ness, problems- fester and spread throughout the body of Christ, no- bring the issue before the leadership and let's take care of it in God's wisdom. We are not immune to the same attacks that the early church experienced, we've seen the early church already attacked by Satan through governmental persecution, through an attempted embezzlement plot (Ananias and Sapphira), and now through a grumbling and complaining over a perceived unfair church dynamic. This third attack especially, is a strategy used over and over by the enemy to create division and ineffectiveness for God's kingdom. Please be on guard against this, and attempt first to resolve any issues biblically and directly with those parties involved, and if that doesn't work, then please come to the leadership so that together we can find a

solution and cause no shame upon the name of Jesus Christ. You might even be seated right here this morning because of an experience of some sort of mistreatment issue from another church fellowship, and I want you to know that you are welcome here with open arms and we want to partner with you in your spiritual journey and partner with you in our call to minister to those inside and outside these walls, but if there are issues with another fellowship in which you have not yet dealt face to face with the parties involved and/or the leadership- then I highly encourage you to honor the Lord in this and do that- do all you can do to avoid causing any damage to the Body of Christ.

Now after the early church dealt with this issue, we're presented with the story of what took place shortly afterwards, in the life of Stephen- one of these newly appointed Greek Jew servant-leaders. And here's a spoiler alert- he's about to preach the longest sermon we have recorded in the New Testament, and then be killed for it directly afterwards. Now he wasn't killed for the sermon's length- don't anyone get any ideas- Pastor Dave and I don't want to see any guns pulled out if we go a little longer one Sunday. In all seriousness, this is a big deal, Stephen is about to become the first martyr of the Christian faith, the environment within Jerusalem is about to change drastically, believers are about to disperse, and the gospel message is going to spread with them, and through this event eventually Saul will submit to Jesus and become known as Paul and will further spread the news of Jesus throughout the world. This is a game changer event. The message, the miracles, the unity of the Church- all these things were having great impact on the community around them, and many were newly placing their faith in Jesus, but in the tragedy of Stephen's death, the growth of the Church exploded with new exponential gains. Miracles were cool, and the unity was awesome, but it was a game changer for the world to see that the message of Jesus Christ was even worth dying for.

God made sure that through this terrible tragedy, the church would be strengthened, empowered, emboldened, and the gospel message of hope would spread like wild fire to other nations. God used this man named Stephen to do this. We really don't know much about him, other than what [verse 5](#) tells us- he was *"a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit"* and [verse 8](#) tells us he was *"full of grace and power,"* and *"was performing great wonders and signs among the people."* Before we get into his story much further, I just want to encourage you that that was enough- one bold act from someone full of faith, grace, and power of the Holy Spirit was the catalyst that changed the world. Stephen wasn't one of the apostles, he wasn't like one of the "special guys," he could have perhaps even just been a relatively new convert to Judaism and then Christianity, but as we're about to see, He had read God's word

and he knew it. And what I find interesting is that judging from his sermon, he probably could have very well joined with the apostles in their work of boldly preaching and teaching, but instead he served tables- taking on a servant-leadership role in an effort to maintain unity within the church.

Here at One Church, there's many ministries and serving opportunities available, and we encourage you to plug into a place of service that number 1- you are equipped for, or number 2- you have a passion for, or number 3- there is just a need. Stephen wasn't "above" serving food just as Jesus wasn't above washing His disciples' feet. I don't imagine Stephen being passionate about distributing food to the Greek Jews, or Jesus having a special skill in washing feet ("Now Peter, this is my special technique for flossing in between toes...") -no, they just humbled themselves and did it in order to minister to God's people. Stephen seemed to be an "ordinary" dude, who was full of faith and the Spirit, who dug into God's word, who was willing to humbly distribute food *or* boldly preach a convicting message before religious and governmental leaders. I want to encourage you even now, to be like Stephen. To be that ordinary man or woman, who spends time with the Lord learning His story and His truth, growing your faith and attentiveness to the Spirit, willing to serve in whatever capacity God might call you to- willing to jump in when a need arises, whether it be the smallest and simplest of tasks, or whether it be something carrying a much heavier weight, whether you get a pat on the back for it, or... whether it ends up costing you your life. This is the person I believe God is calling us to become. This is the surrender He desires from every one of His followers.

What we see in the remainder of Acts chapter 6 is that a group of people were debating with Stephen, and Stephen knew God's word and was defending Jesus with wisdom and with authority of the Holy Spirit, and so in anger and frustration, this group stirred up a crowd and laid their hands on him, dragged him to the religious leaders, and then basically told accusing lies about him. Now this is interesting because beforehand, we've seen trials against Jesus-followers initiated by the religious and governmental leaders, but now this is the first time a trial has been initiated by the general public. And as we enter into chapter 7, we see Stephen take this moment before his accusers and the religious leaders, as a moment to remind them of the history presented in God's word. He begins his message to them speaking of Abraham whom God called to leave his own country and relatives in order to follow God into a new place, the land in which they now stood. And from Abraham, there was Isaac, and then Jacob who had the twelve sons who would father the 12 tribes of Israel. One of those 12 was Joseph, who was sold to Egypt, but God provided for His people through Joseph's position in Egypt. But years later a new

King became ruler in Egypt and he enslaved this people of Abraham, who were becoming known as the nation of Israel. Not only did Egypt enslave Israel, but they even began killing Israel's newborns for population control. But God saved a baby named Moses, who later as a man, God called to be a rescuer for His people. And through signs and wonders God led His people out of Egypt back to the land of Israel, where God used Joshua to drive out the other nations in the land. Years later, a man named David (who served as king) wanted to build a house for God, but Solomon his son, was the one who ended up building the temple for God... And every time I've read through the Bible and have read Stephen's sermon here, I was thinking- "Man, Stephen's building a case, He's walking through the Old Testament, walking through Jewish history and is about to tie it all to Jesus," but he gets to the subject of the temple and in verse 51 he stops his fast track story and drops a bomb on them... [\(verse 51-53\)](#)

And with this, they were intensely angered, Stephen then sees the heavens open up and cries out that he could see Jesus and God, and the people then rush at him and stone him to death. Some of you might remember the box gospel statement I mentioned a couple weeks ago. I hope that you were able to formulate a simple gospel focused response for when things get difficult, and I hope that you've remembered to use it. We talked about a general rule of not accusing people in that statement, as the apostles kind of did and thus negatively triggered their oppressors back in chapter 5. [\(Acts 5:30\)](#) Well, I guess Stephen didn't learn from that incident and here he just blasts his listeners which ultimately triggered his death. As a side note, in 1 Timothy 3 and the book of Titus, there is outlined the qualifications for service as a deacon and then also the qualifications for service as an elder or pastor. And the qualifications are very similar concerning the integrity and godly living requirements, but the main difference in requirements is that elders/pastors are to be able to teach, and that is not listed as a requirement for the office of deacon. I wonder if Paul when he was writing those instructions to Timothy and Titus, if he was like... "the last time a deacon preached, he got stoned... and I was actually partially responsible for the stoning... maybe it's better just to keep preaching out of the deacon role..."

So, in the past I've read this and have been kind of disappointed that Stephen didn't just stick to the fast track Biblical story, and point them to Jesus though the chronology of Jewish history. But this time as I studied, with the help of some other pastors who are smarter than me, I now see that there was a different thread Stephen was weaving through his message. It wasn't just the Jewish history through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, that would point to Jesus. He

had a different angle he was working. Let's look at his message a little closer. After recalling the promise to Abraham, Stephen reminded the people ([chapter 7 verse 6](#)) that God told Abraham (long before it would happen) that His people would be oppressed by the hand of those in a foreign land, yet- God would intervene as Judge and save them ([verse 7](#)). And then Joseph was oppressed at the hand of His own brothers and sold to Egypt, yet- God was with Him ([verse 9](#)). And then God's people were oppressed at the hand of Egypt, yet- God provided for them and protected Moses. ([verse 19-20](#)) Then Moses was oppressed at the hand of his own people when he attempted to stop an argument between brothers ([verses 27-28](#)), yet- God appeared before Moses in the burning bush and declared that He would be with Moses as He sent him to rescue the people through mighty acts ([verses 35-36](#)). After God rescued his people from Egypt's oppression, *Israel* rejected God and Moses, and they then made *with their own hands* a golden calf to worship. [Verse 41](#)...

Throughout this message, Stephen is weaving in this idea that throughout the history of Israel, there has been a rejection of God's plan and an embracing of the people's own plans- a rejection of God's work and an embracing of the people's selfishness and work of their own hands apart from God. And yet, time and time again, God answered and rescued, and proved that it was His plan that would prevail. Stephen is building a case of mankind's handiwork, versus God's handiwork. This [verse 41](#) is a little bit of a catalyst to the grand finale. I want to draw your attention to the words "*rejoicing in the works of their hands.*" In the verses that follow, Stephen then points out another work of their ancestors' hands- the idols they made to worship while traveling from Egypt to Israel- and he contrasted these handmade idols with the God ordained work-of-hands that made the tent tabernacle according to God's design, in which God inhabited. [Verse 44](#)... Do you see the emphasis on how it was made as *God directed him, according to God's pattern*, in contrast to the objects of worship in which the *people made according to their own plans and patterns* in the previous [verse 43](#)? And then look at the climatic verses here, the punchline verses [48-50](#)...

In his message up until this point, and then even in his accusation that followed, the point was that throughout history, there has been man's work through his own hands, and there has been God's work through *His* hands. And man's work has resulted in *oppression and rejection* of God's people, and God's work has resulted in the *salvation and blessing* of God's people. Here they stood in the courtyard of the temple, built by human hands, that represented for the religious leaders their place of work, their honor, their tradition, their pride, their zeal. The temple represented their achievements, their fulfilling of the law, their ability to cross all the "t"s and dot all the "i"s. And in contrast, God's hand had orchestrated salvation in Jesus alone,

God's hand was doing miracles, God's hand was empowering ordinary people like Stephen to wisely and boldly defend truth. The implication was that *their* hand was fighting against *God's* hand- the very same message that Gamaliel had warned them with previously in Acts chapter 5. ([Acts 5:38-39](#)) And whose hand was going to win and be the hand that brought salvation and blessing to the people? *God's*. (Typical Sunday School answer ☺) As hard as Stephen's accusation was to hear, it was an opportunity for the religious leaders to see the pattern they were falling into- to realize they were doing things according to their own strength, plans, traditions- by their own hands- seeking their own prosperity, elevating themselves by squashing others... this was a clear opportunity for them to self-reflect and repent, asking the Lord for forgiveness and to, from that day forward, seek God's work and not their own.

How easy would it be for us to fall into the same trap? To rejoice at the work of our hands, to take pride in our achievements, to wrongfully take the work of God and turn it into something through which we worship ourselves? May it not be so. It wasn't that many years later that God allowed the Romans to completely destroy the temple, yet even through persecution, trials, oppression, and death- God's real temple, the one made with His own hands- flourished. And you and I are part of that structure being built by God's hands. One Church is part of that magnificent building being orchestrated by God. And if we're not careful, we too can be like the religious leaders here who thought their spirituality was all about themselves and what they had accomplished. We too can start looking inward, instead of outward. We too can start thinking it's all about our own needs being met rather than about how God wants to work and meet the needs of others.

Look at the last two verses of the chapter- even as Stephen was wincing at the pain of rocks hitting his face, he was surrendering to Jesus and concerned for others. ([verse 59-60](#)) How do you say that? How do you say- "*Lord, take me, but just forgive these guys*"? I think Stephen got it, it really clicked for him. His words echoed His master- His Savior, His King's words on the cross- "*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" ([Luke 23:34](#)) Stephen chose to continue building his life on, trusting in, modeling, submitting to- the work of God's hands, rather than giving in to the temptation to pattern his life on the work of human hands- his human selfishness, pride, anger, resentment. But you don't just wake up one day and suddenly feel prepared to submit to God's work for better or worse no matter what- no, this kind of temperament comes from time with God in His word, soaking in His story, intaking His truth. He had committed to memory God's word, this whole chapter 7 is sprinkled throughout with scripture he was citing, and he obviously

spent time zooming out and learning the whole over-arching storyline of God's word. He had spent enough time with God where he was able to just leap into this sermon, under extreme pressure, on the spot, without any head's up, without time to prepare a specific message to address this specific situation. Now, yes, he had massive help from the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit is not going to remind anyone of scripture if they haven't already internalized that scripture. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will be a reminder to us of what He said (**John 14:26**), but you can't be reminded of something you've never read before. You can't be reminded of a lesson you've never experienced. You can't be reminded of a truth you've never processed. God, through His Spirit, wants to remind us, strengthen us, help us to remain in the work of His hands, but we have to put in the time with Him. When difficult times come, when life is unfair, when I'm staring death in the face- I want to be able to say "It's cool, God take me if you want, but I want to see Your forgiveness extended to all I know, even to those who have been unfair, and even to those who seek to take my life." In the midst of difficult, pressured situations, I won't be able to have the peace to say those type of things unless I've already put in the time.

It's kind of like Jiu-Jitsu. Most of you probably know about our Monday night Jiu-Jitsu classes, we have a parents with young kids class, and then afterwards an adult class. One of the biggest principles of Jiu-Jitsu is to be able to be calm in the chaos. To be relaxed and comfortable when someone is throwing punches at you, or is on top of you, or behind you trying to choke you out- Jiu-Jitsu teaches techniques that enable the practitioner to defend attacks, escape and control, and even turn the tables to where the aggressor's attack becomes an opportunity to attack and submit them. *Jiu* is the Japanese word for gentle, and *Jitsu* is the Japanese word for art- it's the gentle, calm art of self-defense. But with this being the case, every single person- myself included- every single person who begins to study Jiu-Jitsu, gets on the mat and exerts tons of energy. Every single person goes into panic-mode, resisting and fighting heavily, burning lots of energy, relying on their own strength and on their own quick responses for defense. And it takes weeks, if not months, sometimes a year or two- of time on the mat before it suddenly clicks, and you feel you have the mindset, the tools, the experience to relax and be comfortable in the chaos. You can *understand* that Jiu-Jitsu is the gentle art, and you can have the *head knowledge* that you are to remain calm so that you can survive whatever attack is presented; but when a fight comes your way, you won't be able to respond in that gentle, relaxed manner unless you have... put in the time on the mat.

The art of following Jesus is very similar. You can *know* the Jesus type responses that we as Christian should have. You can have the *head knowledge* that we as Christ

followers are to have His peace, and we are to be cool under pressure, and we are to respond in love no matter what the situation. We can read this account of Stephen and see that whether in life or in death, we are to honor the Lord Jesus. But we will not have these Jesus type responses unless we put in time on the mat- reading and praying through God's word. Through that time, we will slowly discover, learn, apply- His truth to our lives. Now the other correlation here between this concept and Jiu-Jitsu, is that when we're on the Jiu-Jitsu mats, we learn a new technique or two every time. The technique is presented, and there's a time to slowly practice the technique with someone else, and practice a few variations in order to learn the different nuances of the technique according to the situation presented. After we learn the new technique, we'll then simulate a fight on the mat. I say simulate, but it's grappling, wrestling on the mat. And often what happens is that the new technique, because it's so fresh in the mind, it doesn't get acted out in the real-life application opportunity of the wrestling match. And so, when we "roll" on the mat, as we call it- as we wrestle- both participants have to be very intentional in creating opportunities in order to use the freshly learned technique. There has to be an intentionality to use the new technique in a seemingly real-life situation in order for that technique to be truly learned and internalized so that muscle memory kicks in and that technique can be relied upon in the future.

The same is true in our walk with Jesus. We can spend time on the mat, reading His word, learning truth, understanding principles, listening to sermons, studying "technique," but if we are not intentional about applying those learned techniques to our real, day to day life- then they won't really be of much use to us. We won't be able to really, truly, personally rely on the truth of God's word unless we have made a habit of not only reading it, but of attempting to practice it in real life scenarios. Stephen had put in the mat time, and here seized the opportunity to test the technique he had learned in real life and... he was killed as a result. But look at what happened as a result of his death, [chapter 8:1-4...](#)

Now you would think that perhaps this terrible tragedy would spark fear amongst followers of Jesus, and that there might be a little more hesitation to "preach the word" as Stephen did. But just the opposite happened. Look again at the connection between verses 3 and 4, verse 4 begins with the word "therefore." Any time we're studying scripture and we see the word "therefore," we need to figure out what it's *there for*. Here, verse 3 is the cause, with the word "therefore" connecting it to the effect in verse 4. [Verses 3 and 4...](#)

Saul is dragging people out of their homes, putting people into prison, *therefore*- wherever people from the church were dragged, wherever they were put, wherever



they were scattered... they went about preaching the word. If ordinary Stephen- who wasn't an apostle, who wasn't one of the famous people, who wasn't an original native Jew- if he could fearlessly preach with words and with his life, in the face of death... if he could do it, then by golly we all can do it.

Now it was totally cool, the sermon one of the famous guys preached- Peter, back a couple chapters ago. 3,000 people placed their faith in Jesus. Miracles were happening immediately afterwards. Everyone was in awe. It was good times, a pretty awesome high. Now contrast that with Stephen- not a famous guy- he's chosen to wait on tables, calm down a racial dispute- and he preaches- and the result is not tongues of fire, not understanding, not immediate salvations, not miracles, but the result is rather cold, hard, depressing, real life stuff-hitting-the-fan type of a result. He gets killed and the church gets raided- dragged out from their own homes. But the sermon preached through pain is often more powerful than the sermon preached through blessing. And in time, Stephen's testimony, and the good news of Jesus upon which he committed his life to, was boldly conveyed to the world and not 3,000, but rather millions were saved, and *are* being saved as a result of this scattering and preaching from ordinary guys and gals like Stephen. You can imagine the impact this had on Saul, how this primed him and actually made it possible in his heart for the dramatic change that was soon going to take place in his life.

Now I hope that none of you ever have to experience giving your life as a result of sharing God's truth, then again... maybe that does sound better than getting taken out by cancer. Maybe dying as a result of sharing the gospel *is* a better way to go, I don't know. God is sovereign, I'll leave that up to Him- He has even our hairs numbered and has a plan even for our exit from this world. But regardless, whether you consider yourself as ordinary or extraordinary; whether you serve in little ways or you serve with great responsibility; whether you are new in the faith or mature in the faith; a new participant in One Church or a long-standing member of Next or Glady Branch- God has purpose for you and wants to use you for His glory. He wants to fill you with His Spirit and fill you with His wisdom, grace, and peace. But it's probably going to take some mat time. It's going to take intentional time with Him in His word, and intentional attempts of applying His word to your real life. Throughout the book of Acts we see the early church go through ups and downs, good times and bad times, times of blessings and times of persecution- yet they continued to grow. They continued to focus on Jesus- on His word and teaching- no matter what the circumstance. May the same be said of us here at One Church.