

Acts 7:44-8:8

Persecution & The Church

Learning Objective(s)

- Look at the stark contrast of the role the Holy Spirit plays in the life of Stephen rather than the lives of the religious leaders around him.
- Look at how trying to stop the spread of the Gospel, only fueled the spread of Jesus.
- Explore how we can better share the Gospel even when we are being persecuted for it.

Pray for your time together as a group.

? Has anyone ever tried to “talk trash” or “smack talk” you and it only motivated you to do better and work harder?

Read Out Loud: Previously In Acts

The book of Acts shows how the Holy Spirit – working through early Christians – helped spread the Gospel and built the global church. The first few chapters of Acts show how the early church wrestled with Jesus’ ideals among themselves, but early Christians also faced opposition from the outside. At the end of chapter 6, a group of Christians comes into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders for spreading the Gospel. Stephen was a great early speaker and fierce prayer warrior, but the Jewish authorities wanted to accuse him of blasphemy (speaking disrespectfully/falsely about God). Chapter 7 is Stephen’s response to these claims, before he eventually became the first Christian martyr.

Read Out Loud: Acts 7:44-51 (NIV)

44 “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: 49 ““Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?’

51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

? While Stephen was giving his speech in front of the synagogue, what was it about his statements (vs. 51-53) that motivated these religious leaders to kill Stephen?

Possible Answers: He calls them stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, resist the Holy Spirit, persecuted the prophets, killed the Righteous One, and didn't keep the law.

? How did the people of Israel resist (vs. 51) the Holy Spirit? (cf - Isaiah 63:10)

Possible Answers: Almost every prophet throughout the Old Testament was martyred. The Israelites constantly rebelled and murmured against God.

Leader's Note: Our goal is not to debate the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but rather discussion about the ways we tend to resist or grieve the Holy Spirit today.

Isaiah 63:10
Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.

? What are some ways we tend to resist or grieve the Holy Spirit today?

Possible Answers: When we don't share the Gospel when we have the opportunity. When we blatantly choose to sin even when we know it is wrong. When we attribute something around us to God when it wasn't or don't give God credit when it was his blessing. When we try to defeat sin on our own. When we rely on legalism to keep us from sinning.

Read Out Loud: Acts 7:54-60 (NIV)

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. 1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

? In comparison to the religious leaders, what did Stephen do differently that shows he was filled with the Holy Spirit?

Possible Answers: Stephen: Was close with God or looked up toward God in a time of need, he prayed, and asked that God not hold their sins against them.

Religious Leaders: furious, didn't want to listen to what Stephen had to say, yelled at him, dragged him out and stoned him to death.

Read Out Loud: Acts 8:1-8 (NIV)

1 On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. 5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.

? After Stephen died, what did the rest of the believers do, and why is this significant?
Possible Answers: They scattered to the surrounding area and preached the word wherever they went. This is significant because they were fulfilling the great commission to go into all the world preaching wherever they went.

? How was Saul persecuting the church?
Possible Answers: he began to destroy the church. Everywhere he went, he would go house to house looking for Christians to have them sent to prison or even killed.

? In what ways is the global church today being persecuted, and why do you think God allows this persecution to take place?
Possible Answers: In some parts of the world Christians are being put to death and scattered the same way the early church was. In others, Christians are challenged in their foundational beliefs. God seems to allow this to happen to fulfill the great commission of spreading his word to all people.

Paul's Persecution of the Church

Saul, who later changes his name to Paul, says in Acts 22:4-5 "I persecuted this Way to death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished." And in Acts 26:10-11 "And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."

Leaders' Note: As your group answers this question, please work to maintain the theological balance of God's sovereignty and goodness in the midst of a fallen world. If your group dives more deeply into the problem of evil than you are comfortable navigating, you can ask them to hit the "pause" button on the topic at this time. Feel free to email naty@hopecc.com for further resources and guidance about how to address that question in a Gospel-centered way.

? Do you think Saul was expecting the church to grow? What is it about persecution that spreads the Gospel faster, further, and more efficiently?

Possible Answers: People are willing to go to extremes for something they truly believe. The Holy Spirit was with them giving them boldness to share their faith even during intense persecution. When they left Jerusalem, they took the Gospel with them and shared with people they came in contact with, so what was once confined in Jerusalem was now reaching the entire Roman empire and beyond.

For Discussion and Accountability

? How are you being bold like Stephen? What is holding you back from sharing the Gospel with someone who needs to hear it?

? How can we better pray for each other and help spread the Gospel in our own context?