

Acts of the Holy Spirit - 8
Living Martyrs – Week of November 6, 2016
Bay Park Life Groups – Leader

There were four key symbols of first-century Judaism: the temple, the Torah, the land, and their ethnic identity as Jews. The gospel Stephen and the early church proclaimed challenged every religious boundary marker in one way or another.¹ N.T. Wright

The story of Stephen continues to challenge our faith and cultural boundaries some 2000 years later. Before launching out into the questions, pray that the Holy Spirit would so move in you that your life would be stretched, challenged, transformed by the power of God and to the glory of God.

1. What has been your favourite part of Acts so far? Which has been your least?

Read Acts 7:1-53 together – yes it’s long but it’s worth it!

2. Stephen highlights certain aspects of Israel’s history to make a critical point. In a sentence or two, what is the main point of his message?

The point in a sentence: *Anyone who makes a place (Temple), a location (Holy Land), or a method (Traditions) the means to knowing God is an idolater, not a worshiper. Abraham – was called and blessed by God while in Iraq! Joseph – was used and blessed by God in Egypt! Moses – while he was getting the Torah from God the people were asking for a golden calf. The temple at that time was a mobile one that followed the people in the dessert. David – asked God if he could build a temple. God didn’t require it of David, but allowed for it while making it clear that he doesn’t dwell in any one place (Isaiah 66:1-2).*

3. Stephen could have politely worked his way out of a hot predicament, but he wasn’t willing to compromise his faith in Jesus for it. What are your non-negotiables of faith and why? Have they ever been tested?

Read Acts 7:54-60 together

4. What happened to Stephen to prepare him for his death and for forgiving his killers? How can we know more of this ourselves?

Verses 55-56 tell us that just before being unjustly executed, Stephen was *filled with the Holy Spirit* and saw *Jesus, standing at the right hand of God*. Passages like Hebrews 1:3 talk about Jesus being *seated at the right hand of God, symbolizing his finished work of redemption*. But Stephen saw Jesus *standing*. “The best guess is that this refers to his work as our Intercessor (Heb.7:25). The Bible speaks of his intercessory work as an ongoing work, in which he stands before the Father as our

¹ N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone – Part 1*, (John Knox Press, 2008)

representative, so that we are regarded by God in him. Compare I John 2:1 – we have an advocate with the Father, one who speaks in our defense — Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins. F.F. Bruce says, “Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God.” (Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 168.)”²

Though being condemned by a mock and unjust court, Stephen knew in that moment he was free from condemnation before God in Christ. That’s why he could not only face his accusers boldly and calmly, but also why he was able to forgive them. His spirit was filled with the Spirit of God, the one that says “you are fully mine, loved, forgiven and there is therefore now no condemnation in Christ Jesus.”

As for how we might experience such love and grace in our lives, it must not be overlooked that Stephen was first willing to be used by God. He was first a living witness (aka *martyr*).

5. How has God led you to forgive someone or something that you thought you would never get over? Who (group of people, type of person, individual) do you find yourself inclined to want to throw rocks at, even if just in your mind? How does Acts 7 help you with your attitude?

Christians are free to love our enemies, not kill them, because we live with the awareness that our battle is never really against people. Our struggle is against the ideas themselves that oppose the truth of Jesus, not the people who embrace those ideas (e.g., **2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:11-17**; etc.).³

6. What is your main take away from this series or study?

² Tim Keller, *Evangelism Studies in the Book of Acts*, (Redeemer, 2005) p 67

³ Bruxey Cavey, *Roots*, (Part 11 – Till Death do us Part, 2009)