

Session 7

THE CHURCH ENDURES PERSECUTION

Acts 6:8-12; 7:51-8:4

Memory Verse

So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word.

– ACTS 8:4, CSB



The Church Endures Persecution

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Christians will face persecution. Jesus warned of this during His earthly ministry, and we see examples both in the pages of Scripture and in the lives of believers worldwide. The good news is persecution isn't the end . . . the church also endures. We can endure hardships knowing we are already victorious in Jesus, who overcame death and the grave. Jesus has already won, and He's worth facing opposition (Philippians 3:8).

CALL TO ACTION: Keep leaning into those gospel conversations. Keep showing hospitality for the sake of the gospel. Pray for specific lost people this week, that they may come to life in Jesus Christ.

According to the 2025 World Watch List, produced by Open Doors, one out of every seven Christians are persecuted for their faith worldwide. In Africa, that number is one in five, and it's even higher in Asia (two in five). Last year 4,476 Christians were murdered for their faith, and another 4,744 were imprisoned. The countries under the worst persecution are North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan.¹

We have more stories of modern-day martyrs than could possibly fit in this lesson, but here's one: Esther John. She was born to a Muslim family in India and named Qamar Zia. She began attending a Christian school when she was seventeen. Deeply moved by the faith of one of her teachers, she started following Jesus secretly. When

her family moved to Karachi, Pakistan, in 1947, she was given a pocket New Testament by missionary Marian Laugesen, which she read twenty-seven times in secret.

Years later, she fled from an arranged Muslim marriage and landed in Sahiwal, Pakistan, where she was baptized and took on the name Esther John. What a fitting choice for a woman who would go on to embody the bravery and boldness of Esther as she shared the gospel (Esther 4:14).

When the believers there recognized her devotion and calling to evangelism, they sent her to a Bible Training Center. After her training, she started her ministry in 1959, evangelizing in nearby villages, traveling by bicycle, working with women in the field and teaching them to read. On February 2, 1960, she was found brutally murdered in her bed. She was just thirty years old. She's attributed with the quote, "Leave all other ties, Jesus is calling."²

Her story, however, endures, inspiring new generations of believers. In 1998, the legacy of her faith was memorialized through a statue as a part of a collection honoring modern martyrs of the twentieth century at Westminster Abbey in London, England.³ Her faith still speaks, even though she is dead (Hebrews 11:4).

We may not meet a similar end here in the deep south of America, but persecution of God's church is still alive and well. For example, Pakistan ranks eighth in Open Door's list of highly persecuted countries for 2025, with Christians like Esther John still being murdered. While we are blessed not to face the reality of intense persecution like many of our brothers and sisters in Christ worldwide, we still face persecution of a different kind.

Today, we are going to talk about the first recorded Christian martyr, Stephen, and what persecution looks like for us today.



What does it mean to be persecuted for your faith?



Have you ever encountered any kind of persecution for your faith?
How did you respond?

Session Summary

Today, we are exploring the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. His bold ministry on behalf of the gospel was cut short when a group of Jews persuaded men to lie about Stephen's message, accusing him of blasphemy.

Stephen's precarious position in front of the Sanhedrin didn't diminish his boldness. His testimony before them was full of truth and called out the unfaithfulness, sin, and guilt of the religious leaders—at whose hands Jesus was arrested and ultimately crucified. They took Stephen's proclaimed vision of heaven, where he saw Jesus standing at God's right hand, as blasphemy and stoned him to death.

Stephen's death prompted "severe persecution . . . against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1), which led many believers living there to scatter, preaching and sharing the good news as they went. The church *endured*. No persecution can stand in the way of God's plan.

1. Persecution (Acts 6:8-12)



How is Stephen described in these verses?



What insight does this give on his preparedness to endure persecution?


Luke describes Stephen as being "full of grace and power, [and] performing many wonders and signs" (v. 8). The Holy Spirit used Stephen as a tool to bless those around him by glorifying God and acting as a witness to the good news of Jesus. When we fully buy in to following Jesus like Stephen, God will use us too. The signs and wonders Stephen performed attracted dangerous opposition from the Jews. They began to argue with him (v. 9). The text seems to imply a level of hostility, and we certainly see that play out in what came next. When they couldn't stand against a Holy Spirit-filled Stephen in debate, they persuaded some men to lie

and accuse him of blasphemy, inciting a riot and prompting his arrest based on these fake charges.


Sound familiar? The Jewish leaders did the same thing to Jesus when they presented false charges against Him and accused Him of blasphemy in Matthew 26:59-66.


Consider how we might see similar opposition today. What happens when you stand boldly in your faith, and someone disagrees with you? A common reaction to this type of scenario today is anger. People don't like being wrong and are easily incited to anger. Our culture, fueled by angry internet rants and public mocking, thrives on disagreeing. But the gospel and the Bible guide us to live in opposition to many things our society openly supports today.

This passage ends with Stephen being falsely accused and brought before the Sanhedrin, the powerful Jewish governing body.

 **Application:** Stephen was described as full of grace and power before facing this specific opposition. How are you pursuing God's grace and power today so you might be prepared to face opposition to your faith?

2. Martyrdom (Acts 7:51-60)

 Stephen spoke the truth of Jesus boldly. How might he have been tempted to respond otherwise?

 How are Stephen's ability to stand firm and his focus on Jesus connected? What does this teach us?

Between our last passage and this one, Stephen delivered a Holy Spirit-filled sermon chronicling the history of God's people, beginning with Abraham and emphasizing the Jewish leaders' unfaithfulness to God.

Stephen didn't offer a personal defense. When the high priest asked him if the accusations were true (v. 1), he could have sought to correct their assumption on what he was teaching. He didn't. Instead, he continued to speak the truth, once again acting as the Holy Spirit's tool on a mission to glorify God.

Beginning in verse 51, Stephen brought his sermon to a close by calling out the Jewish leaders directly for resisting the Holy Spirit, betraying and murdering Jesus, and not truly keeping the law. He called them "stiff-necked." They were unyielding and prideful, very different from the devout and upstanding reputation they sought to present. Faced with the truth of their sins, they didn't repent. They multiplied their sin by ordering Stephen be stoned.

In contrast, Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. His eyes were on Jesus. As the Sanhedrin was enraged and gnashing their teeth (v. 54), Stephen maintained a level of peace that only comes from the Holy Spirit. He was not worried about his reputation or even his life; he was focused solely on Jesus.


Luke recorded that Stephen, "gazed into heaven" (v. 55). We don't know precisely what this means, but we do know what he saw: "the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (v. 55). He then proclaimed what he saw to those listening. The Sanhedrin, the same body that conspired to kill Jesus for blasphemy, didn't take this well. Stephen's proclamation further enraged the leaders, who began yelling, covering their ears, and then "together rushed against him" (v. 57).

They ultimately "dragged him out of the city" to stone him (v. 58). Ironically, the Sanhedrin, who took offense at the implication that they didn't keep Jewish law, worked against it by stoning Stephen on the spot. They did not have authority to stone someone without Roman permission, and Jewish law did not allow the execution of a person on the same day as their trial.⁴ Nevertheless, they killed him anyway.

Even amid such extreme injustice, Stephen spoke in favor of the people: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (v. 60). Stephen's words here were strikingly similar to Jesus's proclamation from the cross (Luke 23:34). Following these words, Stephen died.

In Matthew 10, Jesus warned His followers that they would be persecuted. He even warned about some of the things that happened to Stephen (Matthew 10:21-25). Jesus's followers can't expect to be treated better than He was, and His opposition was great.

Jesus followed this warning by telling the disciples not to be afraid (Matthew 10:26-31). Stephen didn't display fear as he faced his death here, and we shouldn't fear in the face of persecution either. Jesus knew this would happen and even called those who are persecuted for His name blessed (Matthew 5:10-12).

 **Application: What can we learn from Stephen and Jesus about the godly response to persecution?**

3. Scattering (Acts 8:1-4)

 **What took place with the church in these verses?**

 **What was the result, and how does the church react? What does this teach us about responding to persecution?**

These verses move into the events that follow Stephen's death. The CSB aptly titles this section, "Saul the Persecutor."⁵ Saul of Tarsus, who agreed with the decision to stone Stephen, led in the "severe persecution" against the church that followed. He sought to destroy the church, throwing men and women of faith into prison for their belief in Jesus (v. 3).

The persecution was directed at the believers in Jerusalem. So, while the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, the hostile environment there drove many believers to scatter. This was, no doubt, a hardship for the believers in question, but as usual, God works through all circumstances, even the negative ones. In this case, the scattering of the church furthered the spread of the gospel as God's people moved but continued to share the good news.

The church endured. It may have been tempting to just give up. The persecution was severe, and people were being thrown into prison. But the first Christians didn't give up. They remained faithful, and the gospel spread. The church still endures, even in countries where persecution is severe.

What an example for us today! When we face difficult circumstances or persecution because of our faith, we should stand firm in the truth, continuing to act as Jesus's witnesses wherever our paths take us (Acts 1:8). As believers, we should expect persecution and not let it keep us from following Jesus with boldness.



Application: How can we respond to opposition to Christianity today in a way that glorifies God and continues His mission?


Conclusion


Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and working many signs and wonders among the people, and the truth in his message prompted a group of Jews to work maliciously against him. When they argued with Stephen and couldn't win, they persuaded others to lie about him, inciting a riot and bringing Stephen before the Sanhedrin.


Stephen gives us a beautiful example of how to respond to persecution. He stood firm in the truth with a forgiving heart. In verse 60, adopting a similar posture to Christ Himself on the cross, Stephen said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"

Stephen's death prompted "severe persecution . . . against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1). Saul of Tarsus ravaged the church, throwing faithful men and women into prison (v. 3). But God was still working. Saul would go from persecutor to preacher, becoming one of the most influential figures in the history of the Christian faith.

The hostile environment of Jerusalem drove many believers to scatter, an act which God used to further the spread of the gospel: "So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). They provide further insight on how to respond to persecution: We stand firm in our faith and refuse to shy away from acting as Jesus's witnesses.

 What can we learn from the way Stephen approached sharing the gospel in today's study?

 How can we support one another in seeking Jesus daily so that we might be prepared for opposition to the gospel that comes our way?

 How does suffering for your faith give you greater opportunity to share the gospel with others?

Memorize

So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word.

- Acts 8:4, CSB

References

¹"The 2025 World Watch List," Open Doors, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>.

²"Esther John," Abbey Commemorations, Westminster Abbey, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/esther-john>.

³Westminster Abbey, "Esther John"; CH, "Discipling those who pay a great price for faith: Esther John 1929 – 1960," Blog, When Women Speak, April 4, 2016, <https://whenwomenspeak.net/blog/disciplining-those-who-pay-a-great-price-for-faith-esther-john-1929-1960/>.

⁴"Pakistan," Persecution, Open Doors, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/pakistan/>.

⁵Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Acts, 2025 Edition," SonicLight.com, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/acts/acts.htm>.

⁶Stanley E. Porter, "Acts," in CSB Study Bible: Notes, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1730.