



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

theme: Something New Begins (Acts 6:8-15)

materials: Bibles, news story

welcome

Have you ever been falsely accused of anything? How did that feel? What did you do about it? How do you deal with confrontation and opposition?

Bring in a news item about your neighbourhood, city, country or world that you can discuss with the cell. Where do you see God in this story? Ask other members of cell to bring in stories to discuss in subsequent weeks.

worship

Where have you seen God this week? Where have you experienced divine community this week? Pray for your enemies this week, for the opponents of the gospel. Pray for the people who persecute the people of God. Pray that the persecution would end, that any suffering persecution and opposition would be faithful, wise and bold, and that the persecutors themselves would come to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

word

Read **Acts 6:8-15**

Do a quick run down, in your cell, of all the things we have seen in the book of Acts so far leading up to this story involving Stephen.

Who was Stephen? What was he like, according to Acts?

Why did certain people oppose Stephen?

How did they first try to oppose him? Why didn't this work?

What responsibility do we have today to be able to wisely dispute with those who oppose the gospel?

What did Stephen's opponents do next when they couldn't defeat him in debate?

What was he accused of? Why was he accused of these things in particular?

How do people smear and slander the Church today? How should we respond?

Have you, your cell, or Church ever been significantly opposed for the sake of the gospel? Why, or why not?

Why did Stephen's face shine like an angel? What does this signify?

witness

Is there anything you are nervous about doing in your community, something you suspect might be the right thing to do, or a person or group you need to witness to, but you are afraid of the opposition and persecution that might come as a result? Talk about why this might frighten you. Is it a reasonable fear? Even if opposition is likely to come, is it still something you should be doing? Pray with one another around these issues, and ask how the Lord is calling you to witness for him.



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action points

Stephen was able to wisely and effectively explain and defend the gospel against serious opposition. How prepared are we to do the same? What are the big questions and scepticisms people have in your neighbourhood, school, workplace or family about the gospel? Do you know how to answer them? Start asking around, try to find out in an open, honest and humble way what the opposition to the gospel is in your sphere of influence, and set about making sure you can wisely engage with those oppositions.

leader's guide

Because we have previously examined **Acts 2:42-6:7**, we are now going to move ahead in the story to the events surrounding Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

So far in the book of Acts we have seen: Jesus ascend into heaven; the apostles replace Judas; the Holy Spirit being poured out Pentecost; the apostles speaking in tongues and Peter's sermon leading to three thousand people saved; the creation of the radical new Christian community; the healing of the lame man at the Temple gate and the subsequent preaching and arrest of Peter and John; the Holy Spirit falling on the believers again after Peter and John are released; the description of the way the new community held everything in common, and the consequences of lying and stealing within the new community; the miracles the Holy Spirit was doing through even the apostle's shadows; the second arrest of the apostles, their miraculous release from prison, their continued preaching in defiance of the orders given to them; and their beatings before being released again; and the seven people chosen by the Church to ensure that the Jewish and Greek speaking widows received the help they needed and that the apostles were freed up to pray and preach.

Now, something new was beginning. One of the men chosen to serve the widows, a man named Stephen, takes the stage in the story. His preaching and the subsequent accusations, trial and martyrdom mark a new period for the young Church, one that was characterised by both increased persecutions an expansion of the gospel beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem, into Samaria, Ethiopia, Asia, Europe and the rest of the world. This is all in accordance with the commissioning Jesus gave to his followers when he told them that by the power of the Holy Spirit they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (**Acts 1:8**).

We first meet Stephen in **Acts 6:1-7**, where he is one of the Seven chosen to distribute charity to the widows. In that passage he, like the other six, are described as being full of the Spirit and wisdom. Now, in this passage, he is described as a man full of God's grace and power. He is also shown performing signs and wonders amongst the people. This is the first time Luke shows someone other than Jesus or the apostles doing that kind of thing.

We also know, however, that Stephen's activities, specifically his preaching, brought about some serious opposition. Members of a synagogue (it is unclear whether there are five synagogues represented here, or people from five different areas who formed one local synagogue) began disputing with Stephen about the message he was preaching. But they could not best him in dispute, as he was full of both wisdom and the Spirit. Jesus had promised that his followers would be given words of wisdom when they needed them to overcome their opponents (**Luke 12:12, 21:15**). Some take this to mean that Christians today should not worry about studying or preparing sermons, because God will give us the words to say. But Jesus made this promise in the context of expected persecution, not in the context of giving sermons. And he was speaking to his followers who spent three years learning from him, and who came from a culture that was incredibly Scripturally literate. We should therefore not use this type of passage to try to prove that study and learning and preparation are unimportant. But we should also remember that ultimately all knowledge and wisdom come



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from the Lord, as a gift, and we must be totally reliant upon him to face any opposition and persecution.

Once it became clear that the opponents couldn't overcome Stephen (and the Holy Spirit) in an argument, a slander and smear campaign was begun against him. He was accused of blaspheming against Moses and God, and of attacking the Temple and the Law, the two most sacred institutions of the Jewish faith and communal life. An attack on these two things represented an attack on the very place where God's Presence was thought to dwell, and the very revelation of the will of God. These were therefore no small accusations. When the Church is slandered today, we should remember Paul's description from **1 Corinthians 4:12-13**: "...When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly..."

Eventually Stephen was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council) on these charges. Stephen was accused of saying that Jesus would destroy the Temple and change customs or oral traditions and interpretations of the Law, which were considered to have stemmed from Moses himself. Jesus did prophesy that the Temple would be destroyed (**Luke 21:5**) and it was destroyed in AD 70. Jesus also said that he had come to fulfill the Law (**Matt 5:17**), and in the course of his life did correct the misinterpretations of the scribes and Pharisees on numerous occasions. But Jesus had never said that he would destroy the Temple, and he said that he had not come to abolish or even change the Law, but to fulfill it.

It is likely that Stephen had referred to these teachings of Jesus in his public speaking. It is also likely that Stephen, even more than the other apostles, was teaching that the Temple had been pointing all along to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, and that the ancient religious relationship with Yahweh had been preparing the way for a new, intimate relationship with Yahweh made possible through Jesus. This relationship was being experienced by the new Christian community after they had been filled by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Luke indicates that the accusations made against Stephen were false, and procured with bribery, but it is understandable how Stephen's opponents arrived at them. The teaching may have been misunderstood or grossly misrepresented, but the charges were not picked out of thin air.

As Stephen was being accused, Luke reports that his face was visibly shining like an angel. It is an unusual turn of phrase, but it takes us back irresistibly to the picture of Moses, having met with Yahweh on the mountain or in the Tent of Meeting, coming back down or out to see the people of Israel with his face literally glowing (**Exodus 34:29ff**). God's favour rested on Moses, and God's favour rested on Stephen, the first of his witnesses for Jesus who would be martyred. Paul talks about this glorious light of God, greater even than the light that was reflected in Moses' face, because that light would eventually fade, whereas the light of the indwelling Holy Spirit would never fade (**2 Corinthians 3:7-16**). God was present with Stephen as he had been present with Moses, but in an even more incredible and immediate way, by the Holy Spirit filling him, strengthening him, giving him words to say, and shining through him.