

WHEN THINGS GET REALLY REAL
ORIGINS SERIES PART 2 - GOING VIRAL
Dan Burrell

Good morning Life Fellowship. It is great to see you today. I know this is a very busy time of year. We have a lot of our young people who are graduating this year. I think there were seven or eight homeschoolers here yesterday having a graduation service. And there were several others graduating, as well as five guys from my Life Group who are graduating from Davidson College. So part of my heart is over there today because they are having a graduation service today during our church service.

Pastor Ben and I are going to be completing this section on Going Viral from the book of Acts at the end of June, and then we will be taking a few weeks break from it before we pick the book of Acts back up. On the last Sunday in June we have a special guest coming in, Dr. Alex McFarland, who is one of America's premier apologists. And not only is Dr. McFarland an apologist but he is also an evangelist. He used to be the president of Southern Evangelical Seminary, and you will just be blessed by him.

Now please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts Chapter 6 and we will also be in Acts Chapter 7. Last week we introduced you to a character by the name of Stephen. He was one of several men who were asked to serve as deacons in the early church. Now this series that we are doing has the overall title of 'Origins' over the book of Acts. And then we took the first section and we talked about the very foundation of the church called 'Church As It Was Meant To Be.' Then we stopped for a few weeks and when we came back to Acts we are now in a series called, 'Going Viral.'

And going viral is what is happening to the early church. There are some things that are going on in the this church that are building steam, building momentum, and it is getting ready to just explode all over Asia Minor and the Middle East. And when we see what is going on behind the scenes it kind of helps us to be prepared here, because we are talking about planting a church in Mooresville. We have had wonderful attendance these last few weeks where we have had to use overflow, so we are excited about what the Lord is doing here. And we want to see this church expand and go viral, to spin out congregations, to send people out to the mission field, and to send people out in ministries.

This is what was happening in Acts, and this is why we think this is such an important book to study. So we were introduced to Stephen after the church was having some internal problems, because when we get people together we get conflict. And these conflicts have to be worked out just like we do in our families. Sometimes we have to sit down with our families and talk things out, and in this church some of the widows were saying they were being neglected and they wanted some help. So they selected seven deacons and they were to help with these widows.

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I want to explain to you why this was important. Stephen was actually from a subset of Jews called Hellenists. His name was a Hellenist name and I want to explain why that was significant. Stephen had just been appointed to be a deacon and the next thing you know in this passage we find that he is in big trouble. We are going to read a passage, and then we are going to take a pause, because there are 53 verses in the intervening passage, and as much as I would like to read Stephen's whole sermon, I realize that he suffered from Dan-ism and he really went long. *(Laughter.)*

Now I will tell you that I am quite happy to read all the verses, but it would probably become a two hour sermon. Are you good with that? *(Laughter.)* If you heard any booing or hissing that would be from my family. So I won't read that whole passage, but I really do want you to go home and read it on your own, because it is an amazing treatise on the gospel, and a clarification for the accusations that were made against Stephen. Then we are going to see the invitation and the response time after Stephen's message and you probably already know that it did not go well.

So let's begin reading this passage and then I will set the context for it. Then I will give you five points that will hopefully help us apply some things as we continue to digest it in the week to come. So Acts Chapter 6 and beginning with verse 8 says:

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit.”

Stop for a moment here and notice that the word Spirit here has a capital S. It is not talking about rah-rah spirit and it is not talking about having a dynamic personality. No, that capital S means the Holy Spirit. So what was happening was of God, not of man. Not a man with charisma or eloquence, but a man filled with God's Holy Spirit. I think it is really important we not miss that.

“And the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

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So here we have all this conflict, all of this turmoil, and it is almost like a mob mentality that had been created. They said, *'This Stephen is out there teaching and preaching and he is getting people stirred up.'* And we saw in the earlier passage where some priests had even been converted recently. So they were drawing a crowd and claiming Stephen was threatening all these different synagogues, these little places of influence and even the power brokers. They were afraid Stephen was going to be successful because he wouldn't shut up, so they get witnesses to testify untruthfully about what he was saying.

And then as we look at Stephen right in the middle of all this, was he having an anxiety attack? No, I probably would have been, but Stephen wasn't. Did he double down and get angry and say, *'Well, let me just tell you something?'* No, there was none of that. The Scripture says, ***"that his face was like the face of an angel."*** He was calm, serene, authoritative, but not disturbed.

And then he preached for 53 verses. He says, *'Let me clarify,'* and he did. *'You have accused me of this, but this is what I have said. And I am so sure of what I am saying that I am going to say it to you right to your face.'* And at the very end he ties a big bow on his message. He says, *'But let's make no mistake what this is all about. I want you to know that everything I have said, when I have talked about Moses, when I have talked about the temple, when I have talked about all these different things, it comes right down to this - the Messiah has come, you have seen Him, and you murdered Him. And then He rose from the dead, and now we are preaching about Him. That is the bottom line issue, the fundamental core issue that you have is that we are preaching Jesus, we are teaching Jesus, we are telling you what we know and what we have heard from Him, and you killed Him. And when He came back to life we talked to Him, and we are not going to shut up about it. We have seen the Messiah.'*

And now we get to see their response to all of that. Look in Chapter 7 and verse 54. ***"Now when they heard these things,"*** they were convicted to their core and repented with tears. (*Laughter.*) Is that what the Scripture said? No. This is what they did. ***"Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him."*** Now I don't know what level of anger that is. I have not reached that level yet. I came pretty close on I-77 recently, but I have not gotten there yet. They were grinding their teeth at him. That is second level anger. In other words they didn't receive his message all that positively.

But look at his response again. ***"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. And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand***

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of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.” They went from teeth grinding to ear plugging and then they rushed him. Talk about a mob scene, this was one that was absolutely out of control.

Verse 58: *“Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 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.”* He died.

So this is the record of the first martyrdom in church history. For the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ Stephen would lose his life. They stoned him to death. Now there are so many layers to this, and I would love to be able to get into all of it, but I don’t want to get too professorial because this isn’t a classroom. But I want to give you a little bit of context so you can kind of understand it, because there are some similarities between what is going on here in this passage and what is going on in our culture and in our country.

I think it is important that we understand the nature of conflict because fundamentally if you are speaking the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Satan does not appreciate it. It is going to cause conflict and we need to understand that. Not fear it, not strive for it, but when it comes know exactly where it is coming from, why it is there and how we are to respond. Because if the gospel goes viral we have to understand that Satan is not going to passively sit by and let that happen.

We saw all the techniques that they used against Stephen. They used exaggeration, *‘He never stopped.’* They twisted his words, *‘He is talking about changing traditions.’* They brought up false witnesses because cowards making accusations find it is never enough to just say it themselves. They always have to say something like, *‘A lot of other people think.’ ‘A lot of other people are saying this.’ ‘He is causing a lot of trouble in the community.’* Because cowards always have to have reinforcements they brought in these men who said, *‘He won’t shut up. He is talking about Moses. He said they are going to destroy the temple. We have to do something about this.’* And they worked the crowd into a frenzy. So when we see these things happening, we need to understand why and where it is coming from.

Stephen was one of the earliest leaders of the church. He was probably a Hellenist Jew. We know that because of his name because first of all that is not a common Jewish name, but it is a Hellenist or Grecian name. And remember that Ben talked last week from Chapter 6 about Stephen becoming an early deacon. He was helping with administration.

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And I want to point this out, because I think it is so important that we not miss this. So Stephen's ministry, his service to the church was administration and in helping. All of us in the body ought to have responsibility in that, like how we run our homes. If our home is running smoothly we are probably recruiting volunteers to help us do it. Hopefully not just one person in our entire house is doing everything. We all need a kind of philosophy that says, *'If you dirty it, you should clean it up. If you open it, you should close it. If you turn it on, you should turn it off. If you mess it up, you should clean it up.'* And the church is the same way. We need to be careful and remember that we have spiritual gifts that we should be exercising for the good of the body.

But that isn't all that Stephen did. He was going out and preaching and teaching. And there is a principle here I don't want us to miss. Service is not a substitute for biblical evangelism. It is not a substitute. None of us gets to say, *'Well, you know I serve the church by doing this, so that other people can go share the gospel.'* No, no, no, we are all called to do that. The Great Commission applies to all of us.

Now some people have a deeper passion for things, a burning need that comes from God. You and I have met them, and everywhere they go they are just dropping tracts, they are talking to people, they are introducing themselves to strangers, and they talk about Jesus wherever they go. But that does not mean that we can say, *'Well, I don't have that passion. I am not called to be a pastor.'* It does not negate our responsibility to share Jesus.

And this is what Stephen was doing. Stephen was a busy dude. He was helping all the widows and the Hellenist Jews. He was busy distributing food - how did he have time to preach? Stephen found time to preach. He made it happen. He wasn't in trouble because he was doing good works. He was in trouble because he was speaking the truth. He wasn't in trouble because he was confining his attention to the body of Christ. He was in trouble because he was going into all the world and preaching the gospel. And this is where the conflict was.

Now there are always little conflicts in the church. There are always people who are disgruntled, unhappy, wanting more, it's too hot, or it's too cold. We understand that and that can be a distraction to the greater mission which is to take the gospel wherever we go. One of the great stresses of the Christian life is to not let the little things keep us from the main thing. And the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

What is the main thing? It is helping people find Jesus. It is always about the gospel. Some people say, *'But we don't have enough money, we don't have enough time, we don't have enough people.'* All of those are little things. What is the main thing?

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People need to hear Jesus. People need to hear Jesus. And that is where the conflict arose.

The question is - why Stephen? Well, Judaism like all religions had sects and sub-sects. For instance, when you go to different parts of the world and say the word 'Christian' most think it is just people who know Jesus. There are Catholics and there are Protestants all underneath 'Christians.' Now if you are a Catholic or if you are a Protestant, you know that oil and water often do not mix, they are just not on the same page on a lot of things. And in the broader sense of the word Protestant and Catholic have different parts. I have never been a Catholic, even though I have friends who are, but I do know the Protestant side pretty well. And under that we have Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Mennonites and non-denominationals.

Judaism was the same way, particularly in Jerusalem, where there were basically five major groups. Now in Charlotte there aren't a lot of Mennonites or Amish here. But if you go to my home town in Missouri there are a lot of Amish people there. In Charlotte we have Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterians and non-denominationals - those are the big four. Now that doesn't mean the other religions aren't there as well, they are just not as loud as the big four.

But in Jerusalem there were five major groups, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Zealots, and the Herodians. So those were the five big denominations of the Jewish tradition. And it is interesting that we see many of them represented in the synagogues. They had all these different sub-congregations of Judaism all around the region.

Now Stephen was a Hellenist Jew and he didn't fit in to the other groups because he was Hellenist. Maybe you are wondering what the Hellenists were. The Hellenists came from the city of Helen and the Greek Empire. Hellenistic philosophy took root during the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great and the whole Grecian Empire influenced civilization from that day to this.

Maybe you think that we are not influenced by the Greek Empire and Alexander the Great in the United States. Yes, we have our constitution, but let me tell you this: there were four pillars of Hellenistic culture and they were these - education, health care, entertainment and athletics. What? Let me say it again. Four pillars of the Grecian Empire, the Hellenistic philosophy, included - education, health care, entertainment and athletics. They believe if they did this for the people they would have a civilized culture. So we see they still do impact modern history as well.

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Now some of the denominations of Jews were okay with this, while others totally hated it and rejected it. Depending on where you came down with that, it caused conflict. So if you were for instance a Sadducee in the Herodians, they said they could live with it. They even embraced it to some degree. But if you were an Essene you rejected it, and if you were a Zealot you outright hated it and worked against it. And if you were a Pharisee they might just say, ‘*Oh we should just focus on the Torah.*’ So they all had kind of different attitudes about the Hellenistic philosophy.

And because Stephen was not ‘one of them’ there was this tribalism, almost like a racism, that was subtly behind the scene. Now maybe you are wondering why that is important. It is because we need to understand that Satan is the great deceiver. He likes to use a variety of methods to oppose the gospel. He will use racism, he will use tribalism, he will use social economy status, he will use political parties, he will use religions and he will use whatever it takes to distract, to use against and to stop the main thing.

What is the main thing? Remember what Stephen said, “***The gospel of Jesus Christ.***” He told them, ‘*This is what it was about. The Messiah came, you murdered Him, He came back to life and we preach Him. This is the gospel. Don’t miss it. I don’t care if I am a Hellenistic Jew or a Christian convert, whatever you want to label me. I didn’t grow up in your neighborhood and my parents didn’t grow up in Jerusalem. My forefathers probably were slaves that had been taken out of the city generations ago and had been raised in some part of the Grecian Empire. They probably weren’t some of the cool kids, they probably didn’t have a degree from the right synagogue, or a membership in the right club, and all of this complicated it.*’

But when it came right down to it, they just didn’t want to know Jesus. And we see that in our country today. We can divide over politics, racial lines, genders, and all kinds of things, but what do we have to do to stay focused in the church? We must stay focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we want our church to go viral, if we want to make a difference, this is where it gets really real. It gets really real. On this we must take our stand. On this we must be willing to take a bullet. On this we must not compromise our voice. Jesus saves. He is the Son of God, there is none like Him, and we will give an account. If we believe this stuff, this is where it all starts. This is the cornerstone of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Either there is a God and He matters and He has a plan for our lives, or none of this matters.

It is really basis isn’t it? You know we like to complicate things. I have taught philosophy for many years in different colleges, and I can give you ‘isms’ like Pantheism and Panentheism. I mean I could go on and on about all of those, but there are really

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only two philosophies. When you break it down it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and either there is a God and He matters and you can trust Him, or God doesn't matter and you can't trust Him. That's all Satan did. He said, *'Oh, let me just tell you Adam and Eve, you really can't trust God, and He is keeping good things from you. He didn't really mean it when He said that, and you aren't really going to die if you disobey Him. I don't think God is really all He says He is. And if He is He is probably lying to you, and it doesn't really matter because He is not all that.'*

And that is the same message that Satan is using today. *'You can live apart from God,'* that is the message of Satan. And God's message to you is, *'You need me. And I have removed every barrier I can possibly remove. You need me if you want life, and if you want the abundant life you need me.'* That is pretty simple. It is not complicated. Why? It is because the message of the gospel begins and ends with Jesus. He is the salvation we prayed for, that God promised, and we have to decide what to do with Him.

There are so many more things that can be gleaned from this passage and I wish I could take the time, but if you only take away one truth this morning it is this - there is a truth, so very real, so very sure, so very important, so very powerful, that it is worth dying for. And it is also worth living for.

In our culture, in our country we are not in danger of having someone come in, putting a gun to our head, and saying, *'Recant, or die.'* But just because it is not happening in our culture, during our day, it doesn't mean that it hasn't happened or that it isn't happening right now. I mentioned two weeks ago that persecution against the church is happening. More people are dying for the cause of Christ right now, in the last year, than in any of our lives previously. Thousands of people every year are dying because they trust Christ.

Just because it is not happening in North Carolina doesn't mean that it is not happening. And by the way just because it is happening to someone whose skin is a little different color, or who speaks in a different language, or who has a different socio-economics status than we do, doesn't make them any less significant to God. We need to get over ourselves. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering.

But here is the question - those folks under the stress of persecution are willing to continue to preach and teach the gospel and even to die for it - what are we doing in this land of amazing freedoms, amazing opportunities, amazing wealth, amazing resources - what are we doing to live for it? How is it making a difference in our walk and in our talk? And sadly for many in the American churches we have chosen to hide our light under a bushel. We have chosen to remain silent when the world needs to hear Jesus.

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We use arguments as well we should, but we seldom get to the best argument which is this - we are sinners in need of a Savior, let me tell you about Him.

There are a lot of things about different political and social issues that are going on today. It is all over the headlines, I get that. This is not a political sermon; I want you to understand that. I am steering way clear of that. But I also want you to understand this - how I vote is a reflection of who I follow. And I don't follow a political party, and I don't follow a politician. I follow the king of truth - Jesus Christ, and because of that it impacts the way I vote. And it affects my position on abortion.

It is all over the news so I am going to address it, okay? And that is because God gives life and it is sacred. He said not to murder, He said not to take innocent life. And so we need to respect that. When we stop respecting what is God's alone, we endanger ourselves. We need to understand that there is an authority higher than public opinion, majority rules, pieces of paper, or court decisions. (*Audience 'Amen.'*)

I am not telling you how to vote because it is none of my business, but as your pastor I want you to know this, I won't vote for anyone - I don't care what tag they put behind their name - I won't vote for anyone that isn't interested in life, because life is sacred and it begins with God. So I am just not touching it. (*Applause.*)

You are free to disagree and take me out for a cup of coffee. We'll chat, and I am not going to get ugly. I love you and care about you. And by the way science supports it and philosophy supports it, but here is the main reason, the foundation of all my beliefs is the gospel, because you see life was so sacred to God that He was willing to send His Son to die that we might have eternal life. It all comes down to the gospel over and over again.

By the way that truth also determines how I spend my money. And it also determines when I am acting spiritually what I find funny and what makes me cry. I have always said if you want to find out the essence of a person's character watch what makes them laugh and what makes them cry, because it tells you a whole lot of what we value and what is important to us.

So I want my faith to impact my emotions. I want my faith to impact how I spend my money, how I spend my time, what I use for entertainment, how I treat my body, and how I treat the environment. All of the other things ought to be flowing out of this - is God true, can He be trusted, does His Word matter and what is my role and relationship with Him? And all of those things then have the potential to create conflict with those who reject who He is.

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And when that conflict occurs, I have a decision to make - will I go radio silent, will I back down, will I compromise, will I slip into the shadows, or will I be a Stephen and let the winds rage, the accusations come, and then patiently, not out of anger but with the face of an angel, say '*Let me tell you about my Jesus. This is why I believe.*' That will make us go viral, but that is also when things get really, really real.

And in the midst Stephen's face was the face of an angel. He wasn't being a jerk. And by the way, don't be a jerk. There is no reason to be a jerk. We don't have to be hateful, we don't have to be ugly and call people names. We don't have to threaten people. They may do that to you because they can get really angry. I have been on the receiving end of some of that a time or two. But when you respond, respond back with grace and peace. It doesn't mean that you back off of what you believe, you just say it with clarity and grace and let the Holy Spirit do what only the Holy Spirit can do. And that is to change minds and hearts, call people to repentance and conviction, and convert them to become children of God. That is what the Holy Spirit does. All we are is the mouthpiece. But we are to be the mouthpiece, and we have been commanded and commissioned to go and tell people about the Savior. That is when it got really real for Stephen.

Now here are the principles I want you to take away today in this moment for us. Number one - we have a responsibility to declare truth to all people from the commoners to the elite. Here we have a young guy who was probably in his late teens to mid-twenties somewhere in that range, as were most of the apostles at that time.

And by the way we have a lot of high school and college kids in here, and I just want to tell you that this message is for you guys. People like to complain about the millennials and generation Z's, but let me tell you that I am excited for the Christ following millennials and generation Z's. Do you know why? It is because my generation messed it up, but your generation can fix it. People aren't going to listen to me in the same way they will listen to you. And I just want to urge you to stand firm in your faith. Again, don't be a jerk, but don't be a coward either.

By the way I am a professor and I know how to play the game. But you can politely disagree with your professors and still be okay because we don't have all the answers. We get in our little bubble sometimes but we don't know what we don't know. And even in a classroom you will be in a position where your faith may come under attack, and I just want you to speak up with respect, and with conviction, and not be silent.

Edmund Burk said, '*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.*' Don't be a jerk, but don't be a coward. Talk to them privately, explain

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to them the difference, call someone who can help you if you need to, but this matters. You are light and you are salt in areas that desperately need it. You will learn skills now standing up as a young person that will benefit you all the rest of your life. And I am watching college students and high school students do it everywhere I look, and I am excited because it is your turn up to bat, so swing for the fence young people. You can do it.

And understand this, selective silence and inconsistent living undermines the credibility of the message we are called to carry. If we are silent when it gets rough, when the heat gets turned up, when someone is holding a rock, then they are going to think, *'He really didn't believe it. She really doesn't swallow that. It is just not that important.'* And I would urge all of us to consider the fact that our walk talks and our talk talks, but our walk talks louder than our talk talks. And we need to live it and we need to speak it - the gospel - Jesus saves.

It is one thing to be courageous to an audience of friends and it is a completely different thing to be courageous to an audience of opposition. Let me just tell you in here I can get pretty cocky because I know if I hit certain buttons somebody is going to applaud, somebody is going to say *'amen,'* somebody is going to say, *'preach it, brother.'* I get that. But do you know when it is a little difficult? It is when I am sitting with a bunch of people that do not know Christ, and they say, *'Oh well, you are just a preacher.'* Well, Jesus was just a guy from Nazareth, but He didn't let that slow Him down. He was just the son of a carpenter, just a person who didn't have a place to lay His head down at night, but He had a message and it was from His Father. And we have a message and it is from our Father, and that is the gospel. It is all about Jesus.

The second thing is this - the ability to stand for truth is a byproduct of the Holy Spirit's work within us. It is a byproduct of the Holy Spirit's work within us. I wish I had time to peel back all these layers as well, but if we go back and look at Stephen's countenance, look at when the capital S is used signifying the Holy Spirit in this passage, the reason why Stephen could look in the face of impending death was because the Holy Spirit was with him.

Do you realize this - that Stephen saw what was going to happen before it happened? Why else would God be standing there with Jesus getting ready to welcome him into Heaven? It says Stephen looked up and there was the Father. He knew what was going to happen even though no one had thrown the first stone yet. They had jerked him out of town and were getting ready to stone him. By the way they couldn't kill him in town because that would have been a violation of the Roman authority. They had to

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take him outside of town to do what they were getting ready to do. The devil always likes to do his work in the dark.

So they are getting ready to murder Stephen, and he knew what they were going to do and he looked up and saw Jesus, and he knew he was going to be okay after all. And he kept on speaking the truth and as they threw the rocks, a peace came over him so deep, so intense, so personal that even as the blood was draining from his body and his bones were being broken, he looked up and said, *‘Father, please don’t hold this to their account.’*

Who does that remind you of? Maybe Jesus? When Jesus said, ***“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”*** Would to God that each of us would have the kind of grace that we could stand up in front of those who are abusing us and hating us, who would see us dead, and to simply say, *‘God bless you. I am going to keep speaking the truth. My prayer for you is that God won’t hold what you are saying or how you are acting to your account. I get it. It is not about you and it is not about me, it is about truth. I am trying to speak the truth and I hope you will hear it. But in your rejection I don’t take it personally, because they crucified the one I am telling you about.’*

Now I can’t imagine having that kind of grace. I just can’t. I am from the Midwest, I am a Type A, I am a firstborn and my first instinct is to throw it down. I want to double down. But do you know what I am also confident of in this - when we walk in the Spirit God gives us what we need when we need it. And God gave Stephen, before the stoning and after the stoning, exactly what he needed. You see God was doing something bigger through Stephen than Stephen was even aware of. We will talk about that in a moment, but there were some important things going on. When we come to those times when we have to face opposition and hostility over the truth, we should anticipate that God will give us what we might otherwise lack in order that we will be able to speak boldly, endure patiently, and to suffer joyfully.

Whether you are going through cancer treatments, your marriage is in crisis, someone in your life is breaking your heart, you are losing your job, you are getting turned away from opportunities you think you deserve, it may be spiritual oriented. But remember this, in the midst of all of that, suffering with joy gives the opportunity for the truth to be clarified, because it is easy to follow Christ when everyone is cheering you on, and throwing you roses, and applauding you, but the reality of Christ will allow you to endure when it is really rough. And that is when Christ can be most glorified. It is no tribute to us to endure easiness with grace, but the Scripture says it is a tribute to God when we endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ with grace. And it is an opportunity if we always keep it about the truth.

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Number three - when we sign up for Christ we sign up for risks. When we sign up for Christ we sign up for risks. Let me just say this, if your life is spent trying to be one of the cool kids, Christianity is not for you. Maybe there is a little less risk involved if you are in the United States, but basically around the world you need to understand that following Christ comes with shame. It is called the shame of the cross. Jesus warned the apostles, the apostles reminded each other of it, there is shame in following Jesus. *'Oh you're a virgin. Oh you don't cuss. Oh you don't get wasted. Oh you go to church.'* There is shame, but we need to embrace it because it is worth it. And you should not sign up for Christ if you do not understand the reality of the risk that comes with it.

I just happen to think that the joy that is set before us, the hope of Heaven, the price that was paid makes it all worth it. And so we won't compromise the message in order to be cool, or to be liked, or to be popular, or to be accepted, or to be in the majority, or to have power. But instead we will speak the truth because the truth needs to be spoken, remembering that God held nothing back from us. So whether you are 12 years old or 100 years old, let me say to you, let's speak the truth in love in spite of the risk. Our willingness to declare God's truth in courage is a reflection of believing God's truth with confidence. And if you are confident that He is who He said He was, as was Stephen, you can face even martyrdom with peace and forgiveness.

Number four - we must resist those who try to redefine compassion. This is a word that has come under attack lately, because we have abused the word 'hate.' Let me just say with clarity, it is not hate to speak truth, even if it makes us uncomfortable. In fact it may be love to speak the truth even if it makes everybody uncomfortable. It is not compassionate to remain silent when the truth needs to be spoken. It is cowardice to be silent when the truth needs to be spoken.

And here is how we can see it played out in Stephen's life. The fact that Stephen's final words were words of compassion and of forgiveness is all the evidence we should need as to the intent of his actions and what was in his heart. As the stones were flying, as the bruises were being made, as the bones were being crushed, as the blood was flowing, Stephen looked into their faces and told them he was praying for them that God won't hold this to their account. And then he died.

That brings me to the last point - God may answer some of the prayers that are borne of suffering in surprising and powerful ways. And in ways that may occur even after we die. The Bible says that *"the fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."* Maybe you are wondering how I know this, what makes me think that is so. Well, Stephen prayed for mercy for those who were murdering him. Little did he know that his

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prayers were going to be answered through the life of the guy that had everyone's coats laid at his feet, this guy by the name of Saul.

Does that name sound familiar? You see this Saul in a few days would be traveling down a road to Damascus, and he would receive an intervention from Jesus Himself, and Jesus would say, '*Saul, Saul, why are you doing this to my church.*' And Saul became Paul. He abandoned his sins, repented and trusted in Christ. And he is the greatest evangelist in church history.

Stephen did not know that would happen when he looked at his accusers, his tormentors, his executioners and said, '*I am just praying God will have mercy on your souls.*' I wonder if Saul had some sleepless nights thinking about the last words of that young man that had just been murdered in cold blood?

We don't know what patiently enduring suffering and praying for those who hate us might do in their lives, because the story may not be told during our lifetime. But God is working around us even when we don't see Him. When we endure suffering, hardness, travail, opposition, setbacks, accusations with grace and forgiveness and compassion, we are sowing the seeds that the Holy Spirit will use to draw others to Himself.

Stephen - the first martyr of the church, was an amazing young leader with a very brief ministry, but we talk about him today because for Stephen the main thing was Jesus. May I invite you today if you do not know Jesus as your Savior to trust Him? Would you repent of your sins and put your confidence in Him?

Maybe you would say, '*but I have questions,*' and that's okay because the Bible has answers. I would love to chat with you, you can come to my office, or we can go get a cup of coffee, or I can come to your house. Maybe you would prefer to have someone else talk to you, maybe someone younger, or someone you feel more comfortable with, and that's okay too. Satan will try and stop you with all kinds of excuses, so please don't let any of that matter.

Do you know Jesus? And are you willing to listen to what He did for you and how much He loves you? If you don't know Him this morning, and you want to know Him, will you come up and talk to me, or go to the Next Step Station on your way out, or go to the prayer room while we sing a couple of songs. There are three options - come see me, go to the Next Step Station or to the prayer room at the end of the lobby, and there will be someone there who will show you that God loves you and wants you to be His child.

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If you are going through hardness, I challenge you to endure and don't back down. Meet people where they are and love them to where they need to be. Will you patiently let the Holy Spirit complete His work in the lives of others? Maybe you just need someone to pray with you this morning. Pastor Ben and I will be over there, as well as our elders, and you can pray with one of us, or you can go pray at one of the crosses.

Maybe you want to talk to someone about baptism. If that is you, just go to the Next Step Station, or come see one of us. Maybe you don't know what God is doing in your life and you would like someone to come see you. Just fill out the Connect card if that is you. If you want to take communion there are tables in the front and in the back.

I don't know what God is doing in your life, but I know that if you will listen to Him He will tell you exactly where He wants you to move and grow. Maybe it is to take a stand in your classroom, or in your work place, or in your neighborhood. Maybe it is to follow Him in baptism. Maybe it is to just open up your heart to serve and share the gospel. Whatever we do, let's not leave here without letting the sacrifice of Stephen bear more fruit in us even today. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the life of Stephen, who inspires us today as a great example of how things can get really real. Holy Spirit use us in ways that makes others look to you. For it is in Christ's name I pray. Amen.

The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.