



# Acts:

# A Life of Witness

## Week Six: Acts 6:8-15; 7:51-60; 8:1-4

### *The Witness of SUFFERING*

**Opening Question:** Is there a movie or book from now or your childhood that always brings tears to your eyes?

#### CONTEXT

A quick look back: Review the big picture of Acts. Who wrote it? Where are we in the big timeline of Scripture? If you had to summarize the heart of the book as you understand it so far, what would you tell someone? What does it mean to be a witness, and how does it happen?

**Today's Passage:** Last week we saw Stephen commissioned as one of the 7 people responsible for carrying out ministries of care and mercy for the church. This week, we see Stephen- "full of wisdom and the Spirit"- also preaching and healing- actions that create a cascade of hardship and suffering for him as he is put on trial and eventually killed. In the midst of his suffering, Stephen is able to both experience and testify to the presence of Christ. His story is often identified as a turning point in the book of Acts, as his death causes these early believers to now expand their witness beyond Jerusalem to "Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The story of Stephen reminds us that God is intimately present in our suffering, and that because of his Spirit, we are somehow still able to reflect the face and love of Christ even when it feels impossible.

#### CONTENT

**Read 6:8-15; 7:51-60; and 8:1-4 out loud and then pick ONE of the following ways (Option A, B, or C) to help your group engage with this passage.**

**Option A. Notice/Wonder:** Ask everyone to read the passage again quietly on their own. As they read, ask them to make a list like the one below. Remember that what people notice or wonder can just be small, simple things.

What do I NOTICE about this text?    What do I WONDER about?

Once everyone has had the chance to make their list, come together as a group to share and discuss your observations, writing them in a place where everyone can see the list as it develops.

**Option B. Creative Engagement:** Give everyone paper and drawing supplies. Have everyone read the passage again on their own, then invite them to spend some time illustrating the passage (or a part of the passage) in whatever way they want- concrete, abstract, colors, images, lists, words. When everyone has completed their art, come together to share and discuss what you drew and why.

#### **Option C. Guided Bible Study Questions:**

1. Contrast the mood, actions and descriptions of Stephen to the mood, actions and descriptions of his accusers. What do you notice?
2. The Bible rarely highlights physical characteristics, so when it does, we pay attention. How is Stephen described in 6:15? We can assume that no one in this crowd has physically seen an angel, so what do you think they are seeing? What might it have to do with Stephen's witness in this moment?

3. Stephen's trial has many connections to Jesus' trial before his crucifixion. Have group members look up Matt 26:59, Matt 26:61, Matt 26:64, and Luke 23:34. Where do these connect to this story? Why might the author be making these connections?
4. What deep comfort (7:55-56) does God give Stephen in the midst of the violence of the Sanhedrin trial? Notice the position of Christ in this moment- what is significant about it?
5. What are the last words Stephen speaks in 7:60?
6. Joseph is a biblical character in the OT who knew a thing or two about suffering. In Gen 20:50, he says to his brothers- who have been nothing but evil towards him, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." How do we see this same theme being repeated in Acts 8:1,4. How does this connect with the mission laid out in Acts 1:8?

## **APPLICATION**

**How does all of this connect to our lives? Here are some questions to help guide your discussion. Choose one or several.**

- Stephen is the first Christian martyr recorded in Scripture, setting up the biblical reality that following Christ may very well include suffering. But his story also conveys this very important truth- once the message and miracle of Christ's life, love, forgiveness, and kingdom vision capture your heart, you cannot help but look, speak, walk and love like him in the world. Do you know anyone who radiates this kind of image bearing? Who helps you- in your everyday life- to really see and experience the person of Christ?
- In the midst of his deep suffering, Stephen is gifted with a picture of what is really happening. Outside the shouts and accusations and pain and even death, he is firmly in the presence of God. Christ is standing with him, beside him, around him. Have you ever had a particular sense of God's presence in the middle of your own story of heartache, grief or suffering? Share with the group.
- In the middle of deep suffering, Stephen gently and powerfully bears witness to who Christ is and what Christ looks like in the world. Have you ever witnessed someone you love who is in the middle of deep pain, grief or suffering bear witness to God's presence, promises or hope in a meaningful way?
- There are times when we wrongly diminish other people's suffering by quickly trying to look for its meaning or even using stories like Stephen's to somehow "explain" the nature of suffering. But most of our suffering has no easy answers or obvious purpose. Share about any times you have been hurt or saw others being hurt by these kinds of interactions. What does this teach you about the idea of suffering as witness?
- Many of us deal with our suffering in very private ways. What might this passage teach us about the gifts of opening ourselves to others in the midst of the hard and grief-filled spaces of our lives?

## **PRAYER**

Close your time together in prayer using one of the ideas below

- Use words/images/themes from the passage to guide your prayer.
- Raise up your "wonderings" from the notice/wonder section to God in prayer
- Take prayer requests and pray over each other as a group or in small groups
- Use this written prayer taken:

*God-*

*We admit that it is hard to understand why suffering is part of our lives, and why it is part of the way we witness to the world. It is a holy mystery that you don't ask us to resolve. But we are reminded today of this life-giving truth- we are never, ever alone in our suffering. That is why you can use it. Because somehow, in ways that we can see and often in ways that are very hard for us to see, your love and forgiveness and tenderness and face exist as much in suffering as they do in joy. So teach us God, to open our stories of suffering to others. To not be quiet about the ways you have tended and loved and restored us in the hardest places in our lives. And may we be people who wrap our arms around those who are suffering in our midst, so that they might experience your presence in us, too.*

*We pray this in the name of Christ, our Savior who is well-aquainted with grief.*

*Amen.*