

Week 07

Bible Passages

Acts 6:1—7:2a, 44–60



Sneak Peek

Stephen, an early leader and servant in the church, was martyred for his faith in God. But even at the end, he prayed that God would forgive his persecutors.

Forgiveness of Persecutors

Desired Outcomes

1. To study the story of Stephen's ministry, his arrest, and his martyrdom.
2. To see how Stephen ministered for the Lord, defended the faith, and forgave his murderers.
3. To consider how we might be filled with the Spirit and with forgiveness as Stephen was.

Session Key Verse

[Stephen] knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." —Acts 7:60a

Optional Materials

- Internet access
- *For free digital resources to enhance this lesson, go to www.warnerpress.org/life-mosaic-resources.*

1 Get Acquainted

If new members are present, introduce them and then share updates and concerns for prayer.

What would you want included in your own obituary? This may sound like a morbid question, but it relates to our discussion for today. **Would adjectives such as *godly, faithful, loving, servant, visionary, hopeful, inspiring, selfless, and obedient* be included? Why or why not?** Use the space below to record your thoughts:



As you are willing, share what you have written in a pair or trio or with the entire group. **What adjectives did you use, and why did you choose them?** Think of an actual obituary you read recently that you found very meaningful, or one that disturbed you. **Why did you feel this way?**

Today, you will talk about a man named Stephen. His godly qualities set him apart in life, but they also stirred such hostility in other people that these people put him to death.



Read and discuss Acts 6:1—7:2a, 44–60. The commentary sections can be used to generate dialogue, or for study prior to your meeting.

Acts 6:1—7:2a

Commentary

The conflict between the Hebrews and the Hellenists was a division over language and culture. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews. They complained that the Aramaic-speaking Jews, likely natives, were neglecting the Hellenistic widows in the distribution of food. “Widows” may imply any who were disadvantaged in some way. The Hellenists were most likely immigrants and a minority in this new community of believers. The distribution of food suggests divisions over social and cultural habits and customs.

“The twelve” shifted the focus from neglect of the widows in the distribution of food to neglect of “the word of God” by waiting on tables (6:2). They resolved the conflict by creating a division of labor. The community selected seven men to deal with the food distribution, thus freeing the twelve for ministry of the Word. Of the seven appointed, only Stephen and Philip appear again in Acts, each in the role of furthering the word of God.

The conflict between the Hellenists and the Hebrews concluded with the spread of the word of God and increasing numbers of disciples in Jerusalem. Despite the conflict and divisions within the community of believers, the numbers “obedient to the faith” continued to increase greatly (6:7).

Stephen’s gifts for ministry led him to perform wonders and signs and speak with wisdom. His words and works provoked synagogue members who were African slaves, along with Jews from parts of Asia. The reference to Jews from other nations reminds us of the diversity of Judaism in the world of the early church. Acting secretly, these Jews instigated false witnesses against Stephen, claiming he spoke against the temple and the

law. Stephen was charged with an offense against deeply-held convictions concerning Israel's identity.

In this conflict within the church, discernment of gifts and division of tasks provided a way to resolve neglect arising from language differences and perhaps prejudice. We face similar conflicts in our own communities.¹

Questions

- **What was the conflict that created the opportunity for Stephen and six others to be chosen to lead a new food distribution ministry? What does this say about conflict?**
- **Were “the twelve” right in having the church appoint people to take on this food ministry while they focused on teaching and preaching? How would such an arrangement be received in the church today?**
- **What were the results of this new leadership model?**
- **What does it mean that the people who argued with Stephen “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke” (v 10)? What did they decide to do instead?**

Acts 7:44–60

Commentary

Stephen was brought before a council of religious leaders. The high priest heard the charges and invited Stephen to respond. Stephen's response was a retelling of Israel's history.

Today's study includes the conclusion of Stephen's speech. Images such as “stiff-necked people” and “uncircumcised in heart and ears” belong to Israel's story of self-judgment, confession, and repentance. Stephen stood within that tradition.

In this second conflict, false witnesses and harsh judgment threatened traditional norms and identity. Stephen was murdered. But Stephen's speech, the longest speech in Acts, dominates the narrative.

1. Adapted from “Commentary on Acts 6:1—7:2a, 7:44–60,” accessed September 13, 2016, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1672.

The rehearsal of the family story is an act of identity formation. Within communities, how might different groups or individuals tell the history of a congregation or faith community? How does telling the story of patriarchs and matriarchs, leaders and teachers, reveal values and define identity? Is it possible that constructing a narrative might lead to mutual understanding and respect? We might consider also the different ways we choose to tell the stories in the Bible. Perhaps Stephen’s story is a good place to begin.²



Questions

- **If you were one of Stephen’s opponents, what would have been the most enraging thing he said to you? Why?**
 - a. “You stiff necked people.” (v 51)
 - b. “You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.” (v 51)
 - c. “[Your ancestors] killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.” (v 52)
 - d. All of the above.
- **What parallels do you see between Stephen’s death and the death of Jesus? What does this say about Stephen?**

3 Experience



Option 1

Bullying—and efforts to combat it—have been prominent in the news for several years. Some bullying has to do with looks or ability. **But what about being bullied because of one’s faith?**

2. Ibid.

In the space below, take time a few moments to write about a time when you, or someone you know, were mocked or bullied because of his or her faith.

What did the person who was bullied learn about courage through this experience? What did this person learn about the Holy Spirit? Did anyone stand with this person? How might Stephen's story have been an encouragement? How can we help Christians stand in times of persecution or when their faith is mocked? Discuss this with the group.

Option 2

Persecution of Christians continues today in Africa and the Middle East. Read the story of the Nigerian pastor's wife who was murdered because she asked a Muslim man to move his ritual cleaning away from the front door of her business. (There is a link to the story at www.warnerpress.org/life-mosaic-resources.) Notice what the report states that the woman did before she died.

What would you do in this situation? Discuss with the group.

4 Apply



Consider and respond to the following questions, then share with the rest of the group as you are willing.

What is the most important takeaway from the story of Stephen? Do you think that Stephen was scared or worried at any point? What makes you say this?

What might Stephen say to persecuted Christians today? Would he go to the places where they are being persecuted and even murdered and stand with them? Explain.

Would Stephen be considered by some believers today as taking his faith too far? Would they try to stop him from speaking? Why?

How did the Holy Spirit help Stephen when he spoke and when he was being murdered?

Think about a time when you asked the Holy Spirit for help when faced with a challenge to your faith. **How did that turn out?**

What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit reside in you? How can you tell?

5 Conclude



Acts says that Stephen was “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (6:5), that he was “full of grace and power” (6:8), and that he “gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (7:55). Stephen truly lived in a way that demonstrated the Holy Spirit at work in his life.

As the meeting concludes, spend some time thinking about how you would like the Holy Spirit to help you live for the Lord. Meditate on Galatians 5:22–23, which says, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These are evidence of a life filled with the Holy Spirit. **Which quality do you need to have more of in your life?** Share that with the group as you are willing.

Close in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill and empower you to develop the quality you have chosen, and the boldness to stand firm in the faith and share the faith with others.

Daily Bible Readings Week 7	<i>Sunday</i> Acts 6:1–7:2a, 44–60 <i>Forgiveness of Persecutors</i>	<i>Monday</i> Acts 8:1–13 <i>Saul Persecutes the Church</i>	<i>Tuesday</i> Acts 9:1–19a <i>The Conversion of Saul</i>
	<i>Wednesday</i> Acts 9:19b–31 <i>Saul Preaches in Damascus</i>	<i>Thursday</i> Acts 10:1–18 <i>Peter and Cornelius</i>	<i>Friday</i> Acts 10:34–48 <i>Gentiles Receive the Holy Spirit</i>