

## The Continuing Acts of Jesus: How to get what Jesus got

Acts 6:8-15

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Good morning! If you are new with us this morning we are in the middle of a book study through Acts. We've had a little break over the last two weeks, but we are coming back.

Today we are picking up in Acts 6 so please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you, or open the one on your device.

Let me catch you up with a little refresher. In 30AD Jesus was crucified, died, buried, spent 3 days dead in the tomb, and then early in the morning on Easter Sunday was raised from the dead.

After this He spent 40 days with His disciples, proving He was alive, and teaching them that soon they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would fall on them, and this power would transform these timid fishermen into warrior witnesses of the gospel.

And this happened 10 days later. The Apostles were gathered together in one room and the Holy Spirit fell on them and filled them with power, with purpose, and a plan for participating in the growth of Jesus' kingdom. And they started acting this out.

The church started growing. Peter preached his first sermon and 3000 men and their families were transformed by the power of the gospel. A little later another 2000 men and their families joined the church. And while the church was growing by leaps and bounds Luke tells us that they enjoyed the favor of the people.

Basically Jesus was continuing to show up. And every time Jesus arrives, the world He steps into is flipped right side up. People start living in *shalom* – which is the Hebrew word for a peace that affects every aspect of your life. When Jesus gets into you, you experience shalom in your relationships, and shalom in your finances, and shalom in your physical bodies and shalom in your minds. How many of you need a bit more shalom in your life? Everybody should say “amen” to that.

The people of first century Jerusalem were experiencing shalom on mass. But not all were happy about this. Along side the success of the gospel came the jealousy of the religious world. And so Peter and the other Apostles were locked up in prison and commanded not to speak in the Name of Jesus anymore. But they refused; they responded saying they simply had to keep talking about what they had seen and heard. They were witnesses.

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Another problem that accompanied the growth of the church was the administrative challenge of taking care of all the needy. The Hellenist widows were inadvertently being overlooked in the distribution of food, and so the Apostles appointed 7 godly men to serve and care for the congregation. And one of those men was Stephen.

Now we are going to spend three weeks looking at Stephen which is a lot considering he wasn't even an Apostle. In fact we don't know anything about him other than what we get in chapters 6 and 7. And then, after he dies we virtually never hear about him again.<sup>1</sup>

But that doesn't mean that Stephen is a bit of an interlude in Acts. Luke wasn't taking a break from the narrative to give us a nice martyr story. Rather Stephen is pivotal to the progression of the story of Acts. In fact, Stephen is the turning point in the story.

So in Acts 1 verse 8 we get Jesus' last words to His Apostles – you've got this memorized by now. It's the outline for the book. It reads:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

But up to Stephen the witness of Jesus' Apostles has been confined to Jerusalem. But Jesus had a plan to extend His witnesses to the ends of the earth. And Stephen is the catalyst in this plan. You've probably heard the saying "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The idea is that when someone dies for Jesus the church explodes. And this is certainly true about Stephen.

So Luke gives Stephen an entire chapter to preach – we will get into his sermon next week. But just to put this in perspective, his sermon is the longest one recorded in Acts. Stephen gets more talking time than either Peter or Paul – that's saying something. And the reason is because his blood is the dynamite Jesus uses to expel His witnesses from the comfort of Jerusalem into the four corners of the earth.

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So today we are going to talk about dying for your faith. Have you ever thought about whether you would be willing to die for your faith in Jesus? Does that seem a little extreme?

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Let's be honest, for most of us here – perhaps all of us – the idea of whether you would die for your faith is pretty theoretical. I remember being 19 years-old and encountering Christ for the first time. Now I was raised in a Christian home, so I knew the Bible stories, but something happened when I was 19 that changed this from head knowledge into something I was passionate about – I met Jesus. And I remember being enamoured with the idea of dying for my faith. I wanted my life to count, and I figured the way to do that was to get into a spot where I could die for my faith.

Now the passion behind that overstated position was real. And I still want my life to count. But in the almost 20 years that have passed since I really met Jesus I've found that while dying for Jesus might be a glorious way to finish, it is living for Jesus that poses the practical challenge. Can anyone say "amen" to that?

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of 8:1-3 which finishes off the Stephen story and one brief mention in 22:20.

And as we will see, Stephen's challenge to us doesn't come only in his dying but in his living. So are you actually living for Jesus?"

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In order to answer that let me ask you: What captures your heart? What do you wake up thinking about? When you find yourself daydreaming what thoughts are running through your mind? Where do you spend your money? What do you worry about? When you have free time what fills it? Are you living for Jesus?

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Author Rebecca Pippert once wrote "Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by acceptance. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives."<sup>2</sup>

And it is only the lords that we live for that we would ever consider dying for. So who, or what, is your lord?

Some of you might know comedian Jimmy Fallon. I enjoy some of his skits, though I never stay up till midnight to watch him live – I'm way to old for that. But a few years back he had an interview about his very successful career and how he got started and he said: "I remember saying to myself, 'If I don't make it on Saturday Night Live before I'm 25, I'm going to kill myself.'" After saying this he just casually confessed "It's crazy. I had no other plan. I didn't have friends. I didn't have a girlfriend. I didn't have anything going on. I had my career and that was it."<sup>3</sup>

For some of us our career is our lord. For some of us our children or grandchildren are our lords, they are the reason we live. For some of us our hobbies are our lords. For some of us our charity work is our lord. The reality is that everyone has something that captures their heart, and that they live for. And lots of these things are good. Careers are good. Kids are good. Hobbies are good. Charity is good. But none of these things deserve to be lord in our lives. And most of them start looking pretty foolish when you consider dying for them. But what we don't think about is that it is the things we live for that we are willing to die for.

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Now what we get in the story of Stephen is a man who dies incredibly well because he has been living incredibly well. Let's pick it up in chapter 6 verse 8.

[Read Acts 6:8-10]

Look at the first word in verse 8. It reads "Now Stephen" or some translations read "And Stephen". And this word is a linking word that lets us know that Stephen's story isn't just coming out of left field. This is part of Acts. In fact this story starts part 2 in everything Acts is about. Stephen and his death, as we've already said, is going to be the catalyst to propel the church into the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Pippert "Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World"

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/jimmy-fallons-big-adventure-20110120> (Accessed June 23, 2017)

But the second thing to notice here is that Stephen hasn't appeared out of nowhere to get martyred. Rather it is because he has been living for Christ that he is about to die for Him.

Luke says Stephen was a man full of God's grace and power. He had the Holy Spirit flowing through him enabling him to partner with God in performing signs and wonders. People's lives were impacted when they were around Stephen. Their sin was exposed and they came to repentance, reveling in the grace of God when they were around Stephen. People got healed when they were around Stephen. Stephen had been living for Jesus long before he shows up in Acts 6.

And we know this because Stephen was the first guy the Apostles thought of when they needed someone to look after the neglected widows. And they chose him, chapter 6 verse 5 says, because he had already proven himself to be full of faith and the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> And now it was his looking like Jesus that provoked the synagogue leaders to wrath.

Catch the parallel here. Stephen is a man who looks like Jesus. Stephen had been living his life the way Jesus lived His. And so now Stephen is going to get what Jesus got. And this is what every Christ-follower longs to be true of themselves.

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Now this doesn't mean everyone wants to be martyred. Actually I don't think anyone in their right mind wants this. But every Christ follower longs to live like Jesus did. After all Jesus was a man of joy. Jesus was a man of purpose. Jesus was a man who lived with the power of the Holy Spirit coursing through His body every day. Jesus lived a life that counted. What about you? Do you want to live a life like that?

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And while Jesus died an excruciating death, He didn't go to death full of regret or bitterness like so many people who have been hurt by others. Hebrews tells us it was for the joy set before Him that He endured the cross. Even in death Jesus knew He wasn't being separated from His purpose or the Lord of His life.

So do you want to live a life like that? Do you want to speak the kinds of words Jesus spoke and do the kinds of actions Jesus did? Do you want it to be said of you that you look like Jesus?

If this is your desire it is evidence that the Holy Spirit is inside you and that your faith is real. I say that because only Jesus followers understand that the path to ultimate joy comes from living a God-glorifying life like Jesus did. And so they want to get what Jesus got.

Now nobody wants to get martyred. Stephen wasn't happy about being stoned. Jesus wasn't happy to be crucified. But martyrdom is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. The worst thing that can happen to a person is to be separated from their lord. And this didn't happen to Stephen. Look down at verse 11.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 6:5

[Read Acts 6:11-14]

Now the way this is playing out should sound familiar. These false witnesses are almost mirrors of the ones who accused Jesus during His trial. And this shouldn't surprise us. Jesus said:

The student is not above the teacher.... If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! (Matthew 10:24-25)

And so just like Jesus, when Stephen's opponents have nothing they can accuse him of they bring in some false witnesses. It's almost like Jesus is back on trial here.

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Now there were four things that were central to Israelite religion in the first century. God was central, Moses was central, the Law was central and the Temple was central. And so in verse 11 these witnesses accuse Stephen of blaspheming against God and Moses, and then in verse 13 they throw in his low regard for this holy place – that's the temple – and the law. So they are throwing the book at him. As far as religious offenses go they are saying Stephen is guilty of it all.

And the evidence they cite for this grave accusation is verse 14. They heard Stephen say that Jesus would destroy this place and change the customs Moses had handed down. And this is a virtual quote of what the false witnesses said of Jesus at His trial.

So in Mark 14 we read:

Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against [Jesus]: "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" (Mark 14:57-58)

And then later when Jesus was hanging on the cross we read:

Those who passed by hurled insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save Yourself!" (Mark 15:29-30)

And here in Acts, Stephen is accused of saying the same thing. Stephen did the things Jesus did – wonders and signs. And he said the things Jesus said. Stephen looked like Jesus. And that's why Stephen got what Jesus got.

But here we have a bit of an interesting situation. Luke describes the people who brought these accusations as false witnesses, just like Mark described those who accused Jesus. So did Jesus and Stephen actually say these things about the temple?

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Well first, with Jesus the answer is "yes". In the temple cleansing account in John 2, just after Jesus drove the money changers and livestock out of the temple, the people asked Jesus what authority He had to do what He was doing. And John tells us:

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and You are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple He had spoken of was His body. (John 2:19-21)

So John makes it clear that Jesus did say this, but that His words were cryptic. The people thought He was telling them that He was going to destroy the physical temple, but actually He was talking about His death and resurrection.

Now, if you've been around the Bible a bunch perhaps this doesn't bother you, but if Jesus was really talking about His death and not the temple why did He say "this temple" which obviously was referencing the physical temple He was standing in at that moment? Isn't this a little dishonest? And even a little dishonest for Jesus would be a big deal! Even having committed the smallest sin would mean He wasn't God.

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When you come to texts like this let yourself be bothered by them – don't just read them and forget – instead look for the solution.

And there is a solution to this text. So Jesus is God. And as God He speaks in layers all of which are true, but often it took decades for people to figure out what He had said.

So in John 2 Jesus is talking about His death and resurrection, but He is also talking about the temple. And so Jesus is saying "When I die, the temple dies. When I am destroyed, the temple is destroyed. The whole system – all these sacrifices, all this blood flowing to make atonement for sins, all this priestly activity surrounding the holy place where God's presence dwells – it all ends when I die. You destroy me and in dying I destroy the temple."<sup>5</sup>

And this is why at the moment Jesus died the curtain in the temple that divided the presence of YHWH from sinful humanity was torn in two. And it was torn from top to bottom. This means that humanity wasn't breaking in, God was breaking out. Because Jesus had paid the price for our sin, God was breaking out to flood the world with His presence.

So the temple – the place where people went to meet God, and the sacrifices necessary to atone for sin, and the priests who acted as intermediaries between us and God – were now all obsolete. Jesus is the new temple, Jesus is the new sacrifice, Jesus is the new High Priest. The temple is finished.

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<sup>5</sup> John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/stephens-crime-jesus-will-destroy-the-temple>  
(Accessed June 23, 2017)

All of this to say that “no” Jesus wasn’t being dishonest when He said “destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.” And “yes” Jesus did say this. And in this seemingly simple statement Jesus was brilliantly both referring to the temple and His body which was about to become the new means for encountering God.

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But then a second question arises: Did Stephen say this about Jesus? And this is a good question because there is no text that specifically says he did. And on top of this Stephen is quoted to have said, verse 14, “Jesus... will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” But if he spoke like this then he would have been speaking about the future. “Jesus *will* destroy this place.”

But Jesus had already died. And He had already been raised. And the temple curtain had already been torn. And everything Jesus had prophesied about the temple had already come to pass. So how can Stephen be talking about this as though it hadn’t happened yet. Did Stephen agree with Jesus?

Well yes, he did. And it is very likely Stephen did in fact say this. Stephen knew that Jesus had already destroyed the temple. He knew the curtain was already torn and that killing sheep was no longer the means to appease God. But while Stephen knew all this, the reality he was living in was that it was taking time for the temple to come down.

It’s kind of like how when we come to faith in Christ our identity immediately changes. We become children of God instead of objects of wrath. And we are viewed as righteous by God. Jesus takes all our sin upon Himself, and clothes us in His righteousness. And in that moment we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are made into new creations, the old has gone, the new has come. And God sees us this way. If you love Jesus, God sees you as clothed in Christ’s righteousness.

But this doesn’t mean we are perfect – not yet! Instead, now a secondary process of sanctification begins by which we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and grow in Christlikeness. And this is a process that continues until the day we die.

And likewise here in the first century the reality was that the temple had been destroyed, and yet the process of its dismantling, and the customs Moses had handed down, was not yet complete. It wouldn’t totally end for another 35 years. The temple was destroyed in 70AD. And so Stephen did say “Jesus will destroy this place.”

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But this leads to one last question, and that is what did Luke mean by calling those who opposed Stephen false witnesses since they were speaking the truth?

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The answer to that is simply that Luke, and the other Gospel writers, call everyone false who seek to silence the Way, the Truth and the Life. And so because these men sought to destroy Stephen who looked like Jesus, they were false just like the witnesses who spoke the truth about Jesus in an effort to have Him killed were false. It was because Stephen looked like Jesus that he got what Jesus got.

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There is one final verse in our text today, verse 15. And this is where we see what Stephen got.

[Read Acts 6:15]

In Isaiah 53, that great prophecy about Jesus written 700 years before He was born, the prophet described the Suffering Servant as going to His death “like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.”<sup>6</sup>

The picture is of Jesus standing before sinful humanity, being accused and condemned, but refusing to defend Himself. And the reason for this was that Jesus’ death had been God’s plan, Jesus’ plan, from before the creation of the world. And so while His enemies looked on in glee believing they had Him trapped, in reality He was in complete control embracing the cross despising it’s shame, all for the joy set before Him.

And here Stephen got what Jesus got. Stephen was living like Jesus and so when he found himself about to die he was able to walk forward with such uncharacteristic peace that it was as though an angle was looking back at his oppressors. Stephen got what Jesus got. But it wasn’t death Stephen got – this was a side point – what Stephen got was to look like Jesus. He got to be filled with Jesus’ Holy Spirit. He got to taste true life such that even death seemed insignificant. Stephen got to live out shalom just like Jesus did. And that is where true life resides.

So brothers and sisters, here is the challenge this text leaves us with: Who is the lord that controls your life? Who are you living for? Is your career what is ultimately valuable to you? Are your kids or your spouse what is ultimately valuable to you? Is the work you do for God ultimately valuable to you? All these things are valuable, but none of them make a good god.

Friends, don’t worry too much about dying for your faith, give yourself to living for it. Jesus is the only Lord able to give you angelic joy so deep it doesn’t dissipate in the face of death. So seek to honour and please the Way the Truth and the Life with everything you’ve got. Make Him Lord in your life like Stephen did so that whether it be in living or dying it might be said of you “they look like Jesus.” Brothers and sisters, you must get Jesus to get what Jesus got.

I love you. Let me pray for you.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 53:7