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**Word to Life**’s are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!

**Week 17: Acts 6:1-7**

**Day 1: Internal Conflict**

**READ: Acts 6:1-7**

**EXPLORE:**

Pressure and conflict often accompany the development of the Church that is active and mission-minded in the world. In our study of the early Church’s development in Acts so far, we have seen opposition and attacks brought from outside influences. Acts 6 introduces us to the reality that sometimes the Church not only faces external pressure, but also internal conflict.

The background of Acts 6 is a conflict between the Hellenists and the Hebrews. Basically, the distinction was being drawn between the languages with which these two groups communicated. Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews. Their counterparts, labeled in Acts 6:1 as “Hebrews,” would have communicated primarily in either Hebrew or Aramaic. It is clear from the context of this passage that both Hellenists and Hebrews were following Christ and belonging to His Church.

As far as internal conflict is concerned, this is only the proverbial “tip of the iceberg.” Even a quick reading of the New Testament would reveal that there were always problems to be solved and arguments that needed to be sorted out. In fact, many problems that existed in the early Church resulted in incredible progress for the community of faith.

What could have resulted in division or divisiveness was transformed into one of the major assets for the Church. The premise of the conflict in Acts 6 exists because people who used different languages were being integrated into one, unified community. That is really challenging. It is also really rare. Unlike Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, Christianity does not have one sacred language. When God chose to construct the Bible, he chose not only Hebrew, but Aramaic and Koine Greek as well.

The conflict in Acts 6 exists because a gracious God is bringing together a diverse group of people under one grace and into one Gospel. With an awareness of this deep truth, the Church was able to see this not as an obstacle, but an opportunity for further growth.

In Acts 6:1-7 specifically, the conflict between Hellenists and Hebrews results in the creation of a task force to care for the needs of the often neglected. A group of seven godly individuals were commissioned to minister – all because the ears and hearts of Church leadership were responsive to the calls for change amongst the body of believers. We should not miss this truth from the Scriptures. When internal conflict is handled well, it can often galvanize and further refine the Church.

**Big Idea: Internal conflict can result in greater growth when it is handled in a God-honoring way.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** This Word to Life study emphasized how tension and conflict can present an opportunity for more growth. How have you experienced this in your life?
* **Question**: When God constructed both His Word and His Church, he chose to include different languages. Why might this be significant for our understanding of God?

**Week 17: Acts 6:1-7**

**Day 2: The Cost of Compassion**

**READ: I Timothy 5:3-16 and James 1:27**

**EXPLORE:**

It is deeply reassuring to know that the early Church was not immune to struggles. Certainly, we are inspired by biblical passages like Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:23-31, but there is something endearing and oddly comforting to see how the Church wrestled through complex issues.

Yesterday, we discussed how the issue in Acts 6:1-7 arose because of a cultural division within the Church. There was neglect of some individuals and preferential treatment toward others. Fundamentally, widows were not receiving the care they needed. This is one of the first problems that arises in the infancy of the Church. If they neglected widow-care early on, how much more likely is it that we, two thousand years later, might be found guilty of neglecting those in need?

In order to understand the full weight of this biblical text, we need to further explore the significance and implications of widows within the ancient contexts. The Hebrew term for widow comes from a root word meaning “one who is unable to speak.” In the fullest sense, the idea is that a widow is one who is unspoken for. Similarly, the Greek term that is often translated as widow carries with it the idea of one who is forsaken or abandoned. As we will study at length tomorrow, God has a deep love and compassion toward both orphans and widows. The Church is simply intended to reflect the heart of God for these people in need.

In the ancient patriarchal contexts, a woman would have often needed a man to function well in society. According to the Old Testament, a childless widow could be returned to her father’s house.[[1]](#footnote-1) On some occasions, a widow could have been asked to return to her mother’s house.[[2]](#footnote-2) Widows were incredibly vulnerable. As a result of this vulnerability, the Church was commanded by God to care for widows. Widows actually had a special status and claim for benevolence within the community of faith.

The reality is that compassion is costly. Compassionate living often results in discomfort, loss of time, and feelings of helplessness. The Church is designed to love and serve those who are utterly unable to reciprocate the care they receive themselves. In this way, we reflect the heart of Christ.

**Big Idea: In their care for widows, the Church reflects the costly compassion of Christ.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** If someone were to observe and assess your life, do you think they would identify you as an individual who cares for widows? Why or why not?
* **Question**: In the global mission’s organization, The Timothy Initiative, each Christian community must be caring for a widow in order to be labeled a Church. Who are people in your life who you could care for in this way?

**Week 17: Acts 6:1-7**

**Day 3: Reminding Ourselves of God’s Heart**

**READ: *Various Passages Below***

**EXPLORE:**

After today, we will have spent three days discussing the conflict surrounding the neglect of widow-care in Acts 6:1-7. This could seem like overkill until we get a glimpse of just how often Scripture tells us of God’s heart for widows.[[3]](#footnote-3) Today, we are going to spend time reminding ourselves of God’s heart by reflecting upon His Word.

Psalm 146:9

*The Lord watches over the sojourners;****he******upholds the widow*** *and the fatherless,  
    but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

Exodus 22:21-23

*“You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.****You shall not mistreat any widow*** *or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me,* ***I will surely hear their cry****.”*

Isaiah 54:4-5

*“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;  
    be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,****and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more****.****For your Maker is your husband,*** *the Lord of hosts is his name;  
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
    the God of the whole earth he is called.”*

Psalm 68:4-6

*Sing to God, sing praises to his name;  
    lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts;  
his name is the Lord;  
    exult before him!****Father of the fatherless and******protector of widows*** *is God in his holy habitation.  
God settles the solitary in a home;  
    he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,  
    but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.*

**APPLY:**

* **Activity:** Pray that your heart would be softened and convicted as you reflect upon God’s compassion toward those in need.

**Week 17: Acts 6:1-7**

**Day 4: Tensions to be Managed**

**READ: Ephesians 4:10-16**

**EXPLORE:**

Life is full of tension. Whether the tensions exist internally or externally, life seemingly finds a way to pull us in different directions. Sometimes, the strain we experience in life is a result of evil. In some cases, we are drawn by sinful desire and experience the pressure created as we fail to do what is right. On other occasions, the tension we experience is not the result of sin, but of two or more good things in competition. Life does not always present us with a battle between good and evil, but between better and best.

This struggle between two “goods” in competition is exactly what is playing out in Acts 6:1-7. There was tension between the good and necessary care for widows and the good and necessary act of preaching the Gospel. The leaders in the early Church recognized this dilemma and found a workable solution. Fundamentally, they did not look at their situation as a problem to be solved, but as a tension to be managed. In Acts 6:1-7, we are presented with some valuable insights for how we can manage tension in a God-honoring way. Let’s take a look!

First, the early Church leaders willingly received the complaint that was raised. Often, our response to complaints or criticism is defensiveness. It can be disheartening to realize you are in error and denial often arises as a result. Notice in the text how the leaders receive the complaint – they gather together and work toward a solution.

Second, the leaders in the early Church managed tension by acknowledging that not every situation has an “either/or” conclusion. Tensions often have a “both/and” solution. The disciples saw the validity of the need, but they did not assume the problem could be solved only one way. They valued the significance of both widow-care and effective preaching.

Finally, the Church leaders managed tensions by purposefully selecting and delegating responsibility to spiritually mature followers of Christ. The disciples were well-acquainted with their limitations and they were well-informed about their community. They did not delegate caring for widows out of personal preference, but out of a deeply held conviction that Church leaders ought to equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

In summary, the Church leaders in Acts 6:1-7 effectively managed tension by willingly listening, critically thinking, and tactfully delegating. We would do well to follow their example!

**Big Idea: Not everything is a problem to be solved. It may be a tension that needs managed.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** Which of the three aspects of tension management do you find most challenging? Why is that?
* **Question**: In your reading of Acts 6:1-7, you may have noticed other principles of effective tension management. If so, what principles of godly leadership do you see?

**Week 17: Acts 6:1-7**

**Day 5: Don’t Miss the Forest for the Trees**

**READ: Acts 6:1-7**

**EXPLORE:**

One of the major benefits of studying Acts in a slow, purposeful way is that each section can be observed and hopefully contemplated at length. One of the major downsides to this approach, however, is that sometimes it can be possible to lose the significance of each individual part within the collective whole. As the 16th century playwright, John Heywood, might say, “We should not miss the forest for the individual trees.” Simply, if we fail to see Acts 6:1-7 in light of the overarching narrative, we will miss its true significance.

Since the first week of our study in Acts, we have been studying Jesus’ commissioning of His disciples. Jesus promised that His followers would be sent out from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.[[4]](#footnote-4) The structure and organization of Acts is brilliantly designed around this exact commission from Christ. Acts 1-7 details the disciples’ ministry in Jerusalem, chapters 8-12 recount evangelism in Judea, and chapters 13-28 report the expansion of the Gospel through Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The passage we have been studying this week serves as a crucial connection between what Jesus promised His followers and the way it unfolds throughout the rest of the book. In Acts 6:1-7, we are introduced to both Stephen and Philip. The killing of Stephen in Acts 7 marks the decisive shift of ministry into Judea. Likewise, Philip is a crucial character involved in bringing the Gospel into Samaria. If we read Acts 6 in isolation from the rest of the book, we would miss the true significance of the introductions to these two characters.

In a profound way, Acts 6:1-7 is preparing us for the relentless and continual expansion of the good news about Jesus to the ends of the world. Think about how magnificent and beautiful God is through His word. Whether it is your first time reading through this biblical text or your hundredth time, be reminded of how tactful and brilliant God is in the communication of His word. Stephen and Philip will play key roles in the development of the Church; Acts 6:1-7 ought to remind us again that it is God who was, is, and always will be the main character in the unfolding of His story!

**Big Idea: Individual Scriptures are meant to be read in light of the whole**

**APPLY:**

* **Question:** Acts introduces characters briefly who will later have tremendous significance (Ex: Barnabas, Stephen, Philip, Saul). What can these introductions teach us about God and His Word?
* **Question:** What difference does it make if you read Acts 6:1-7 separate from the rest of the story in Acts?
* **Activity:** Watch the Bible Project’s video of Acts 1-12 online. They provide a helpful outline of Acts that will reiterate the significance of Acts 6:1-7 within the whole book?

**Week 18: Acts 6:8-15**

**Day 1: Full of Grace**

**READ: Acts 6:8-15 and Luke 24:49**

**EXPLORE:**

Introductions in the Bible are often significant. In the case of Stephen in Acts 6, we have an example of one of the most impressive introductions in the New Testament. For the next three weeks, we will be exploring both Stephen and his famous speech. Before we can unpack all that is to come, we need to take an in-depth look at the way in which Stephen is introduced and described.

In Acts 6:5 we are told that Stephen is *full of faith and the Holy Spirit*. He was among the leaders who were selected to serve and care for the overlooked widows. As the text continues however, it is clear that Stephen’s giftings extend far beyond his willingness to serve the neglected. In Acts 6:8 we are told that Stephen is a man of *full of grace and power*. In summary, when we meet Stephen, we encounter a man who is full of faith, grace, power, and the Holy Spirit. He is a model of what it looks like to possess God-honoring character and a God-empowered ministry.

If we are not careful though, we might miss the full significance of what is being communicated about the character of Stephen. When we read about how Stephen is *full of grace* we might subtly and even subconsciously misunderstand what is meant. We might think that Luke is describing Stephen as charming, elegant or refined. The truth is that when Stephen is described as one who is full of grace, Luke is asserting that his life and ministry overflow God’s unmerited favor which he has first experienced in Christ and now is reflecting to those around him. There was a distinctiveness about Stephen that echoed the goodness of God.

We need to realize what is happening in the description of Stephen in Acts 6:8. The author, Luke, is giving us a commentary on the life of this early church leader. He is a model of what it looks to be filled with God’s grace and His power as a result of being filled with His Holy Spirit. We ought to be described in the same way. Holy Spirit filled followers of Jesus ought to willingly serve those in need (6:5) and relentlessly reflect the beauty of God’s unmerited favor in sending Jesus Christ (6:8).

Stephen is not only impressively introduced, but, as we will continue to explore, he lives up to the description. May this be true of us as well. That we, as the Church, are a people full of God’s good grace and great power we are continually filled with the Holy Spirit.

**Big Idea: Stephen is described as one who reflects the grace and power of Jesus.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** If people were to describe you, do you think they would mention the ways in which you reflect Jesus? Why or why not?
* **Question**: Stephen is described as one who is full of *faith, grace, power, and the Holy Spirit*. How would you describe the relationship between those aspects of how he is described? How do they relate to one another?
* **Question:** Grace does not equal charisma or elegance in this passage. In your own words, what is meant by “grace?” Why do you think we so often miss the significance of theological words?

**Week 18: Acts 6:8-15**

**Day 2: SETTING... up the conflict!**

**READ: Acts 6:8-15**

**EXPLORE:**

For just a moment, I want you to imagine a rather unique living room conversation. In the room there are four men from various regions in the United States. The men come from inner-city Portland, rural Oklahoma, suburban Boston, and Mississippi. Without mentioning anything about their interpersonal relationships or the nature of the conversation, some assumptions might be drawn about each individual based upon where they are from. Some biases might be correct whereas others may prove to be false. Regardless of the conclusions we draw, the truth is that geography matters. When we consider the biblical text, the setting is always significant.

In Acts 6:9, Luke goes out of his way to mention that individuals from across the ancient world rose to argue against what Stephen had been communicating in the Synagogue. The biblical text mentions those from the synagogue of the freedmen, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians and those from Asia. You do not have to be a distinguished scholar to know that Stephen is going to face a lot of opposition, but a quick study of geography and history can prove quite helpful. The aim of today’s study is to answer the question, “What is the significance of the geographical references and how does it help us understand Acts 6-7?”

In this section of Acts, we are reminded of the painful truth that many points in Jewish history are marked by exile and displacement. The people groups mentioned by Luke represent those who had been scattered around the world because of persecution, war and unrest. When we see them rise in opposition to Stephen in Acts 6, it makes sense. They had returned from the Jewish dispersion only to hear Stephen preaching about how Jesus is God and the fulfillment of both the Law and Prophets. This news would have been a tough reality to accept.

Those from the synagogue of the freedmen are either Jews who had been released from slavery or their children. They had returned to Jerusalem, alongside others, to devoutly worship God only to encounter a man who was filled with grace, faith, power and Holy Spirit who unreservedly preached the Gospel. We ought to notice also that Acts 6:9 mentions Cilicia specifically. This is most notably the synagogue to which the murderous man named Saul belonged before he encountered the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. In short, these geographical references are intended to prepare us for the intensity and conflict that is to come.

**Big Idea: The geographical references in Acts 6:9 help us to anticipate and understand the conflict that will ensue as the story of Stephen continues.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** The Jews who were scattered returned to worship devoutly in the synagogue. Why do you think they had so much difficulty accepting what Stephen was preaching? In what ways might we be similar to the diaspora Jews?

**Week 18: Acts 6:8-15**

**Day 3: Who is blasphemous in Acts 6?**

**READ: Matthew 26:57-68 and Leviticus 24:11-16**

**EXPLORE:**

Blasphemy. The word would have sliced through the chaos and echoed throughout the crowd. Those opposing Stephen could not withstand his wisdom, so they secretly instigated others and brought accusations of blasphemy. In this context, the opposition was accusing Stephen of speaking a word of insult and disrespect toward both Moses and God. In order to understand the weight of this moment in Acts, we need to know a few things.

First, we need to notice the severity of their accusation. Blasphemy was one of the most serious accusations that could be brought against an individual. In Leviticus, blasphemy against God was punishable by death. Specifically, the blasphemer was supposed to be stoned. When Jesus was on trial prior to His crucifixion in Matthew 26, He was accused as a blasphemer. Whether it was Leviticus, the life of Christ or what eventually takes place with Stephen in Acts 7, the reality is that blasphemy would have required a severe penalty!

Second, we ought to notice the specific wording of those who brought accusations against Stephen. Specifically, they assert that Stephen had blasphemed Moses and God. In the specific order of their accusation, we are meant to notice the way in which they falsely prioritized Moses over God. Simply, they prioritized the Mosaic Law over what God had brought to completion in Jesus, their promised Messiah.

Third, Luke is once again contrasting the bold truthfulness and purity of Stephen with the secrecy and misplaced priorities of the opposition. When Luke describes how Stephen performs signs and wonders he uses a specific verb tense in the original language that refers to an ongoing and repeated action in the past. In a sense, Stephen was continually reflecting God’s grace as he performed signs and wonders. The opposition was sly; Stephen was courageous.

So, with these things in mind, enter back into the accusation of Acts 6:11: Blasphemy. If blasphemy is speaking a slanderous, untrue word about God, we ought to ask a pivotal question of the text. Namely, who is it in Acts 6 that is guilty of blasphemy? It is certainly not Stephen. In Acts 6:8-15 we can see that it is not the accused, but the accusers who are guilty of blasphemy. May we learn from their example and be bold in the face of opposition like Stephen.

**Big Idea: Despite accusation, Christians ought to boldly communicate the Gospel.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** The accusers were guilty of prioritizing Mosaic tradition over Jesus. How might we also be guilty of prioritizing things over Christ?

**Week 18: Acts 6:8-15**

**Day 4: The Right to Remain Silent**

**READ: Luke 21:10-19**

**EXPLORE:**

You have the right to remain silent. There is perhaps no sentence that is more famous in police television than, “You have the right to remain silent.” This familiar sentence is known as the Miranda warning. It is a type of notification that is given by police when an individual is taken into custody. As its name would suggest, a Miranda warning advises an individual who is under arrest of their right to not answer questions or provide information that might be self-incriminating. Hopefully, you have never heard these fateful words directly. Regardless, you are probably familiar with the idea.

Contrary to the rights for those who are being detained, the believer does NOT have the right to remain silent. Now, there are moments when it is both wise and prudent to remain silent. Jesus was largely silent before the Sanhedrin. As Christ-followers, we ought to be good listeners and slow to speak. Nonetheless, the reality remains, we do not have the ultimate right to remain silent about the truth of the Gospel. The Christian does not have the right to remain silent.

In the case of Stephen, we have an example of a Christ-follower in the heat of accusations who refused to stay silent. He was not arrogant, and he was not brash. He simply continued to speak and confound those who brought accusations against him. From the way that Luke structures this back-and-forth in the wording of the original language, it is clear that the opposition was continually unable to refute Stephen’s logic. There is no indication in Acts 6 or 7 that Stephen was exceptionally smart, well-educated or simply a better debater than the others. We should attribute his upper hand in the debate to the fact that he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In Luke 21:10-19 Jesus promised that His followers would experience both hardship and persecution. Stephen is a living testament to this reality. He is a dying example of this truth as well. There may be times in which it is wiser to listen and more sensible to not speak, but the reality is that Christ-followers cannot help but speak about what they have experienced in the Gospel!

**Big Idea: Opposition often provides the opportunity to communicate truth.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** How have you learned to balance choosing to be silent and choosing to speak up in different situations?
* **Activity**: After reading Luke 21:10-19 what are some principles and truths that you see in the text. Write your observations, pray through them and share with your LifeGroup.

**Week 18: Acts 6:8-15**

**Day 5: Face Like an Angel**

**READ: Exodus 34:29-35 and Acts 6:15**

**EXPLORE:**

Far too often the idea of angels conjures up rather awkward images of cloud-riding plump babies carrying harps. For all of the biblical portrayals of angels, there are a wide range of misconceptions and misunderstandings. To provide clarity and deeper understanding on Acts 6:15, today’s study will intentionally focus on the manner in which Stephen possessed a face like an angel.

When Luke describes Stephen’s face like that of an angel, he certainly did not mean that it was pasty in complexion or docile in nature. Throughout Scripture, angels consistently invoke awe and fear in those they encounter. Most likely, Luke is intending to highlight the purity and potency of Stephen’s character as it was evidenced in his appearance. Stephen was not the first biblical character whose face shone as a result of a divine encounter and empowerment.

After Moses received the Law and spent time with God on Mount Sinai, his face glowed powerfully. In fact, Moses’s face shone so brightly that it terrified the onlookers and was eventually covered by a veil. Ironically, the Jews who were opposing Stephen for speaking against Moses were looking intently into a face that glowed in the same way as their beloved prophet. Stephen’s face literally glowed and it testified as a reminder of how he was a grace-filled and godly servant of Jesus Christ.

When Christ revealed His glory in the transfiguration, we are told that His face shone like the sun and His clothes were white as light.[[5]](#footnote-5) Once again, we are reminded that Stephen is acting as a faithful prophet and witness. With a face like an angel, the truthfulness of Stephen’s witness is visible even if it is unreceived by those around him. The irony of his truthfulness and their resistance presents a powerful dynamic.

Simply, there will be many times in which the witness of the Church will be well-reasoned, God-honoring and pure even though it is opposed and rejected. Our call is to reflect the goodness of God in our faithfulness toward living out our faith. Our primary mission is toward faithfulness as we trust God to bring about the fruit.

**Big Idea: The Christian ought to reflect the glorious nature of God through faithful witness.**

**APPLY:**

* **Questions:** Why do you think the people didn’t respond well to Stephen even though his face was like an angel?

**Week 19: Acts 7:1-53**

**Day 1: Creating an Outline for Acts 7**

**READ: Acts 7:1-53**

**EXPLORE:**

One tool for scriptural study that often proves very helpful is the creation of an exegetical outline. In an exegetical outline, the student of Scripture aims to better understand the biblical author’s intended meaning by organizing the passage according to its structure.

Why create an outline:

There are three primary reasons for creating an exegetical outline. First, an outline should help us understand the logical flow and points of connection in such a large passage. Second, an outline will help us to create a framework for the passage without leaving out any major details. Third, purposeful, biblical study is God-honoring.

How to create an outline:

The completion of an exegetical outline involves studying the text in various sizes and identifying major themes.

**STEPS**:

1. Identify major sections of Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:1-53 and write down their verse numbers.
2. Identify smaller subsections of the passage that make up the major sections you identified in step 1.
3. Next to both the major section titles (step 1) and the smaller subsections (step 2) write out brief, corresponding descriptions.
4. After you have created your outline, write down some overarching themes that you have observed.

This process may sound more complicated than it is. Do not be discouraged or intimidated. For the purpose of today’s study of in Acts, you are going to create your own exegetical outline of Stephen’s speech.

**Activity**: In the space below or on a piece of scrap paper, work to create your own exegetical outline of Acts 7:1-53. Complete it with large sections, subsections, and major themes.

**Week 19: Acts 7:1-53**

**Day 2: Major Themes in Acts 7**

**READ: Acts 7:1-53**

**EXPLORE:**

As we see at the end of Acts 6, Stephen is brought before the Jewish council and is falsely accused of speaking against the temple in Jerusalem and the law of Moses. He is brought before the council for preaching Christ and here in Acts 7 Stephen gives his defense for this message. Stephen is going to demonstrate that what he preaches is consistent with the faith of the Old Covenant and how Christ is the fulfillment of that covenant. In this WTL we will be focusing on the major themes of Stephen’s speech.

The first major theme of Stephen’s speech is that the presence of God is not restricted to any one land or to any one building. The God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, not Jerusalem. God also appeared to Joseph in Egypt and to Moses and the people of God in the wilderness. Stephen also makes mention how God commanded Moses to set up the tent of witness (or tabernacle) to travel with the people in their sojourning’s. The tabernacle was a physical symbol of God’s divine presence with his people. The temple that Solomon built was also not able to contain God’s presence. In other words, Stephen’s message is that the divine presence is found in the person of Jesus. Those who worship Him, will worship in spirit and in truth, and not in a specific land or temple. Stephen is demonstrating that God has worked this way in the past and he is working in this way again.

The next major theme of Stephen’s speech is that just as God’s messengers in the past were rejected, so now Jesus is being rejected by them. The patriarchs were jealous of Joseph and initially rejected him as their brother. Jesus came to his own (his brethren) and his own did not receive him. When Moses first felt called to free his brethren from Egyptian slavery, they did not understand and rejected him as a ruler and leader of the people. This rejected leader would eventually go on to perform wonders and signs before the eyes of the people and would even go on to say that God would raise up a prophet like him from among the people of Israel. Moses received living oracles from God to give to the people. Jesus also performed many wonders and signs before the people. He received His words from the Father and yet he was rejected by the people. He was a prophet like Moses. The people of Israel persecuted the prophets that God had sent to them throughout their History. The council before which Stephen now stands is doing the same thing, rejecting the prophet (Jesus) that God has sent them.

**Big Idea:** God’s presence was never meant to be confined to one place and God’s messengers have historically been rejected. These truths point to the fact that Jesus is both Lord and Christ.

**APPLY:**

* **Activity:** We worship a God who cannot be contained in any one location or house. God is everywhere. **Read** Psalm 139:7-12 and meditate on how this should inform your worship.

**Week 19: Acts 7:1-53**

**Day 3: Abraham: God keeps His word**

**READ: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 15:13-14 and Acts 7:1-8**

**EXPLORE:**

If we are not careful, we can miss the fact that Acts 7 is a well-reasoned response to a question that the Sanhedrin asked Stephen. In summary, the council that was accusing Stephen wanted to know if the allegations against him were indeed true. Instead of directly providing an answer, Stephen chose to expand the scope of the question. Simply, Stephen chose to draw on common Jewish history to point toward Christ. Today, we will take a look at how Abraham’s story (1) reflects God’s heart and (2) points toward Christ.

One major feature that is emphasized in Genesis and in Acts 7 is the manner in which God reaches out to Abraham in a foreign land. The overarching point that Stephen is making is that God called Abraham from a pagan land and into His plan. Even while Abraham lived in a foreign land, God chose to reveal His glory and commission him.

By emphasizing how God called Abraham from ancient Mesopotamia, Stephen is highlighting how God initiated and sustained Abraham’s journey from start to finish. The goal of God’s call on Abraham’s life was true and free worship. God promised land, offspring, and blessing for Abraham.[[6]](#footnote-6) Not only is God a God of great promises, but He is a keeper of His word.

Fundamentally, Abraham is a prime example of a promise-fulfillment pattern that resonates throughout Scripture. God is a promise keeper. This is one of the essential ideas that Stephen is trying desperately to reveal to those he refers to as both “brothers and fathers.” The same faithful God of Abraham had delivered the promised Messiah, Jesus. The same goodness of God that was clear in the Abrahamic covenant had shown up again in the gracious sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The land, offspring, and blessing that was intended to lead into genuine, free worship had been secured through the resurrection of Jesus. God always keeps His word.

**Big Idea: By drawing from the life of Abraham, Stephen is connecting the heart of God with what has been accomplished in Christ. Namely, God keeps His word.**

**APPLY:**

* **Question:** What are some examples in Scripture and in your life of God keeping His Word? Write some down to share with your LifeGroup.

**Week 19: Acts 7:1-53**

**Day 4: Joseph: God saves His people**

**READ: Acts 7:9-22**

**EXPLORE:**

“*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many peopleshould be kept alive, as they are today*.” – Genesis 50:20

These are the words spoken by a man who was born with destiny, betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, sent to a distant land, imprisoned unjustly, and yet powerfully effective for God’s purposes. When the book of Genesis tells the full story of Joseph’s life, it takes more than a dozen chapters to communicate. In a sense, Genesis slows down when it recounts the story of Joseph.

In biblical study, the author’s pace is an important thing to notice. When the Bible slows down to emphasize details and narratives, we should learn to pay close attention. In the New Testament for example, the authors all slow down to highlight details in the week leading up to the crucifixion of Christ. In much the same way, the life of Joseph is given an incredible amount of literary space in the book of Genesis.

The story of Joseph was not only important to the author of Genesis and ancient Israel, but it was also a crucial piece of evidence for Stephen’s speech in Acts 7. Joseph is among the great figures in the Jewish faith. Stephen references him to show what God has emphatically accomplished through Christ. There are a few fundamental points that Stephen is articulating in the story of Joseph.

First, Joseph experienced opposition in Egypt, but most notably from his family. Second, what was intended to bring about Joseph’s destruction had been used for good. Third, the preservation and eventual exultation of Joseph’s life story was used to save a multitude. Each of these three ideas communicated in Acts 7:9-22 connects powerfully to the life of Christ.

Even though the Sanhedrin would not have recognized the ultimate point to which Stephen was building in the telling of Joseph’s story, we can see the connection clearly now. Like the brothers of Joseph, the Sanhedrin stood in hostility. Even though the council had intended evil, God had brought about something good through Christ. Despite the opposition, the victory of Christ has brought about salvation for many.

**Big Idea: Stephen uses the story of Joseph to highlight the salvific nature of Christ.**

**APPLY:**

* **Question:** In your own words, why do you think Stephen chose to include Joseph’s story in his speech about Christ?

**Week 19: Acts 7:1-53**

**Day 5: Questions about Communicating Conviction**

**READ: Acts 7:51-53**

**EXPLORE:**

One of the challenges of studying such a large biblical text in one week is that we cannot possibly expose every worthwhile truth, helpful insight, or point of application. For example, after four studies, we have not even broached the concluding criticism Stephen gives his audience in Acts 7:51-53. That is the purpose of our activity today.

My encouragement to you is to continue studying, reading, thinking, and praying that the Lord would reveal His Word and help you apply it in everyday life.

**Take time to consider these questions about Acts 7:51-53 and write down notes to share with your LifeGroup?**

* **Question:** Stephen calls them “stiff-necked.” What does this phrase mean? Where else has this phrase been used in the Bible? Why do you think Stephen chose to call them “stiff-necked” in light of how it had previously been used in the Bible?
* **Question**: We are told in Acts 7:51 that they always resisted the Holy Spirit. In the Greek, the idea is running or striving against something. What is an example of striving against (*always resisting*) the Holy Spirit?
* **Question**: Stephen references an *uncircumcision of hearts and ears*. What do you think that phrase means? How would you communicate the idea in your own words?
* **Question**: Throughout the speech, Stephen alludes to a shared Jewish heritage by saying “our fathers.” At the end, however, Stephen switches the pronoun used to “your fathers.” Why do you think he did that in Acts 7:51-53?

**Week 20: Acts 7:54-60**

**Day 1: Grinding Teeth**

**READ: Acts 7:54-60, John 1:14 and Matthew 8:10-12**

**EXPLORE:**

As we have covered previously, Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to assist the apostles. He had a good reputation, lived out wisdom, and was filled with the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, he is the only other person apart from Christ who is described as being “*full of grace*.”

Stephen, following the leadership of the Holy Spirit, was exactly where he was supposed to be on that fateful day. He woke up that day, destined to preach the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts. Even though Stephen’s face was like an angel, the council failed to truly recognize what was occurring before their very eyes. In a sense, they had eyes, but could not see.

Just as their ancestors had resisted and killed the prophets of old, they too rejected not only Christ, but also His messenger, Stephen. Because of his knowledge and wisdom, these men could not overcome Stephen. This only angered them more. We need to notice that Stephen took a very serious and bold risk by telling these leaders of Israel the truth about themselves. He did not hesitate or hold back, saying, “You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”

By criticizing their ancestors and implicating the entire council before him in the murder of Jesus Christ, evil was unleased in raging murderous hatred, upon this man of God. We ought to contrast how the council ground their teeth at him with murderous intent and the innocent intensity of Stephen’s gaze as he strictly focuses in on heaven. Despite the visceral nature of their anger, Stephen’s eyes remained unwaveringly fixed on his savior.

Although the Sanhedrin managed to shut the mouth of this man of God with stones, God ordained his entire sermon to be included in the Word of God, for all future generations to read.

**BIG IDEA: Stephen is a shining example of what it looks like to live courageously for Christ and speak the truth in love no matter the personal cost.**

**APPLY:**

* **QUESTION:** Stephen spoke the truth in love, but he was stoned for it. How do you respond to messages of truth spoken to you?
* **Activity:** Read Hebrews 11:35 and Mark 8:38. Share with your Life Group how living boldly for Christ, applies to your own life. What are your struggles or concerns?

**Week 20: Acts 7:54-60**

**Day 2: Why is Jesus Standing?**

**READ: Acts 7:54-58, Psalm 110:1, Isaiah 3:13-14a, and Acts 2:34-38**

**EXPLORE:**

One important, but often overlooked detail in the martyrdom of Stephen is the vision of Christ that he is given before his dying breath. In the moments before his execution, Stephen said, “*Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God*.” Even though this statement is well-known, a crucial question often remains unasked. Namely, what is the significance of Jesus standing next to the right hand of God? It is important to note that Jesus was not merely sitting but standing at God’s right hand. What does this mean and why does it matter? It is to this end that today’s Word to Life Study is directed.

If you have not done so already, please take time to read through the passages listed above. Each of these texts will prove valuable as we dive into this important aspect of Stephen’s story. One prevalent understanding of Stephen’s actions was that Jesus was standing and not sitting in order to welcome the faithful servant into heaven. If this was the only possible meaning, it would not explain why the council stopped their ears and rushed to stone Stephen. In order to understand this more fully, we need to look at some other references.

In Psalm 110:1 we are told that the LORD says to my Lord, “*Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool*.” The LORD has given His Word and will not change His mind. Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. He will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth (110:4-6). The LORD has taken His place to contend; He stands as a victorious and righteous judge. Jesus is found standing at the right hand of the Father as one who is ready and able to judge and exist in victory.

The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people (Isaiah 3:13-14a). Peter’s famous sermon at Pentecost interprets Psalm 110:1 for the men of Israel: “*This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are now seeing and hearing*.”

This council of priests before Stephen would have been very familiar with these prophecies and they would have understood Stephen to be saying, “Jesus is the Lord.” In saying these things, Stephen is implying that, in their opposition to Christ, the onlookers are enemies of the true Lord and Judge. They, as the council over Stephen, believed they had the power and authority to judge and condemn Stephen to death. Stephen’s vision is a testimony that they have a Judge that is in the heavens and stands to make the final decision.

**BIG IDEA: Jesus is the ultimate and final authority as judge of all humanity.**

**APPLY:**

* **Question**: How do you think you can be reminded that Jesus is the ultimate judge and authority when the circumstance around you seems to be indicating something else?

**Week 20: Acts 7:54-60**

**Day 3: The Response to Stephen**

**READ: Acts 7:54-8:3**

**EXPLORE:**

The hope and prayer of this week’s study of Acts 7 is that you would get immersed in the testimony Stephen, that you would get caught up in the intensity of the moment, and that you would be awe-struck by the Christ-like example of this man. Everything about Acts 7:54-60 is visceral and penetrating. Stephen is given a powerful vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Instead of responding with humility and repentance, Stephen’s persecutors violently react.

We are told in Acts 7:57 that they, “*stopped their ears from hearing*.” The idea in the original language is that the former listeners pressed their hands against their ears in an attempt to hear no more. The idea in the ancient world was that blasphemous sayings about God were not only dangerous to the mind, but to the soul. The best way to keep from being defiled, in their estimation, was to yell aloud, block their hearing, and rush toward Stephen. Their response to conviction is a refusal to listen.

The response of this crowd should be contrasted in our minds by the reaction of the crowd to Peter’s Pentecost speech in Acts 2:37. Instead of allowing the message to be heard with humility, this crowd in Acts 7 chose to mute the message and ultimately the messenger.

They did not only forcefully block their ears from hearing, but they chose to drag Stephen out of the city. In the same way that Jesus was taken out from the city, the hostility toward the Christ-followers has undeniably escalated to new levels. They did not carry out a formal legal process, but instead chose to stone Stephen on what seemed to be blasphemy.[[7]](#footnote-7) In these actions against Stephen, they quite literally confirm the accusations that were brought against them. Just like their ancestors, they had hardened hearts and killed the prophets.

Our hearts should not only yearn to witness faithfully like Stephen, but we should also be careful to respond to rebuke rightly.

**Big Idea: Instead of hearing with humility, their pride brought them to mute the messenger.**

**APPLY**:

* **Question:** How can we grow in our ability to respond rightly to rebuke?

**Week 20: Acts 7:54-60**

**Day 4: Receive My Spirit**

**READ: Acts 7:59 and Luke 23:46**

**EXPLORE:**

We have been looking at the execution of Stephen, the first martyr of the early Church.In our reading today we want to focus on some of Stephen’s last words. While he is being executed, he cries out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Stephen has been faithfully preaching Christ in the synagogues. Now he offers up this faith-filled prayer directly to Christ. Stephen had been preaching that Jesus was the only mediator between God and man (the only way of salvation) and now he models that saving faith. Stephen’s prayer is faith-filled in that he calls Jesus Lord, he believes Jesus is in heaven, and that Jesus can receive his spirit. Stephen’s short prayer testifies that Jesus is the ruler of heaven and earth, that He sits on the heavenly throne, and that He is in control of the souls of humanity. Stephen’s short prayer points to the divinity of Christ.

Stephen’s prayer also reminds us of Jesus’ prayer on the cross (Luke 23:46). While Jesus was being executed, he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” This was also a faith-filled prayer by Jesus. Even though He was being crucified and in His human nature temporarily forsaken by God (Matthew 27:46), Jesus kept the faith that His actions were approved of by God and that the Father would ultimately vindicate Him. This is the same faith Stephen had. However, this is one important difference in their prayers. Jesus directed His prayer to the Father. Stephen directed His prayer to Jesus. Jesus is carrying out the same function as the Father demonstrating that the Father and the Son are One.

In Jesus’ death, false witnesses were produced, and they charged Jesus with blasphemy. In Stephen’s death, false witnesses were produced, and they charged Stephen with blasphemy. During Jesus’ execution, He prayed for his executioners to be forgiven and for God to receive His spirit. During Stephen’s execution, he prayed for his executioners to be forgiven and for God to receive his spirit. Stephen models Christ so exceptionally well for us. He truly shared in the sufferings of Christ and now he is sharing in the glory of Christ. Soli Deo Gloria

**Big Idea**: Stephen entrusted his soul into the hands of his dear Savior Jesus.

**Apply:** As Christians we all aspire to a faithful ending to this life.How can we look at Stephen’s faithful ending as a model for our own?

Stephen demonstrates that prayers do not have to be long to be faithful or powerful. Name some other short faith-filled prayers in the Bible and try to come up with a few of your own that you can use throughout your day:

**Week 20: Acts 7:54-60**

**Day 5: Forgiveness: A Survival Guide for the Soul**

**READ:** Acts 7:60, Luke 23:34, and Matthew 6:7-15

**EXPLORE:**

“*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*.”

—Ephesians 4:32

These are the words of a man who was in the crowd the day that Stephen was murdered for his faith. On that fateful day recorded in Acts 7, a notorious man named Saul was in attendance. But thanks be to God that the same Christ and the same Spirit that was at work in the ministry of Stephen would one day redeem and transform the life of Saul as well. This is the power of forgiveness made possible in Jesus.

With his last words, the life of Stephen echoed the forgiveness that was ultimately offered in Christ. From the cross, Jesus called out to heaven, saying, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*.” In much the same way, Stephen said, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*.” Stephen was able to request forgiveness for his abusers, because he encountered the one who ultimately forgives sin. Even though his earthly life was brought to an end, the beautiful and powerful legacy of Christ was allowed to live on through the power of forgiveness.

No matter what situation we might face in life, the transformative power made available through the forgiveness of Christ makes it possible for us not only to survive, but to thrive. A survival guide is intended to provide its users with a handbook for how to endure challenging and harsh environments. Wilderness survival guides would tell you how to find food, build shelter, and stay alive.

Similarly, the forgiveness we experience in Christ and now put into practice through our lives is a survival guide for our souls. It prepares us for the unknown and it equips us for the harsh environments of our world. God-honoring forgiveness may not protect our physical lives, but it will save our souls.

**Big Idea: The forgiveness of Christ ought to be evident in our lives as we persevere and reflect the compassion of Christ.**

**APPLY**:

* **Question:** Forgiving others and being forgiven can both be complicated actions. In what ways have you found it hard to forgive and/or be forgiven by others?
* **Activity**: Pray that God would work in your life in regard to forgiveness or a lack thereof.



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1. Genesis 38:11 and Leviticus 22:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ruth 1:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Greek and Hebrew Scriptures combine for more than 100 references to widows. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 1:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew 17:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Genesis 12:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Leviticus 24:14 and Numbers 15:35 speak to the punitive requirements for blasphemy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)