

Sunday, August 17, 2025 | Martyrs

Week 1 | Acts 6:8-8:1 | “Two Millennia of Jewish History”

READ: Acts 6:8-8:1 (ESV)

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

^{7:1} And the high priest said, “Are these things so?” ² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. ⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. ⁶ And God spoke to this effect— that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. ⁷ ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ ⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹ And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. ¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers

could find no food. ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. ¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. ¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, ¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

¹⁷ But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. ¹⁹ He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. ²⁰ At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, ²¹ and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. ²² And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

²³ When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴ And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. ²⁶ And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' ²⁷ But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?' ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

³⁰ Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.'

³⁵ This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ —this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ ³⁸ This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’

⁴⁴ Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ⁴⁹ ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?’

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which 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.”

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out

with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

^{8:1} And Saul approved of his execution.

Martyrs is a new subseries in our study of the Acts of the Apostles. The second-century church father, Tertullian, living under severe persecution in North Africa, famously said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” In other words, the more the church is oppressed, the more she grows.

Tertullian was right. As church history demonstrates, going as far back as the apostolic age, Christian expansion is in direct correlation to Christian persecution. Stephen is but the first in a long line of martyrs, and it’s through their courageous sacrifices that the church spread so rapidly.

I want you to notice three things about Stephen:

i. 6:8-15 – His Christ-like Presence

Vs. 8 – Stephen was more than a servant of widows. Luke says he was “full of grace and power” and, like Jesus (Ac. 2:22), he did “great wonders and signs among the people.” But, as we’ll see, an opposition arose against Stephen, not because of his works, but because of his teaching.

Vs. 9 – This adversarial coalition comprised five different ethnicities who were all a part of one synagogue: (1) “Freedmen,” as the name implies, were freed slaves; (2) “the Cyrenians,” were from North Africa; (3) “the Alexandrians,” were from Egypt; (4) “Cilicia” was located in the northeastern part of the Mediterranean; (5) “Asia” is often referred to as Asia Minor, aka Turkey.¹ Thus, the common theme uniting these five groups was that they were all Diaspora, likely Hellenistic Jews.² How ironic that a man called to serve due to a need in the Hellenistic community found extreme antagonism from that very group, albeit only those who resisted the gospel. Sadly, when you start following Jesus, often the greatest enemies you’ll have are those from your own camp or family.

¹ Bock, Darrell L., *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 270.

² Peterson, David G., *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 239.

Vs. 10 – Though outnumbered, Stephen stood his ground. So much so that his opponents “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” Jesus promised his followers, “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Lu 21:15).

Vs. 11-12 – The Greek term translated as “instigated” is ὑποβάλλω (hypoballo), and it means “to hire a person to act in a particular way, often involving dishonest activities—to hire, to bribe, to induce.”³ The fact that this was also done “secretly” makes it clear that the accusations they made against Stephen were falsified. Their primary allegation was that Stephen was being “blasphemous...against Moses and God.” As Stephen's sermon will soon demonstrate, it was not he who was being blasphemous, but rather those who were resisting the gospel.

The ploy worked. The “people...elders...and scribes” were duped, and they “seized” Stephen, hauling him before the Sanhedrin “council.”

Vs. 13-14 – Luke says “false [emphasis added] witnesses” then testified against Stephen. Jesus, too, had false witness come against him (cf. Lu. 23:2). They characterize his preaching as being “against this holy place and the law.” They then erroneously claim that Stephen said Jesus would “destroy” the temple and “change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”

As it relates to the first accusation, Jesus did say he would destroy a temple (cf. Jn. 2:19), but he wasn't talking about *Herod's Temple*; instead, he was referring to the temple of his own body, where he foretold his death, burial, and resurrection.

As it relates to the second accusation, the Greek word translated as “customs” is ἔθος (ethos) and while it can refer to a tradition derived from the Law of Moses (e.g., circumcision in Ac. 21:21), it usually refers to “a pattern of behavior more or less fixed by tradition and generally sanctioned by the society” (cf. Lu. 22:39; Jn. 19:40; Ac. 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:16; 15:33).⁴ Jesus said he did not abolish the Law; he fulfilled it (cf. Matt. 5:17). However, when it came to the traditions of men, he had no respect for them (cf. Matt. 7:8).

So, in both respects, these accusations against Stephen had no validity.

Vs. 15 – Far from being enraged or upset at the false accusation, Stephen's “face was like the face of an angel.” Moses spent so much time talking with God that his face shone like a sunbeam, so he put a veil on whenever he came and spoke with the people (cf. Ex. 34:29-35).

³ Louw-Nida (1996), 576.

⁴ Louw-Nida (1996), 506.

When Jesus was on the mount of transfiguration, Luke tells us "[the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white](#)" (Lu. 9:29). Thus, while technically we're not told that Stephen glowed, it is clear that Luke wants us to associate him with those who are in the closest possible fellowship with the heavenly realm.

ii. 7:1-53 – His Christ-like Preaching

This is the longest speech record in the Book of Acts.⁵ Stephen runs through two millennia of Jewish history. And considering that Jewish history is biblical history, Stephen's sermon is rooted in the Scriptures. In this way, Stephen wielded God's Word in the same way that Jesus did. According to Dr. Harold Willmington, "It has been estimated that over [one-tenth](#) of Jesus' recorded New Testament words were taken from the Old Testament. In the four Gospels, [180 of the 1,800 verses](#) that report His discourses are either Old Testament quotes or Old Testament allusions."⁶

7:1-8 talks about [how God called Abraham](#), promising him that the land of Israel would be given to his inheritance. Circumcision was given as a sign of this promise. Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat [the twelve patriarchs](#).

Vs. 9-16 – Stephen speaks about how the patriarchs, who were jealous of Joseph, sold him into bondage in Egypt. Yet God used their ill will to save many people from a dire famine, including the patriarchs themselves and their families. Joseph and his brothers settled in the land of Egypt, and they multiplied.

Vs. 17-44 – This is by far and away the largest section in Stephen's sermon. [It recounts the Exodus](#). At a time when many Jewish boys died, Moses lived and even grew up in Pharaoh's household, attaining the best education that Egypt had to offer. At forty, Moses's attempt to defend his fellow Jews backfired. They rejected him. So Moses fled and lived in the wilderness for forty years, during which time he fathered two sons.

God calls Moses out of the wilderness and sends him back to Egypt. And it is at this point that Stephen pauses the history lessons to make a few points. He says, "[This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'](#)" In other words, just as God used Joseph, whom the patriarchs had rejected, so God used Moses, whom the Israelites rejected. Moses was handpicked by God to be "[both ruler and redeemer](#)" over the Jews. He was the one who "[led them out](#)" of bondage, doing "[wonders and signs](#)" in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the

⁵ Bock (2007), 276.

⁶ Willmington, Harold, "Old Testament Passages Quoted by Jesus Christ" (2017), *The Second Person File*, 71, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/second_person/71, [accessed August 15, 2025].

wilderness for forty years. This is the same Moses who, speaking about the Messiah, foretold that God would “raise up for [them] a prophet like [him] from [their] brothers.” God talked to no one else but Moses at Mount Sinai, where he “received living oracles.”

Yet, despite Moses’ exalted status, Stephen says, “Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt.” He then recounts the story of the golden calf.

Vs. 45-50 – Stephen talks about how, under the leadership of Joshua, the children of Israel conquered the land of Israel. He briefly mentions David and Solomon and how God used them to build the temple. However, as important as the temple may have been, God's presence in the world was of even greater importance. Stephen reminds his listeners, “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands.” He quotes Isa. 66:1-2 to back up his claims, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?” The temple could not contain God. God's presence, although localized in the temple, was not confined to it. This is important because the Lord can and does work outside the temple. The temple should not be emphasized to the point that God's presence in the world is overlooked. You cannot put God in a box.

Vs. 51-53 – It is here that Stephen stops talking about their shared history and addresses the crowd. He says, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.” With this, Stephen wholesale lumps those who are rejecting the gospel with the patriarchs who hated Joseph, selling him into slavery, and the Israelites who rejected Moses, setting up a golden calf. They were no better than their forefathers. This is something Jesus himself said in Lu. 11:47-51 and 13:34.

Stephen asks a rhetorical question, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” The answer was that the Jews had persecuted all the prophets.

Stephen reminds his audience that they had even “killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One.” And just as their forefathers had murdered the prophets who had foretold of the Messiah, so Jews had “betrayed and murdered” Jesus Christ. Stephen’s generation was no better than the patriarchs in Joseph’s day or the Israelites in Moses’ day.

Stephen says they “received the law as delivered by angels,” yet they “did not keep it.”

iii. **7:54-8:1 – His Christ-like Prayer**

Vs. 54 – Rather than be humbled by Stephen’s sermon, the Jews “were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.” “Enraged” was used back in Acts. 5:33 when it described the Sanhedrin’s reaction to the Apostle’s message.

Vs. 55-60 – Stephen wasn’t intimidated by their fury. Luke says that “he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Elsewhere in the NT, Jesus is said to be seated at the right of the Father (cf. Mat. 22:44; Ac. 2:33; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Rev. 3:21). But here the Lord is “standing.” It is difficult to say what this signifies. By standing, the Lord could’ve been honoring Stephen (cf. Lev. 19:32), or, given the mention of the “Son of Man,” this could be a reference to Dan. 7:13-14, or it shows how Christ makes intercession for the saints (cf. Rom. 8:33-34). Of the three, the last seems the most likely. As the Jews pick up stones to kill Stephen, the Lord stands as Stephen’s legal representative and judge (cf. 2 Tim. 4:1).⁷ A court of law is the best explanation, considering the last words Stephen says are “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” As Jesus stood as Stephen’s intercessor, so Stephen stood as the Jew’s advocate with the Lord. Coincidentally, Jesus said something similar while he hung on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lu. 23:34).

But the mob did not want to hear anything that Stephen had to say. Luke said, “They cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.” This was mob violence in the truest sense of the word: crazed collective brutality.

One of the last things we’re told is that “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” This is, of course, the future Apostle himself, Paul. The first time we’re introduced to this man, we see him consenting to the death of a Christian.

So, what’s the takeaway?

Martyrdom is at the core of Christendom.

READ: Matthew 16:24-26 (ESV)

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

⁷ Bock (2007), 312.

READ: Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We do not live or die for ourselves, but for Christ.

Video Description:**Martyrs | Week 1 | Acts 6:8-8:1 | “To Millennia of Jewish History”**

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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