

Gospel Encounters in Acts

Stephen's Faithful Witness

Acts 7:1-60

Context: Church Growth and Persecution

- Church in Jerusalem is founded as a result of Peter's bold proclamation (Acts 2).
- The church community is marked by fidelity to each other and the Word of God (Acts 2:42-47)
- The apostles powerfully proclaim the gospel and the resurrection, which angers the Jewish religious leaders (Acts 4:2-3).
- The Lord brings judgement on Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit, showing His concern for the purity and unity of His people (Acts 5).
- Jewish council is angered by signs, wonders, and teachings to the point of threatening death (Acts 5:33).
- Church unity is threatened by internal disagreement over the distribution of care to widows (Acts 6), and thus the apostles choose men to serve in a deacon-like role to bring unity to the church.

Context: Who is Stephen?

- Was most likely a Hellenist, or a Greek-speaking Jew of the diaspora. (Acts 6:5)
- Qualities:
 - Good reputation among the community (Acts 6:3)
 - Full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3; 6:5; 6:10)
 - Full of Wisdom (Acts 6:3; 10)
 - Full of Faith (Acts 6:5)
 - Full of Grace (Acts 6:8)
 - Full of Power (Acts 6:8)
- Was the first Christian martyr, or one who would die for their faith. (Acts 7:60)
- Content of his speech:
 - The resistance that he is experiencing is the same characteristic resistance the Israelites displayed to Moses and the prophets (Acts 7:39; 7:51).

- God's presence is not restricted to a man-made dwelling (Acts 7:48-50).
- True, Spirit-empowered obedience to teaching of the law and the prophets will acknowledge Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. (Acts 7:52-53).

What Does it Mean to Be Faithful?

- To honestly steward what you've been entrusted.
 - **Luke 16:10–12** ¹⁰*“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?”*
- To maintain fidelity to a particular path.
 - **Hebrews 3:14** ¹⁴*For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.*
 - **Hebrews 10:23** ²³*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*
- To honor by keeping and obeying.
 - **Deuteronomy 28:1–2** ¹*“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ²And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.*
 - **2 Timothy 2:2** ²*and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*
- To follow through with a promise or pledge.
 - **Deuteronomy 7:9** ⁹*Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,*
 - **1 John 1:9** ⁹*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*
 - **1 Thessalonians 5:24** ²⁴*He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*
- If “faith” is the eyesight of the soul by which we see invisible, Spiritual realities, then faithfulness is the characteristic attitude of fidelity and obedience that flows in response.
- Faithfulness, then, is to be “full of faith”, and to act according to the grace, power, and assurance that faith affords.
 - **Colossians 1:9–12** ⁹*And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹being*

strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

- Faithfulness also implies a willingness to follow through, even if there's a cost, for one is assured the benefit far outweighs the cost.
 - **John 12:23–25** ²³*And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*
 - **John 16:33** ³³*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*
 - **2 Corinthians 4:17–18** ¹⁷*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*
- So how did Stephen model faithfulness in evangelism?

I. Faithful to Proclaim the Truth

- **Question: What obstacles stand in the way of telling people the truth?**
- Stephen was speaking to “brothers and fathers” (7:2). There is an identity connection to them.
- Stephen also knows their history, and how God worked through His people.
- Stephen was willing to point out the Jewish people's failures in following God and rightly identifying the Messiah's identity in order to make his case.
 - **Acts 7:37–40** ³⁷*This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ ³⁸This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, ⁴⁰saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’*
 - **Acts 7:52–53** ⁵²*Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*
- Similar to Peter and the other apostles, Stephen didn't shy away from the facts of the gospel, despite knowing their potential for offense.
 - **Acts 4:1–2** ¹*And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ²greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.*
- Proclaiming the gospel requires the explanation of our sin that requires a savior; this goes against the grain of human pride.

- Stephen was willing to point out the heart issues that served as barriers to faith, highlighting the necessary humility to come to Christ.
 - **Acts 7:51** ⁵¹*"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."*

II. Faithful to the Spirit's Leading

- Stephen is repeatedly described as full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5, 6:10, 7:55)
- What does it mean to be full of the Spirit?
 - All believers are baptized into and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
 - **1 Corinthians 12:13** ¹³*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*
 - God promised to pour out His Spirit, dwelling in the hearts of His people by faith.
 - **Isaiah 44:3** ³*For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.*
 - All believers are given Spiritual gifts for the building up and edification of the church.
 - **1 Corinthians 12:4–7** ⁴*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*
 - The Spirit magnifies Christ and empowers the proclamation and application of the Word.
 - **John 16:14–15** ¹⁴*He [The Holy Spirit] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*
 - Sometimes believers receive supernatural fillings of the Spirit that uniquely manifest God's presence and power for a particular purpose.
 - **Acts 11:22–24** ²²*The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.*
 - **Acts 9:17** ¹⁷*So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*
- Being "in the Spirit" opens a channel of grace wherein the recipient of the Spirit is empowered to know the will of God and act according to it.
 - All believers are given the Spirit at conversion to know God and obey Him.

- Sometimes the Spirit is poured out in unique ways to grant specific insight and advance God's kingdom.
 - **Acts 6:10** ¹⁰*But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*
- Stephen knew the will of God, ushering in the kingdom and proclaiming Christ. Stephen followed the Spirit's leading and empowerment wherever He led.

IV. Faithful to Jesus' Character

- Even as Stephen was being attacked, he was compassionate toward his persecutors.
 - **Acts 7:59–60** ⁵⁹*And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* ⁶⁰*And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*
- This is very similar to what Jesus said when he was being crucified.
 - **Luke 23:34** ³⁴*And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.*
- Both Jesus and Stephen knew that those persecuting them were Spiritually blind.
 - **2 Corinthians 4:4** ⁴*In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*
 - **Luke 19:41–44** ⁴¹*And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it,* ⁴²*saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."* ⁴³*For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side* ⁴⁴*and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."*
- There's humility and grace in having received Spiritual sight.
 - **Acts 7:55–56** ⁵⁵*But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* ⁵⁶*And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*
 - **Ephesians 2:1–7** ¹*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins* ²*in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience —* ³*among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.* ⁴*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,* ⁵*even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—* ⁶*and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,* ⁷*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

- Grace can be extended even to persecutors when our eyes are fixed on that which has been revealed to us by grace, namely the absolute reign of our Lord, the salvation that is offered through Him, and the promise of eternity with Him.
 - **Matthew 5:43–48** ⁴³*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

V. Faithful to the End

- Stephen was unflinching in his allegiance to Christ and to the proclamation of the Gospel.
- Stephen did not make an attempt to save himself by altering the message or holding back the truth.
- Stephen was willing to die for the sake of Christ.
- Sacrifice, even potentially to the point of death, has always been the plan for the gospel to spread.
 - **John 16:33** ³³*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*
 - **Matthew 24:12–14** ¹²*And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*
 - **John 12:23–25** ²³*And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*
 - **2 Corinthians 4:7–12** ⁷*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.*
- Stephen was able to endure the cost, even becoming the first Christian martyr, because the cost was esteemed as nothing compared to knowing and being with Jesus.

- **Acts 20:24** ²⁴*But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*
- **2 Corinthians 4:16–18** ¹⁶*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,* ¹⁸*as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

VI. Applications for Our Evangelism

- Faithfulness in evangelism requires fidelity to the truth. Pray that God would give you strength to be wise to the schemes of the devil in attacking the truth of the gospel.
- Faithfulness in evangelism requires following the Spirit. Pray regularly for those with whom you're trying to share, and also act in boldness when you feel the Spirit prompting you to an opportunity or pattern of obedience.
- Faithfulness in evangelism requires a Christ-like character. Pray for a humble demeanor as you interact with the lost, reminding yourself that they have been blinded by the "god of this age". Be reminded that you too would be like them, were it not for God's revelation of the truth to you.
- Faithfulness in evangelism requires a willingness to sacrifice. Pray for strength to be willing to pay the costs associated with evangelism, including awkwardness in conversation, potentially not receiving a promotion, or difficult family dynamics. These costs are eternally worth it – both for you, and for the hearer! Most of us will not be in situations where we may die for our faith, so pray for strength to endure the much lesser "pains" of persecution here.
- Pray for the persecuted church. Don't forget our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for the faith.
 - Sites like "Voice of the Martyrs", <https://www.persecution.com/>, can be helpful tools to help you be aware of persecution around the world.
 - Stratus, a tool created in partnership with Radical (David Platt) found at <https://globe.stratus.earth/>, highlights areas of great physical and spiritual need.
- Prayerfully consider the cost of discipleship, and ask for God's help to be faithful.
 - Luke 14:25-33
 - Matthew 16:24-27