

Acts 7:54 – 8:3 The first Christian Martyr and Introduction of Saul

We are in Acts where Luke does what Luke does. He, “having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”¹

To his followers, Jesus says, “all the things which were written about Him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”²

As a review, I will do a quick “flyover” of our study of the story of the early church.

- Acts 1 Jesus foretells of the coming of the Holy Spirit and declares the church will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the remotest part of the earth before he ascends.³
- Acts 2 records the day of Pentecost and says “**all** were filled with the Holy Spirit.”⁴
- We then studied Peter’s sermon and saw 3,000 souls saved.⁵
- The Scripture tells us the early church was committed to fellowship, the breaking of the bread and prayer.⁶ At VCC we also are committed to fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.
- In chapter 3 & 4, Peter and John were preaching at the temple, they healed a lame beggar that had been at the Beautiful Gate, and they were arrested, threatened and released.
- The church was emboldened, they were of one heart, they were generous with their resources, and there was not a needy person among them.⁷
- Chapter 5 describes the first sin in the church where Satan filled Ananias and Sapphira’s heart to lie to the Holy Spirit keeping back some of their offering in a deceitful way. Recall they fell down and breathed their last.⁸ And great fear came upon the whole church and the result was, “multitudes of men and women were added to their number.”⁹
- In an effort to shut the early church down, the religious leaders sought to put the apostles in prison, but the Holy Spirit opened the doors so the Apostles could resume their preaching in the temple.¹⁰

¹ Luke 1:3-4

² Luke 24:44-53

³ Acts 1:5-9

⁴ Acts 2:4

⁵ Acts 2:41

⁶ Acts 2:42

⁷ Luke 4:34

⁸ Acts 5:3-5

⁹ Acts 5:14

¹⁰ Acts 5:17-25

- The Apostles were, again, detained and questioned. They proclaimed they must obey God and declare Jesus raised whom they had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.¹¹ The religious leaders were cut to the quick and about to kill them, but Gamaliel talked sense to them saying, “if this plan is of men, it will be overthrown but if it of God you will not be able to overthrow them.”¹²
- In chapter 6 we are introduced to Stephen who was chosen along with 6 others to be in charge of caring for the widows. He was a great teacher who, when challenged by Jewish leaders, were unable to cope with the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. So, they charged him with blasphemy against **God, Moses, the Temple and the Law**.
- Bryan covered Chapter 7:1-53 where Stephen delivers his masterful defense.
 - Stephen, first, wisely appeals to them as brothers and fathers. He recognized the officials of the Sanhedrin as “fathers”. He finds points of agreement and defends the accusation that he blasphemes God. He quotes Scripture that they would all have memorized and know by heart as he recounts their history beginning with Abraham’s story. He **affirms** God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham.
 - Stephen reminds them of Joseph who was the chosen heir, set apart by God. Joseph was **rejected** by his brothers and sent to die in a pit. Joseph was later accepted by Gentiles and exalted to **deliver** his people.
 - Stephen then **honors Moses** as a man of power in word and deed. Remember, the Israelites **rejected** Moses who was sent by God to **deliver** His people.
 - They rejected God. They rejected Joseph. They rejected Moses. Remember Jesus’ parable of the Vine growers in Luke 20. The landowner sends his slaves to the vine growers and they beat them so he sent his beloved son, thinking they would respect Him, yet they killed Him. Stephen repeats this indictment. Not in a parable, but directly names the religious leaders rejection of God’s deliverers before killing His son.
 - Solomon built the temple, but the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands. He quotes Isaiah 66 saying, “Heaven is my throne and earth is the footstool of my feet; what kind of house will you build for me. Was it not my hand which made all these things?” God is not confined to a building. They worshipped the building, but not God and they desecrated the temple making “God’s house of prayer into a den of thieves” – Luke 19:46.

¹¹ Acts 5:29-30

¹² Acts 5:33-39

- Stephen answers their charges. **Stephen recognizes God's sovereignty, he honors Moses, the Law and the Temple.** He turns the tables to indict his accusers.

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."*

- Just as their forefathers persecuted and killed the prophets announcing the coming of the Righteous One. **THEY** now are the blasphemers and murderers.

Up to this point, all of this has taken place in Jerusalem.

Today we are going to cover 9 verses. **Acts 7:43 – 8:3.** In these 9 verses we will cover the stoning of Stephen and the introduction of Paul. We will consider a question that has challenged all of our rational minds. I know many people who have rejected the gospel because they could not grasp the answer to this question. We will be introduced to Saul. We will learn of his background, his education, and his personality to find how he arrives at this point in history.

Before we jump into the Scripture, let me tell you a story. How many of you have heard of Jim Elliot? Jim's father was a traveling preacher. Jim accepted Christ at **age 6**. His family encouraged their children to **be adventurous and encouraged them to "live for Christ."** In high school, Jim was an **athlete and gifted public speaker**. In the summer of 1950, Jim was **23 years old** and completed his study of languages at Camp Wycliffe to prepare him for the mission field. It was here that Jim met a missionary that told him of the Auca tribe. They were an Ecuadorian indigenous people considered violent and dangerous to outsiders. In **1952** Jim recruited Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian and Nate Saint to join him in going to Ecuador to preach the gospel to the unreached groups. They were a super star group. They were young, adventurous and considered some of the most skilled evangelists ever assembled. They built a base a short distance to one of the villages. They would fly a small plane over the villages and drop gifts in baskets. They began to make casual contact with people from one of the villages. They even gave a ride to one of them in their plane. Encouraged by friendly encounters, they began to make plans to visit the villages, but before they made the trip on January 8, 1956 a group of 10 warriors from the Huaorini tribe killed Jim, Ed, Roger and Nate. It was a terrible tragedy and loss for the cause of Christ.

Turn with me to Acts 7:54 where we pick up the story following Stephen's defense and turning the indictment back on the mob.

Acts 7:54 ⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were **enraged**, and they **ground their teeth** at him.

Other translations say, "when they heard this, they began gnashing their teeth at him."

- In the Bible, "gnashing of teeth" symbolizes extreme anguish, anger, or despair. It often appears in contexts related to judgment or punishment, such as in **Matthew 8:12**, where those cast out of God's kingdom experience weeping and gnashing of teeth. The imagery conveys intense emotional suffering, regret, or fury, often linked to the consequences of sin or separation from divine grace.

This is only weeks after Pentecost. The church was brand new and growing fast. Stephen has only been a Christ follower for a short time. You may remember in Chapter 6 that there was a complaint from the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews that their widows were not getting the same treatment as the Hebrew widows. The apostles said, "it is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God to serve tables." So they got with the congregation and selected seven men of **good reputation**. Stephen was one of the 7 selected. He was described as **"Full of Faith and of the Holy Spirit."**¹³ **Acts 6:8** tells us that he was **"doing great wonders and signs among the people."** Stephen knew the Scriptures cold. He was a skilled and persuasive orator. The Freedmen sought to debate with Stephen, but **they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.**¹⁴ He was one of the first evangelists of the early church.

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."

- Full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the **glory of God**.

Several passages in the Bible describe men witnessing the **glory of God**

- **Exodus 33:18-23** – Moses asks to see God's glory, and God reveals His back, saying no one can see His face and live.
- **Isaiah 6:1-5** – Isaiah sees the Lord seated on a high throne, with the temple filled with His glory and angels praising, "Holy, holy, holy."
- **Ezekiel 1:26-28** – Ezekiel has a vision of God's glory, described as brilliant light and fire, surrounded by a rainbow-like radiance.
- **Luke 9:28-32** – Peter, James, and John see Jesus' glory during His transfiguration, with His appearance changing and His face shining.
- **Revelation 1:12-16** – John describes a vision of the glorified Christ, with radiant features symbolizing divine power and majesty.

Words are not able to describe or express being in the presence of God. They reflect God's overwhelming presence, revealing His holiness, His power, and His majesty to those witnessing it.

¹³ Acts 6:3

¹⁴ Acts 6:10

“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.”

- Jesus is often described as “sitting at the right hand of God.” Psalm 110, Mark 16:19 at the transfiguration, Luke 22:69 – Jesus to the Sanhedrin before they send him to Pilate and many of Paul’s letters.¹⁵ Sitting at God’s right hand symbolizes **His finished work** and authority.
- This is **the only reference** in the Bible that Jesus is described as standing at God’s right hand. Jesus, standing up for Stephen, communicates **Jesus’ approval** and support for Stephen. Jesus is standing and calling Stephen into heaven.

Acts 7:57 ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together^[a] at him.

- They were an agitated and angry mob. Out of control, they held their ears, they screamed and they rushed together at him.

Acts 7:58 ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.

- Let me briefly, but without too much detail make a comment on stoning. It was a brutal form of execution. It was intended as a punishment and a deterrent. They would take the person outside the city and a crowd of witnesses to the crime would throw stones at them until they died. The process was slow and agonizing leading to death from the accumulation of injuries.

Acts 7:58 b. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

- In order to free up their throwing arms and really rare back and hurl the stones, they took off their garments and laid them aside. They laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul. Saul may not have thrown the stones, but the laying of their garments at his feet signifies his hearty approval and participation in Stephen’s execution.
- And so we are introduced to Saul of Tarsus.
 - Born in Tarsus, he was a Roman citizen
 - He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin
 - Saul was trained as a Pharisee under the teaching of Gamaliel.¹⁶ He excelled in his studies and was a scholar of scholars
 - He saw the Christian movement as destructive to the Jewish faith and he was zealous to persecute the Christian church.

¹⁵ Rom 8:34, Col 3:1, Heb 1:3, 10:12, 1 Pet. 3:22

¹⁶ Acts 22:3

- Following his conversion, Paul becomes the instrument to fulfill the call to spread Christianity to Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world.
- He founded churches across the Roman Empire and wrote many letters in the New Testament.
- He faced great persecution himself, was imprisoned and eventually killed.
- His teachings are the foundation to Christian theology especially regarding salvation by faith, grace and the unity of believers.
- The balance of our study of Acts will be the story of Paul and the spread of Christianity.
- The stoning of Stephen was a turning point for Paul. Describing his calling by the Spirit of the Lord following his conversion experience. The Spirit instructed him to leave Jerusalem because every believer in Christ would know the Paul who imprisoned and beat the Christians. Paul recalls his experience at the stoning of Stephen in Acts 22.

Acts 22:20 ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him. ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” – Paul identifies himself as the leader of the slaying of Stephen

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.

- Could there be a greater contrast between the spirit of Stephen and Saul and the mob? Calm and accepting to rage and violence.
- Stephen mirrors the attitude of Jesus suffering on the cross while Saul and the Jewish mob stone him with self-righteous indignation.

What is the big question that rational minds struggle? What is that question that has led so many people to **reject the gospel**? What is that question that has caused so many Christians to **doubt their faith**?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why would God allow Stephen to be martyred? He was a young man. He was a servant with a good reputation in the church. Stephen was full of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. He was performing great wonders and signs among the people. Stephen was a gifted orator and was an effective apologist bringing many people to faith in Jesus. A good man with so much potential. I can’t understand how the Lord could allow such a tragedy.

Why would God allow Jim Elliot and his friends to be killed in the jungles of Ecuador? Why do bad things happen to good people.

Why did bad things happen to me? Why did I get a brain tumor? Why did I have to experience job loss,? Why did God call me to a company, bless my efforts to rebuild this company and 10 years later be betrayed by the owner and my friend.

We live in a fallen and sinful world. Sin has real consequences. We often don't understand why God allows these things to happen. But, we press on in faith. We pray and we put our trust and confidence in Him.

We conclude the stoning of Stephen and the introduction of Paul in

Acts 8:1-3 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all **scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria**, except the apostles. ²Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

- For Stephen's death, it was just one more condemnation for the Jews and a complete offense against the Trinity.
 - When the Jews allowed **Herod to kill John the Baptist**, the sin was against God the Father who had sent John.¹⁷
 - When the Jews allowed **Pilate to kill Jesus**, the sin was against the Son.¹⁸

Look back at Acts 7:51 where Stephen turns the tables indicting the Jews for blasphemy against God, Moses, the Law and the Temple.

⁵¹ *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.*

- When the Jews stoned Stephen, the sin was against **the Holy Spirit**.¹⁹

They left no person of God un offended.

Acts 8:1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all **scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria**, except the apostles.

- For the Jews, the death of Stephen meant **Liberation**. Since Pentecost they had been witnessing to the "Jew first," but through the opposition of the *enemy*, they are now scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria

¹⁷ Matt 21:28-32

¹⁸ Matt 21:33-46

¹⁹ Acts 7:51

fulfilling the commission of Acts 1:8 “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

- **Revelation 2:10** says, “*Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*” For Stephen, his death was a **Coronation** of which Christ Himself would STAND and give him the crown of life
- For Saul, who “ravaged” the church and entered homes and dragged off men and women demanding that they renounce their faith in Jesus or be thrown into prison or killed for blasphemy. He never forgot the rage that he felt was righteous against the church. He later indicts himself of this sin as he later recounts his conversion in Acts 22.

Acts 22:17-21 says, ¹⁷“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸and saw him (Jesus) saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

- For Saul, the death of Stephen meant **salvation**.

Augustine says: The church owes Paul to the stoning of Stephen. 2X

While at Wheaton College Jim said,

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose"

Jim Elliot's and his friend's blood was the seed of the church. After their death, Jim's wife, Elizabeth Elliot, and other missionaries began working among the tribe and continued the evangelical work. Eventually that entire tribe of Auca Indians were evangelized with the gospel and a church was planted there. That church grew and flourished and stretched across several tribal areas. It is a powerful and growing church. Generations of believers are now coming out of that part of the world. It is one of the great missionary stories of how God worked through this tragedy to bring salvation to many.

Jesus was there to receive Jim and his friends. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” **Revelation 2:10**

So what would Jesus want me to know?

- **I am inspired by Stephens Attitude.** Stephen was unwavering in his convictions. He knew his redemption story. Even in the face of unjust rage he reflected the character and love of Jesus praying for those as he felt the blows of the stones that would end his life.

- **Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” - Revelation 2:10**
 - **Proverbs 3:5-6** ⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
 - Sometimes we don't understand why bad things happen to good people. We live in a sinful world. Bad things happen. Sin has consequences and consequences have names. But God is able as He wills to use any and every circumstance for His purposes and His glory. Often good things happen to bad people, and we wonder why. We live in a sinful world where bad behavior is rewarded. We are to put our trust in Him. We follow the truth of Jesus Christ, we live our life according to the truth of Scripture. We put our trust in Him and know that He is in control. We may not understand why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. I accept that I will not always understand and trust that God's ways are higher than my ways.

Isaiah 55:8-9 ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.