

# Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”  
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)*

1	<b><u>The Ministry And Martyrdom Of Stephen</u></b> <b>February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023</b> <b>Acts 6:8-8:1</b> <b>Rev. Paul Carter</b>
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## **Introduction:**

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 6:8; that’s on page 914 in the pew Bibles. Today we are going to be reading and discussing the martyrdom of Stephen. We are going to be reading a large chunk of Scripture today – if you have your Bible open to Acts 6 – look at it for just a moment. Acts 6:8-15 gives us a bit of a preamble – it tells us that Stephen was full of grace and power and he soon found himself in conflict the leaders of a particular synagogue in Jerusalem. We mentioned last week that Stephen was one of The Seven who were appointed to oversee the ministry to the large influx of Greek Speaking Jews – well there were already people trying to exercise influence with those sorts of people and they immediately came into conflict with Stephen. This synagogue was the “home church” you might say, for all Greek speaking pilgrims and immigrants to Jerusalem – now here comes Stephen and he is completely undercutting their entire ministry. Their ministry was all about the temple and the Law – but Stephen’s main message was about how Jesus had superseded and replaced those things. He was the meeting place with God now – he had fulfilled and properly interpreted the Law. He was the Word of God, the Great High Priest, the Atoning Sacrifice – he was EVERYTHING and these Greek speaking synagogue leaders didn’t want to hear it. So there was conflict. Bitter conflict and it ended in Stephen’s death.

That’s the story.

Now, look at your Bibles again. Look at chapter 7. That's Stephen's speech. It is the longest speech or sermon recorded in the Book of Acts. It is longer than anything Peter ever said. It is longer than anything Paul ever said – so that's Luke's way of telling us that this is important. The word count for this entire story is really quite shocking. We talked last week about how The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are both about the same size – because that was the length of scroll that Luke had access to. So, obviously he had to make choices. He had to think about what stories to include and what stories to leave on the cutting room floor. He had to PLAN and PRIORITIZE.

So why did Luke include this story? And even more intriguing – why did Luke choose to give this story such a HUGE CHUNK of real estate in the middle of this book? What did Stephen say and why did it matter? That's what we're going to be looking at today. Strap in. Take a deep breath. Blink your eyes a few times because we are about to read a very long chunk of Holy Scripture. We'll start at Acts 6:8 and we'll read all of chapter 7 and then we'll end on Acts chapter 8 verse 1.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

<sup>1</sup> And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

<sup>2</sup> 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, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ <sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, <sup>16</sup> 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.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Alright – obviously if we’re going to read a large chunk of Scripture like that then we’ll need to be fairly economical in terms of the observations we make, so we’ll content ourselves with two angles of inquiry here; we’ll talk about Stephen’s sermon in particular and Stephen’s story in general.

Let’s start first with the sermon.

15	<b>Stephen’s Sermon</b>
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In these 53 verses Stephen walks his hearers through several pivotal eras in Israel’s history in order to make two incisive points. The first one is this; Stephen claims that:

17	<b>1. The Jewish people have a long history of rejecting the Deliverers God sends</b>
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In the patriarchal era, Stephen reminds his hearers that their forefathers hated and persecuted Joseph whom God had sent to save the family of Israel from poverty and famine. We’ve been reading that story for the last several days in the RMM. The climax of that story is found in Genesis 45. When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers he says:

19	“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Genesis 45:7–8 ESV)
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His brothers, you may recall, were trying to kill Joseph. They threw him down a well and then they decided that it would be better to make some money out of the deal than simply to let him starve or drown, so they hauled him up and sold him as a slave to the Ishmaelites, who in turn, sold him as a slave to Potiphar.

“That’s how you treated the first Deliverer that God sent to you”, Stephen says.

“And it didn’t stop there. Later in the story when you fell into slavery in Egypt God sent you ANOTHER DELIVERER, Moses and you rejected and rebelled against him as well.

This is a pattern for you.

Which of the prophets did your forefathers not stone?

You consistently reject and persecute, mistreat and even MURDER the Saviours, redeemers, prophets and deliverers that God sends. That’s your M.O.”, Stephen says.

The second thing he says is no less cutting. He says that:

21	<b>2. The Jewish people have an idolatrous and overly local understanding of God</b>
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In each of these eras or epochs that Stephen surveys he is careful to point out that God’s presence and activity were not restricted to the physical territory of Israel. So he starts his story by reminding them that:

23	“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia” (Acts 7:2 ESV)
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Then he spends a fair bit of time talking about Egypt – and then near the end he reminds them that the temple in Jerusalem was never meant to function as a CAGE for God – he quotes Psalm 11:4 where God says:

25	‘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?’ (Acts 7:49–50 ESV)
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He reminds them that God had to frequently REBUKE their idolatrous and overly local understanding of him – even in the Old Testament. The Jewish people always wanted to tie God down. They never let God speak for himself. Stephen reminds them that while Moses was up on

the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments, they were down in the valley constructing an idol – so that they could control God and worship him on their own terms.

“You are idolatrous, short-sighted and tribal”, Stephen says, “and you always have been.”

Remember, the charge against Stephen was that he was speaking against the Temple and the Law – we read the charge in Acts 6:13. The witnesses said:

27	“This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> 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.” (Acts 6:13–14 ESV)
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When they brought Stephen to trial the High Priest said:

29	“Are these things so?” (Acts 7:1 ESV)
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“Is your religion going to destroy the centrality of the temple and the distinctiveness of the Jewish Law” – that’s what they’re asking – and Stephen says: “You better believe it!! Jesus is the temple now; Jesus is our Teacher now; Jesus is our nation now; Jesus is everything – and I’m not surprised that you rejected him because you always reject the Redeemers that God sends and you have always revered this temple and revered this Law as if it was THE GOAL rather than a temporary means. You never got it; so colour me SHOCKED that you don’t get it today.”

That’s Stephen’s speech – and like I said, it is the longest speech recorded in the Book of Acts, by a country mile. It is 5.5 times as long as Peter’s speech to the Household of Cornelius, which was the first time the Gospel was preached to an entirely Gentile audience. It is 4.5 times as long as Paul’s speech to the philosophers on Mars Hill. It is 2.5 times as long as Paul’s speech to the angry Jewish mob in Acts 22 and it is twice as long as Paul’s speech before Agrippa and Festus in Acts 26.

So why in the world does Luke give it SO MUCH PRIME REAL ESTATE in the heart of the Acts of the Apostles? Why does this story about Stephen – who wasn’t even an Apostle to begin

with – receive so much attention and focus? That’s the question I want to turn to now. I want to zoom out from the sermon in particular to look at the story of Stephen in general and to consider why it is that Luke assigns to it such significance.

31	<b>Stephen’s Story</b>
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I think the first thing we can say is this; the story is important because:

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| 33 | <b>1. It establishes an expectation of resistance, rejection and death for those who follow Jesus</b> |
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If you look like Jesus, and you speak like Jesus, then you may die like Jesus – that seems to be the message of the story. I’m sure you noticed all the similarities between Stephen’s death and Jesus’ death. Both were convicted on the basis of false testimony. Both cried out to God at the moment of death asking him to receive their spirit. Both prayed for their persecutors. Stephen said:

35-36	“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:60 ESV)  Jesus said: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 ESV)
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Those similarities are not accidental. Luke is saying that those who look like Jesus and who speak like Jesus may be required to die like Jesus.

The New Testament makes no effort whatsoever to SOFT SELL this expectation, and you should know that. The Bible isn’t saying that this will happen to everyone, but it is putting it out there as part of the GENERAL PATTERN. How could it not? Afterall, Jesus said:

38	“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. <sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” (John 15:18–20 ESV)
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If you depart from the common values and assumptions of the culture – if you refuse to go along with the errors and idolatries of the day – if you dare to stand opposed to the spirit of the age – then don't be surprised if the world hates you.

A servant is not greater than the Master.

The bottom line is that if you follow Jesus, then you must expect opposition and hostility from the world.

That's the PATTERN!

Peace, majority status, cultural privilege – those things are the exception! Resistance, rejection, marginalization and sometimes even martyrdom, represent the norm.

Are you ready for that?

Because the NORM may be coming back in this culture.

There are only a handful of people in this room who have ever had to pay any kind of significant price for following Jesus. I doubt very much whether we'll be able to say the same thing 20 or even 10 years from now.

So count the cost.

The second thing, I think we want to say here is that this story is important because:

40	<b>2. It reminds us that pressure and persecution are aspects of God's perfect plan</b>
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Look at how Luke frames this story. Right after Stephen dies at the end of chapter 7, look at what Luke says at the start of chapter 8. He says:



42	And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. <sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:1–4 ESV)
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I'm sure you've all heard the expression: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" – well that's exactly what we're seeing in this story. The death of Stephen – as tragic as it was – led to the conversion of the Apostle Paul and to the extension of the Gospel mission beyond the confines of the city of Jerusalem. This day, this tragic story – represented a critical HINGE in the history of the movement.

In all probability, left to her own devices, the church would never have left the confines of Jerusalem. That would always have been homebase and being that connected to the nation of Israel would always have been a hindrance to their mission. And so actually, what felt like a setback, was in reality positioning them for a great leap forward.

That's how it works – we've seen that again and again and again.

We see that to some extent over COVID, didn't we? What felt like a setback might have been a great leap forward – COVID shut our buildings down – no worries, we went on the internet. Was that what we wanted? No! But it may have facilitated a great leap forward. Every little church out there figured out how to put their services online. Every church out there figured out how to deliver the Gospel in digital form – do you think that might turn out to be helpful in the years and decades ahead?

That's the picture here. The devil slams a window and the Holy Spirit kicks open that door. And by hook or by crook, the Kingdom continues to advance.

This is what Jesus was talking about in that weird little parable in Matthew 13. Jesus said:

44	“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” (Matthew 13:33 ESV)
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That’s exactly what we’re seeing in this story! A little pressure over here, moves the Gospel over there. Gospel flourishing over there returns as invitation and argument over here.

That’s not a BUG that’s a FEATURE! The Apostle Paul talked about that in Romans 11:13-15; he said:

46	“Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Romans 11:13–15 ESV)
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Paul says I’m working hard to produce fruit over here, where I’ve been forced, so that eventually it will a compelling argument over back over there, from whence I’ve been exiled - do you see how this process works?

Applied to our own contemporary situation, I think this is actually reason for tremendous hope. As we in the West begin to abandon our Christian heritage, and as the church in the West continues to pour resources into the developing world, people here may soon begin to look with envy upon nations and cultures out there that are flourishing under the power of the Gospel.

Can you imagine that day?

We need to begin PRAYING for that day! Let’s pray for Gospel growth and flourishing in Africa, China and Iran to stir up jealousy and to return here as ARGUMENT, because apparently, that has always been part of the plan.

This is how the Sovereign Lord of the universe stirs the pot! This is how he works the yeast into 3 measures of dough. This is how he brings salvation, life and renewal to people from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth - thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.