

The Church Endures Persecution

July 13, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

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

Session Outline

1. Persecution (Acts 6:8-12)
2. Martyrdom (Acts 7:54-7:60)
3. Scattering (Acts 8:1-4)

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.



Leader Guide

The Church Endures Persecution

Introduction

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.⁵ 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).

Seeing the Son of Man

“Son of Man” was Jesus’s favorite self-designation. Each use of this expression in the NT came from the lips of Jesus, except where people quoted his words back to him (Jn 12:34) and in this verse. Stephen’s claim that Jesus was at God’s right hand enraged the members of the Sanhedrin.



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."⁶ 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?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for the example of bold believers like Stephen. Ask for God’s help as you seek to stand firm in your faith even when facing persecution. Thank God for the freedom of religion we enjoy in the United States and pray for the persecuted church around the world.

Memory Verse

So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word.
—Acts 8:4

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Acts* by Tony Merida
- *Acts* by Ajith Fernando
- *Be Dynamic* by Warren Wiersbe

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 6:8–8:4

Stephen's Arrest and Trial (6:8–7:1). One of the seven was Stephen. Filled with "God's grace and power," he performed miracles and bore a powerful witness to Christ. In particular he preached in the Greek-speaking Jewish synagogues comprised of Jews from various parts of the Roman empire who had come to live in Jerusalem. Stephen encountered considerable resistance in these synagogues, but no one could refute his persuasive arguments. So his opponents resorted to treachery. They "hatched a frame-up" and brought false accusations against him before the Sanhedrin. Two false charges were made: he spoke against the Jewish law (=Moses), and he spoke against God. Specifically, the charge of speaking against God maintained that he had threatened to destroy God's house, the temple. In verse 15 Luke prepares us for Stephen's martyrdom that is to follow. Stephen's face shone with the radiance of divine inspiration for his testimony, a testimony which would lead to his death.

Stephen's Speech (7:2–53). On the surface Stephen's speech, the longest in Acts, seems like a bare recital of selected events from Israel's history. It does not appear to answer the charges against him. In actuality, it is a carefully chosen summary of Israel's history which serves to turn the charges back on Stephen's accusers. They, not he, were the resisters of God. They, not he, had blasphemed God's temple. His speech can be divided into five main parts.

1. The Promises to Abraham (7:2–8). Stephen began with God's covenant with Abraham. His main point was that Abraham never owned so much as a "foot of ground" in the holy land. The promises to Abraham all came outside the Holy Land. Stephen was beginning a critique of the narrow Jewish nationalism that confined God to the land of Israel and particularly to the temple.

2. The Deliverance through Joseph (7:9–16). Stephen continued his implicit critique of the "Holy Land" theology by pointing out how God had delivered Israel through Joseph, again outside the Holy Land. He also began a second theme. The sons of Jacob rejected Joseph, whom God had chosen. Israel always rejected its leaders. This is a major theme throughout the speech.

3. The Deliverance through Moses (7:17–34). The treatment of Moses is the longest of the speech. It falls into three sections, each covering forty years of Moses' life. Verses 17–22 cover Moses' early years, his birth and education in Pharaoh's house. Verses 23–29 cover the forty years between Moses's flight from Egypt and his vision of the burning bush. Verses 30–34 begin the final section of Moses's life—the Exodus and wilderness wandering. Again, the same two themes are prominent: God was with Israel in a special way outside the Promised Land, and Israel continued to reject its leader whom God had sent.

4. The Apostasy of Israel (7:35–50). In this section Stephen's polemic became more direct. Israel rejected Moses' leadership. They turned from God to idolatry. In verses 44–47 he began a critique of the temple. He implied that Israel did a better job of worshipping God in the wilderness, when they had a tent of worship that could be moved from place to place. With Solomon God was tied down to a single holy place, the temple. Yet God cannot be confined to buildings made by human hands. Their charge against Stephen was not altogether erroneous. He did criticize the temple worship of

his day. The temple was supposed to be a house of prayer, but it had become a place where Israel confined God, where it tied Him down exclusively to its own land and people.

5. The Rejection of the Messiah (7:51–53). Stephen launched into a frontal assault. Israel had always rejected its leaders—Joseph, Moses, and now Jesus, the “Righteous One.” Stephen’s accusers had heard enough. They abruptly ended his speech.

Stephen’s speech is highly significant to the early Christian mission. He criticized the Jewish nationalism with its exclusive theology of temple and land. This critique provided the rationale for an inclusive worldwide mission. His martyrdom launched that mission.

Stephen’s Martyrdom (7:54–8:1a). Scholars are divided as to whether Stephen was formally sentenced to stoning, the customary Jewish method of execution, or whether he died by mob violence. The latter seems more likely. Under the Romans, the Jews could not carry out executions. What began as a formal trial deteriorated into a lynch mob, so furious were the Jewish leaders at Stephen’s words. Saul is introduced to the story of Acts as the onlooker holding the stoners’s garments. As the dying Jesus had committed His spirit to God, so did Stephen to Jesus (Luke 23:46). Also like Jesus, he asked forgiveness for his killers (Luke 23:34). We call Stephen the first Christian “martyr.” The word martyr comes from the Greek word *martus*, which means “witness.” Like all martyrs, Stephen was a witness to his Lord, even to the death.

Persecution and Dispersal (8:1b–3). Two things directly resulted from Stephen’s martyrdom. First, the Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted and scattered. The apostles and the rest of the Aramaic-speaking church seem to have remained in the city. It was the Hellenists, Stephen’s fellow Greek-speaking Christians, who had to flee. Among them was Philip, who proceeded to Samaria. Second, Saul came forth as the prime persecutor of the Christians. He too was a Greek-speaking Jew. His life was soon to change radically (9:1–31).⁷

References

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2. “Esther John,” Abbey Commemorations, Westminster Abbey, accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/esther-john>.
3. Westminster 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/>.
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6. John B. Polhill, “Acts,” in *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 507–509.