Stephen, the Unwavering Martyr

Acts 6:7-10; 7:54-60
SS Lesson for 08/09/2026

Devotional Scripture: 2 Tim 1:7-10

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Key Verse: Acts 6:8

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Allows forgiveness because God commands loving enemies (Matt 5:44)
Allows forgiveness because Jesus provided the example to do this (Luke 23:34)
Allows forgiveness because God will handle the vengeance (Rom 12:17-19)
Allows forgiveness because God forgave us (Matt 6:14)
Allows forgiveness regardless of the number of times someone harms us (Luke 17:3-4)
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CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH
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Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today's lesson presents a servant of God who faced a catastrophic blow. It was a blow that led directly to his death. The story of God's servants is stained with the blood of prophets and apostles who paid the price for speaking the truth, and today's lesson presents this reality in vivid detail. The book of Acts begins the story of the earliest church by focusing on its development within Jerusalem. The theme of "witnesses" in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) is like of a "Table of Contents" for Acts as it sketches the birth of the church. The narrative starts with events on the Day of Pentecost (2:1-41). Predominant in the account is the divine power behind the dynamic Jerusalem fellowship. The church increased in number from only about 120 believers to more than 3,000 in a single day (compare 1:15; 2:41). The number of believers in Jerusalem continued to increase over the weeks and months after Pentecost (Acts 2:47b; 5:14; 6:1). The expanding number of believers led them to develop habits for their gatherings and expectations for how they would treat each other (2:42-47a; 4:32-35). During that time, almost all followers of Jesus were of Jewish heritage. However, not all had the same cultural upbringing. Some had adopted elements of Greek culture while living in the Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) portions of the Roman Empire (compare 9:29), while others lived in Jewish regions of Palestine. The distinction between Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews was revealed in a conflict regarding the treatment of widows (6:1). To resolve conflict, the Twelve selected seven men "full of the Spirit and wisdom" to handle food distribution to the needy. These men included Stephen (Acts 6:3-5).

Key Verse: Acts 6:8

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

A Unwavering Servant in Ministry (Acts 6:7-10)

7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.
8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.
9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.
10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

A ministry with power (7-8)

Power that is glorious (2 Cor 3:7-11)

7 Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? 9 If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! 10 For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. 11 And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Power that is at work in us (Gal 2:8)

8 For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Power that comes from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:4-5)

4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Power that is part of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 4:20)

20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

Divine power (2 Cor 10:3-6)

3 For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 6 And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

Power that strengthens the inner being (Eph 3:16)

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

Power of the gospel (1 Thess 1:5)

5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

Power that keeps one from being ashamed to testify about God (2 Tim 1:8)

8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,

A ministry that can't be resisted (9-10)

Can't be resisted because it is God who empowers the ministry (Ex 4:11-12)

11 The LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."

Can't be resisted because it is of the Holy Spirit (Matt 10:19-20)

19 But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, 20 for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Can't be resisted because God gives the words and wisdom (Luke 21:15)

15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

Can't be resisted because it is like fighting with God (Acts 5:38-39)

38 Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. 39 But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Can't be resisted because it is based on God's power (1 Cor 2:4-5)

4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

A Unwavering Servant in Death (Acts 7:54-60)

54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.
55 But he, being 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 said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"
57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;
58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.
59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

A death that sees heaven versus earthly harm (54-56)

By fixing our eyes on the eternal (2 Cor 4:16-18)

> 16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

By realizing the present sufferings do not compare to the future glory (Rom 8:18)

> 18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

By having a living hope (1 Peter 1:3-7)

> 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

By the restoring of God (1 Peter 5:10)

> 10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

By regarding the future reward greater than the temporary pleasures of earth (Heb 11:24-26)

> 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

A death that can be caused and approved of by man (57-58)

Death can be caused by man, but fear God only (Matt 10:28)

> 28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Even though man can cause death, God wants us to be faithful to Him even to the point of death (Rev 2:10)

> 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Men who seek to cause death have no regard for God (Ps 54:3)

3 Strangers are attacking me; ruthless men seek my life — men without regard for God.

Ungodly and wicked men seek the death of the righteous (Prov 29:10)

10 Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity and seek to kill the upright.

Men who seek to cause death belong to Satan (1 John 3:12)

12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

A death that allows forgiveness (59-60)

Allows forgiveness because God commands loving enemies (Matt 5:44)

44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Allows forgiveness because Jesus provided the example to do this (Luke 23:34)

34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Allows forgiveness because God will handle the vengeance (Rom 12:17-19)

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Allows forgiveness because God forgave us (Matt 6:14)

14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Allows forgiveness regardless of the number of times someone harms us (Luke 17:3-4)

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Allows forgiveness because we are commanded to bear with others and to forgive them (Col 3:13)

13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Setting of Stephen's Sermon (6:8–7:1)

The "Hellenistic Jews"—those Jews born outside of Israel who migrated to Israel but who still had a separate language and culture derived from their exile—have already been introduced in Acts. They were those Jews who, at Pentecost, heard the apostles "**speaking of the mighty deeds of God"** in their own native tongues. It would not be unreasonable to assume that it was some of the "native Hebrews"—those Jews born and raised in Israel who spoke Aramaic or some Semitic language—who thought the sounds they heard (since they could not understand these foreign languages) were the mere mindless babblings of those who had had too much to drink (Acts 2:13).

Not until the neglect of the Hellenistic Jewish widows did this group actually emerge as a distinct entity in Acts. Here, in chapter 6, they had developed strong feelings of resentment toward the native Hebrews whom they held responsible, in some way, for the neglect of those widows from their own (Hellenistic Jewish) group. In the appointing of the seven men who would oversee the feeding of the widows from this point on, Stephen and Philip were selected, and their names were listed first (cf. Acts 6:5) with greater details given about them, especially Stephen.

Stephen was described as a man who was both "**full of the Spirit and wisdom"** (6:3) and as one who was "**full of faith and of the Holy Spirit"** (6:5). His ministry to Hellenistic widows seems to have put him in contact with a great many Hellenistic Jews. Among these people especially, and through Stephen, God accomplished many "**great wonders and signs"** (6:8). Feeding the widows gave Stephen a much greater exposure and the opportunity to function in a way that was similar to the twelve apostles.

The mention of Stephen's ability to perform "**signs and wonders"** is very significant. It seems to imply that Stephen was, or at least functioned similarly to, an apostle. Up to this point, only the apostles were said to have worked signs and wonders. Since the twelve apostles would remain in Jerusalem after the church was scattered (Acts 8:1), it would seem that Stephen (here) and Philip (Acts 8) would serve as apostles to a more diverse group.

We are not told how the power to perform signs and wonders came upon Stephen. Had we been told, we would probably find this viewed as a formula by which saints are to manipulate or persuade God into acting as we would desire. Every indication is that both Stephen and the apostles were surprised by his ability to perform such miracles. It was not because Stephen "prayed through" or went through the right formula that he was empowered by the Spirit as he was. Neither was it because of the apostles, of their training, of discipleship, or ordination that these signs and wonders were performed. The simplest explanation for the mighty power which Stephen possessed was that the sovereign God had purposed to make him an apostle, in His own time, and in His own way.

Characteristics of Stephen's Sermon

Before we begin to study the sermon of Stephen in greater detail, let us pause to look at the sermon as a whole and note some of its characteristics. Taking note of these will help us to understand its parts.

(1) This sermon is the longest recorded sermon in the Book of Acts. Stephen's sermon is twice as long as Peter's sermon delivered at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36).

(2) The sermon is not a defense but a response to the charges against him. If anything, Stephen's words are an indictment, not a defense. It is Stephen's answer to the question posed by the chief priest, "**Are these things so?"** (7:1)? The charges leveled against Stephen had to do with "**this holy place"**[101] and the "**customs handed down by Moses."** These are two of the major themes in Stephen's sermon.

(3) The sermon is not an evangelistic appeal. This may sound strange, but I believe it is clear, once one looks carefully at the text of the sermon. The content of Stephen's message is quite different from previous sermons in Acts. There is, for example, less emphasis upon Christ. There is also no reference to Christ's resurrection. And the conclusion of the sermon is very unique. There is no call to repentance but only a very strong accusation of guilt.

(4) Stephen's sermon is Scriptural.[102] One cannot imagine how any more Scripture could have been packed into this message. Much of the sermon is a direct quotation of Old Testament texts.[103] Virtually all of the rest of Stephen's words, as recorded in 7:2-50, are Stephen's summation of Scripture. Stephen is not like so many contemporary preachers who begin with a Scripture text never again to return to it. All of his message was Scripture. His conclusion was but an application of these Scriptures to his accusers.

(5) Stephen's sermon is a survey of the Old Testament and of Israel's history. Stephen begins his message with the call of Abraham, found in Genesis 12. He deals with a number of the major periods in Israel's history and with several of its prominent figures, including Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and the prophets.

(6) Stephen's message has a geographical orientation. Stephen's preaching seems to have focused to some degree on the coming judgment of God on Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple. The charge against him was that he spoke against "**this holy place."** Stephen's message thus has much to say about the places where God dealt with Israel. The sermon is a kind of "walk through the Old Testament," from Haran, outside the land where Abraham was called, to Egypt, back to Shechem where the patriarchs were buried, to the wilderness where Moses fled, to the holy mount where Moses was called, to Egypt again from which God delivered the enslaved nation of Israelites, to the wilderness, to the promised land, and finally to Babylon.

(7) Stephen's sermon was Spirit-filled. Stephen was described as a man who was "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (6:3) and also as a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5). Finally, he was described as "full of grace and power" (6:8). His opponents were unable to refute the "wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (6:10). His face shown like the face of an angel" (6:15). At the time of his death he was said to be "full of the Holy Spirit" (7:55). Surely no one can doubt that his sermon was Spirit-filled. And though it was Spirit-filled, no one is said to have come to faith as a result of hearing it.[104] Instead, Stephen paid for this sermon with his own life. It would be well for each of us to note that a man who was "full of the Holy Spirit" could find nothing better to say than the words of the Scriptures themselves.

(8) The sermon of Stephen supplies us with some details which the Old Testament does not supply. For example, Stephen tells us that Moses was "a man of power in words and deeds" (7:22). From Moses' excuses to God, for not serving as His spokesman to Pharaoh, one would have concluded that Moses was a poor public speaker (cf. Exodus 4:10). Furthermore, we are told (by a literal rendering of the text) that when Moses was placed in the basket, he was really "put out to die" (Acts 7:21).[105] Stephen's sermon is an inspired commentary on certain parts of the Old Testament Scriptures.

(9) In spite of the fact that Stephen's sermon had a very strong message of divine judgment, it was motivated by a loving and gracious spirit. Stephen was "full of grace," and the words of Stephen at the time of his death are a testimony to this fact. He was not an "angry young preacher," a hostile fellow belching forth the fire of hell. He was a man who loved his listeners, who prayed for their forgiveness and salvation. Paul was a delayed answer to this prayer. How the words and actions of Stephen must have stuck with Paul and even encouraged him in his hours of danger as he often brushed with death.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/11-stoning-stephen-acts-68-81)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Stephen's suffering was not in vain. The tragedy of his death led to the spread of the gospel (Acts 8:1-8). His Spirit-filled obedience to Christ empowered him to act selflessly in the face of unfair objection. As a result, Stephen is a model of courage in the face of opposition. Followers of Jesus can expect opposition, possibly even bitter opposition, from others. Stephen faced fierce resistance from many of his fellow Jews. Synagogue members argued with him, false witnesses testified against him, and religious leaders responded with murderous rage. The actions taken against Stephen remind us of Jesus' promises to his disciples: "If [the world] persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). When faced with opposition, we can follow Stephen's example and respond with wisdom, love, and a reliance on God's Spirit. God's Spirit and wisdom filled Stephen, which allowed him to present such compelling arguments that no one could effectively counter or refute. And though he rebuked his fellow Jews, he did so out of love and a desire for them to repent and believe in Christ. Indeed, Stephen loved his opponents even to his death, courageously defending the gospel and graciously praying for their forgiveness. The Lord expects nothing less from us today (Luke 6:27-36; 1 Peter 3:15-16).