

OPEN

In what ways do you use your gifts to serve your church? What might cause you to stop using your gifts?

So far in Acts, the leaders of the church have been threatened, jailed, and beaten. In all these circumstances, they grew bolder and more eager to share the gospel. We rarely, if ever, experience that degree of opposition to our faith.

In this session, we meet the first Christian martyr, Stephen. While it may seem inconceivable to us, his tragic death caused the gospel to spread like wildfire in the region around Jerusalem and even among the people farthest from Jesus.

Difficult circumstances are not a divine mistake. God may even call us into a situation we never wanted. Are we willing to follow him wherever he might lead us?

READ

Acts 6:1–15; 7:51–8:1.

Note: If you have time to read all of Stephen’s defense in front of the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1–50) in your small group, we encourage you to do so. If you do not and would like to read all of Acts 6–7 during the week, see our reading guide in **Go Deeper Section 5** at the end of this session.

WATCH

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Louie Giglio’s teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

What is the benefit of unglamorous service in the church?

Who was Stephen? In what ways did he serve the church?

In what ways was Stephen’s death a catalyst for fulfilling Acts 1:8?

Horizontal lines for writing answers to the questions.

DISCUSS

The road to this point in the book of Acts has not been easy. As Louie said in the video, the incline of the early church's path was steep, and things did not improve in Acts 6–7. But these chapters give us a picture of service and a model of faith we should aspire to. Let's start our discussion by thinking through the spiritual high points in our lives.

When do you most enjoy following Jesus?

Are there any particular circumstances that make you feel most loved by him?

When do you feel God's presence the most?

For many of us, the most spiritually gratifying moments of our lives are in the good times with friends, family, in worship, or prayerful solitude with God. They are emboldening moments when our calling feels sure. Despite the difficult circumstances the church was experiencing in Acts 2–5, the people of God were seeing signs and wonders, witnessing miraculous movements of God's Spirit, and were increasing in number. Their lives weren't peaceful, but they were experiencing God's power.

As the church grew in spiritual power and boldness, God called more people to serve in church leadership. Read Acts 6:1–7.

What problem in the church required the apostles to appoint deacons?

What did the apostles need to focus their attention on?

What qualities were the disciples looking for?

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles appointed seven men to oversee the distribution of food. But this was not the first time these men served the church. Like the apostles, they were "full of the Spirit" and "men of good reputation." In other words, they were visible figures of high character in the church and already active evangelists.

The men chosen to serve in Acts 6 were already serving God and his people before they were given special appointments by the disciples. In our culture, church can feel like a place we go to receive spiritual fulfillment. We

want a service that gives us good music, good preaching, and good production quality. But the early church saw their church service differently. Instead of looking to receive, they searched for ways to give their lives to the church. **In what ways could a service mindset change the ways we interact with our church on Sundays and throughout the week?**

Note: To learn more about how Acts 6 relates to the office of deacons, go to **Go Deeper Section 1** at the end of this study.

The men chosen to serve were the rock stars of the early church, yet they were asked to do a mundane job. But, as Louie taught in the video, even mundane jobs can change the world. **What are the practical, mundane needs in your church that you could meet? How might you sacrifice to serve your church?**

As these men became more visible fixtures in the church, they came under fire from those who opposed the church. Read Acts 6:8–15.

How do verses 8–10 characterize Stephen when he was preaching and when he was opposed?

It is rare to see someone act like Stephen did when people opposed him. **What is a common way people respond to opposition in our society?**

In what ways do you respond when someone contradicts or questions you?

Despite his grace and wisdom, Stephen did not persuade everyone. He didn't even make friends with everyone. Some people still rejected the gospel and stirred up false rumors and lies about Stephen.

What encouragement or discouragement does it give you knowing that even at your most Christlike, not everyone will like or agree with you?

Even so, what should our behavior look like towards those who actively oppose us?

Note: To learn more about how to behave when opposed, go to **Go Deeper Section 2** at the end of this study.

Stephen's inability to win over his whole audience is a normal response to the gospel, and opposition is not persecution. But, when men stirred up lies and rumors

to anger the Jewish leadership, he began to suffer for the mission of God.

Would you classify the hardships experienced by Christians in your community as opposition or persecution? Why or why not?

Being called to leadership was not a comfortable promotion in the early church. Those who served God's people became targets for persecution. Read Acts 7:51–8:1.

Stephen was accused of blasphemy and defended himself with a sermon, walking the Sanhedrin through the Old Testament and highlighting all the ways it points to Jesus. We do not need to have Stephen's knowledge of the Old Testament to tell people about Jesus, but we should want his boldness.

Note: To learn more about Stephen's defense in front of the Sanhedrin, go to **Go Deeper Section 3** at the end of this study.

What circumstances, if any, tend to make you want to downplay your faith in Jesus? When is it difficult to be an outspoken Christian?

What experiences in your own life tempt you to stop telling people about Jesus?

As Stephen's life ended, he looked into heaven and saw Jesus standing to welcome him into glory. For all Stephen knew, he had done little to change the church. He waited on tables and met the same opposition the apostles had, but instead of experiencing a sign or wonder, he died. But his death caused the church to spread and fulfill Acts 1:8.

What is Stephen's legacy? What was his reward?

What would it look like for you to look forward to God's reward in your current circumstances? What could it practically look like to trust God with today?

Note: To learn more about why Jesus stood to receive Stephen, go to **Go Deeper Section 4** at the end of this study.

GO DEEPER

This section has two potential functions:

1. It can supplement your small group discussion with topics your group may be interested in. We've highlighted where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of the study guide. As the leader, it would be good to familiarize yourself with this section just in case your conversation turns to one of these topics.
2. These sections can also function as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting. Consider using these sections to deepen your group's study of the book of Acts.

1. The *deakonoi*

Your church most likely has deacons, but every denomination tends to view them differently. **If you have deacons, what does it mean to be a deacon in your congregation? What are their responsibilities?**

The seven men the apostles appointed in Acts 6:1–7 are typically thought of as the first deacons, a special office of servant leadership in the church. However, the designation of deacon—*diakonos*, meaning “servant”—is never used in this chapter. The office of deacon isn't discussed in the book of Acts at all.

While these seven men are never called “deacons,” they were men called to *diakoneo*, or “to serve” in a specific way. Over time, Acts 6 became the model for meeting social needs within the church. The role of those appointed to serve the needs of the church became the office of “deacon.”

Read 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

What are the qualifications of a deacon? In what ways does this description compare to the qualifications of the seven in Acts 6:3?

The appointment of a deacon is not a way to gain power or social standing in the church. It is a call to specific service to meet the needs of their congregation. But instead of defining what work is worthy of a deacon, the Bible describes their character and commitment to God. While you may never be appointed as a deacon in your church, we can all aspire to have the character and faith required for the position.

In what ways can you grow to be like a deacon, even without the title?

What needs in your church are you uniquely qualified to meet?

You do not need a title to be a person of high character, good reputation, and wholly devoted to the Lord. You don't need to be an employee of your church to serve the body of Christ. Spend some time today praying about the opportunities God has given you to be like a deacon, one who serves the church.

2. Responding to Opposition

In the video, Louie gave us a good framework for thinking about the common difficulties of life, those troubles that everyone goes through regardless of their faith. But the trouble the church was experiencing in Acts was not a common difficulty. Rather, they were suffering specifically because they chose to follow and proclaim Jesus.

In what ways have people in your life responded to you when you tell them you are a Christian?

What sort of responses do you get when you share the gospel with them?

Read 1 Peter 3:8–17.

What characteristics should we display at all times?

How do non-Christians typically describe Christians today? Do you think we deserve that description? Why or why not?

We are not typically known for our harmonious spirit, courtesy, affection, or humility. Like the rest of the world, we are often known for our loud, angry opposition to anyone who stands in our way. But, according to Peter, repaying those who oppose us with the same anger, insult, or disgust that we feel they give to us is evil. We are not called to repay “in kind” but to bless people even when they treat us poorly.

Verses 10–12 quote Psalm 34:12–16. **How must we behave at all times according to this passage? When do we have the freedom to use “evil” tactics?**

According to verse 17, we should always be respectful and courteous. **What circumstance should we prefer**

over being rude?

What can you do to cultivate the qualities described in verses 8 and 16 of a person who always does good?

For many of us, choosing to suffer sounds crazy. Read 1 Peter 4:12–14.

Common trouble should not surprise us. Everyone has difficult seasons in life. Neither should we be surprised when we are reviled or suffer for following Jesus. Suffering isn't "strange" and for Christians, suffering for Jesus should not surprise us.

How should we respond to struggles and suffering according to verse 13? Do you think it is possible to rejoice in difficult times? Why or why not?

What could it look like to rejoice in your present or future suffering?

3. Stephen's Defense in Front of the Sanhedrin

When Stephen stood in front of the Sanhedrin, he was accused of blasphemy against Moses and God. These accusations were lies, stirred up by those who opposed him, but Stephen did not plead his innocence or blame others of wrongful accusation. Instead, he preached a sermon. **Read Acts 7:2–50, taking a note of every time:**

- 1. God speaks or a person hears from God.**
- 2. God prepares his people for a new covenant or prophet.**
- 3. People reject God's appointed servant.**

What do you notice about God's persistence with his people?

Why do you think people are so quick to reject God's prophets and servants?

Stephen's speech gives a panoramic overview of the Old Testament, not to point out things the Sanhedrin did not know, but to highlight that God is frequently calling his people to walk in faith and that his appointed servants, including Moses, are frequently rejected when they do what God calls them to.

Read Acts 7:51–53.

Do you think Stephen was being too harsh towards the Sanhedrin? Why or why not?

Stephen associates the Sanhedrin with the “stiff-necked” people of the Old Testament who rejected God’s great servants, like Joseph and Moses. He reminds them that “your fathers” rejected God’s servants (Nehemiah 9:26; Luke 6:23, 11:49, 13:34), and like them, the Sanhedrin had rejected and killed Jesus, the Righteous One. Stephen’s accusers were the real blasphemers. Stephen, with the appearance like that of an angel (see Acts 6:15), was acting like a prophet, calling out the sin of his people.

Today, prophetic truth is no more welcome than it was in ancient times. We often don’t want to speak as bluntly as Stephen because it can be uncomfortable. But the truth is often uncomfortable. Accepting God’s Word will force us to face our sin and change our lives. Our society is very willing to reject God’s Word as bad news and his messengers as fools. But through his Word and people, God is continuing his long work of persistently calling us to him.

When is it difficult for you to trust God’s Word? What could it look like to trust God’s Word in those times?

What could it look like for you to be a messenger of God’s Word to your sphere of influence?

4. Setting Our Eyes on Jesus

Before his death, Stephen received a vision into the heavenly throne room and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). This is interesting because Jesus is mostly depicted as *seated* at the right hand of God in the New Testament (Luke 22:69, Eph. 1:20, Col. 3:1). Read Hebrews 10:11–14.

What makes Jesus unique from other priests?

The fact that he is our sitting priest is a profound spiritual statement. Jesus’s sacrifice fully forgives and washes away the stain of our sin. He does not need to stand because his work is completed. So why is he standing in Stephen’s vision? In the video, Louie suggested Jesus was honoring Stephen’s sacrifice. Some scholars suggest Jesus stood to welcome Stephen to his heavenly home and reward. Others have noted that standing was the posture of a witness or advocate in court. Though Stephen was accused in the court of the Sanhedrin, Jesus stood as his advocate in the heavenly court where he was fully vindicated and forgiven. Regardless of his posture, Stephen saw the

resurrected Jesus in heaven, a confirming sign to all in the church who were suffering for Christ.

Read Hebrews 12:1–4.

What sin clings closely to you in your pursuit of Jesus?

What could you do to endure the path God has for you, as Stephen endured his?

Just as Stephen saw Jesus, we are also called to “set our eyes on Jesus.” **What do you think that means? What can you do to practice this command?**

Stephen and Jesus suffered death for the message God had given to them. We, like the recipients of Hebrews, have not suffered physical injuries for our beliefs. But this admonition is not meant to discourage us or encourage us to seek out violence. Instead, it is meant to encourage us so that we won’t give up the fight for our faith. If we aren’t opposed with violence, then we still have incredible freedom to share the gospel.

In what ways does the life and death of Stephen encourage you?

What could you do in your daily relationship with Jesus to live with the boldness of Stephen?

5. Acts 6–7 Reading Plan

Acts is a long book, and we won’t be able to study every verse of it during each of these sessions. This reading plan will help you familiarize yourself with the entirety of the book so that you can dig more deeply into God’s Word.

This week, the reading guide will take you through Acts 6–7, the story of the church’s growth and scattering throughout Judea and Samaria.

Day 1: The Appointment of the First Deacons (Acts 6:1–7)

Day 2: Stephen’s Service (Acts 6:8–15)

Day 3: Stephen’s Defense (Acts 7:1–53) *Because of the length of this passage, we encourage you to read it over two days.*

Day 4: Stephen’s Defense (Acts 7:1–53) *On the second day of reading Stephen’s defense, notice the ways Stephen is proclaiming the gospel.*

Day 5: Stephen’s Death (Acts 7:54–8:1)