



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

**theme:** Stephen is stoned (Acts 7:54 – 8:3)

**materials:** Bibles, news story

## welcome

---

If you were to be given a heavenly vision of Jesus, what would you expect him to be doing? What would you want him to be doing?

*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? Jesus sits at the right hand of God, interceding for us, bringing our prayers to his Father. The Holy Spirit enables us to pray, interpreting even our groans of prayer. With this picture in mind, bring your prayer requests to God, knowing that he hears us, and loves to give good gifts to his children.

***If you are in Canada, check out the "Prayer Cast" called "This Prayer Hour Has 22 Minutes" on Tuesday nights, 11:11 Eastern Time, at [www.24-7prayer.ca](http://www.24-7prayer.ca)***

## word

---

Read **Acts 7:51 – 8:3**

Why was Stephen killed? What did he do or say that put the final nail in the coffin for him?

What is the significance of Stephen's vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God? Where have we heard that before?

How was the death of Stephen similar to the death of Jesus?

How might this story be encouraging to other Christians who are facing persecution, or even martyrdom, for their faith?

Why is Saul introduced to the reader in this way?

Why did Saul approve of the execution? Why did he want to stamp out this new faith?

What were the immediate results of Stephen's martyrdom and the persecution of the Church?

How does this event pave the way for the mission of the Church to the Gentiles? To mission in our time and place?

## witness

---

What is the "last straw" for people today? What is considered too scandalous a thing to say about Jesus in our current social climate? Are you careful in your witnessing to only say things that won't offend, or are you more likely to speak truth without worrying about that? When should we take care not to offend? Ever? When was the



SENDTHEFIRE.CA

last time you said something dangerous about Jesus, something that got you in trouble for your faith? Consider: Who would be the most difficult or dangerous person in your sphere of influence to witness to about Jesus? How are you going to go about witnessing to them? Start praying for them, asking the Lord for the opportunity to speak the truth of the gospel to them.

## action points

As you read through the story of Acts, in particular the expansion of the Church's mission into Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world, get out a map to help you follow along. Put pins in the towns or areas the missionaries went into (you may need to do some work figuring out where the ancient cities were). Maps like these can be a helpful visual to see how the prophetic words of Jesus were lived out by his followers.

## leader's guide

Stephen ended his history of Israel with a flourish, turning the accusations of blasphemy and opposition to God against his accusers, the Sanhedrin. Small wonder they became enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. But then, he made it even worse. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the one who had given him the words to say, the one who had made his face shine like an angel's, Stephen saw a heavenly vision. And not just any heavenly vision. This heavenly vision was the final straw that cemented his martyrdom.

Looking up to heaven, Stephen saw Jesus, the Son of Man, standing in glory at the right hand of God. We might think of that as a simple picture of Jesus in heaven. This would have been enough to cause offence, as Jesus had died a cursed death on the cross, and so the Sanhedrin was not likely to have pictured him enjoying the company of God in glory. But Stephen's vision actually communicated a lot more to his accusers. This was blasphemy, to suggest that Jesus was standing in such a position of power and authority. It brought to mind Daniel's prophecy of the "Son of man" coming down from the heavens and being given an everlasting dominion (**Daniel 7:13-14**). Peter had also used this kind of language in his sermon at Pentecost, quoting **Psalms 101** to indicate that Jesus was sitting at the right hand of God, and that his enemies would be made into footstools under his feet. Jesus, of course, applied the title "Son of Man" to himself quite frequently. And it was his use of this title in conjunction with the idea that he would be seated at the right hand of God that was the last straw in his own trial. When Jesus said it, the chief priest tore his garments and ended the trial (**Mark 14:62-64, Luke 22:66-69**). When Stephen said it, the crowd started yelling, put their fingers in the ears, and rushed him to kill him.

This is just one of the similarities between the trials and deaths of Jesus and Stephen. Both Jesus and Stephen had false witnesses produced against them, and both were tried by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy. Both Jesus and Stephen also prayed for their killers before they died. When Jesus died, he committed his spirit into the hands of his Father. When Stephen died, he committed his spirit into the hands of Jesus, a very important and early case of Christians accepting the divinity of Jesus. And just as Jesus' death seemed like a victory for Satan but was actually the plan of God, so was Stephen's death an apparent victory for the Enemy that actually resulted in the expansion of the mission of the Church.

Stephen died in imitation of his Lord, and his vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God in glory was not just a picture of power and authority, but of Jesus welcoming him into his Father's presence. In other uses of this imagery the Son of Man is pictured as seated at the right hand of God, but to Stephen Jesus was standing. This has suggested to many commentators that Jesus is standing to vindicate Stephen, his witness. FF Bruce says this: Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God." (see **Luke 12:8**). Stephen's example, and his heavenly vision, would be a huge encouragement to



a young Church facing persecution, and even to Christians today whose lives are at risk for the sake of the gospel.

As Stephen is being stoned to death, we get our first introduction to Saul. (*Saul* was his Jewish family name, *Paul* was his Roman cognomen). Saul was a Pharisee, zealous for the Lord and the Law, who was anxious to see this new cult of Jesus followers wiped out. He understood, as Stephen did, but as others did not, the fundamental differences between Judaism and faith in Jesus. He knew that compromise was not really possible between the two, and so he approved of the execution of Stephen in as public a way as he could. The witnesses against Stephen had to be the first to throw the stones (**Lev 24:14, Deut 17:7**) and it was to Saul that they gave their cloaks. This not only introduces the reader of Acts to Saul, but sets up the enormous transformation to come in his life, one that Saul himself referred to again and again in his writing. Saul began to persecute the new Church, with the authority of the Sanhedrin behind him, in a brutal way, dragging men and women from their homes to stand trial, some of whom were killed.

It seems it was primarily the Christians associated with Stephen who suffered this first wave of persecution. Stephen and his associates were Hellenistic Jews who had come to faith in Jesus (see **Acts 6:1-7**), and it seems had a different approach to the Temple and the Law than did the apostles. The apostles therefore were able to stay in Jerusalem and continue the ministry there, while the others were scattered out into countryside of Judea and Samaria, taking the gospel message with them wherever they went. One of the practical effects of this was that the Church in Jerusalem became primarily Hebrew until the time of its dispersal in AD 66, and the missionary Churches outside of Jerusalem took on a decidedly Hellenistic flavour, especially once mission to the Gentiles was begun.

The preaching of Stephen had already prepared them for this move. As we saw last week, Stephen was reaffirming the Scriptural principle that God was not constrained to a building made by human hands, nor even to one geographical location. God would go with the missionaries wherever they went, wherever they preached the word. And buildings and traditions were not to hold back the spread of this message. This message was that through Christ, God was available to all, not just to some, and he was available directly, not indirectly through a Temple or priest. This was a message that would turn the entire world on its head.