



SPIRIT-FILLED LIVING | SPIRIT-FILLED DYING  
ACTS 6:1-8:1

Everything is going great with the early church. Hit a little turbulence in chapters 4-5 and really comes to a head in chapters 6 and 7 which is where we're going to be spending our time today. Now to give you a little background here. The church was growing rapidly and as you can imagine, there were growing pains that led to some administrative issues. And one of these issues involved the Hellenist widows getting left out in the distribution of food. Hellenist simply means they spoke Greek. So they go to the apostles and they tell them to pick from themselves men of good repute full of the spirit and wisdom. These are deacons—table waiters. And they pick some folks and in vs 6 the apostles lay their hands on them. One of these guys was named Stephen. And Stephen's ministry career is short-lived but powerful. Just as soon as we meet Stephen and witness his devotion to Christ we say good bye to him and chapter later when he killed for his faith. And yet despite his short ministry career, we get an incredible picture what Spirit-Filled living and Spirit-filled dying looks like... And so we're going to spend our time this morning looking at how Jesus shined so brightly through Stephen, as we do we'll get a wonderful, convicting, encouraging picture of what it means to live well and die well for the glory of God. Pray.

**Spirit-filled living is characterized by unglamorous service to others.**

Now the text goes out of its way to emphasize how anointed Stephen was. Just check his resume: vs6 full of faith and of the Holy Spirit vs8 full of grace and power, vs 8 incredible signs and wonders vs10 his opponents couldn't withstand his wisdom and the Spirit. If there was a division 1 Christian team this guy was on it. And it's instructive for us this morning, that with all of the grace and power in him and all of his public gifts—he gave himself to mundane forgettable work in caring for the church. He was a deacon. This guy was helping ensure that Greek widows get food. Now if your in leadership somewhere this may seem like a misuse of talent—give that to Scooter and let you're a player do his thing under the big lights. And Stephen did do big things, but not of doing forgettable probably boring tasks to love God's people as he served as a deacon.

This is instructive for us because while we would never say it, many of us feel maybe—perhaps at a subconscious level—that our talent or economic status should somehow correlate with the kind of work we do in the church. But friends there is no white-collar spirituality. It doesn't matter if you make 1mill, in God's economy everyone is blue collar and no one's above using a mop—including Jesus. It's mind blowing to me that on the night he was betrayed, he spent time washing his disciples' feet. Quite literally the work of a slave cleaning people's feet. And I think he did that not only to show his love, but to remind us that nothing is below us, that servant is not better than his Master. And it's such a powerful example and as an example it's not just something to admire but to emulate. And I thank God that we have people like that in this church. Signs. Cleaning. Coffee. Thank God for them and I pray for more of them. Spirit-filled living characterized by unglamorous service to others.

## **Spirit-filled living is characterized by a commitment to use our gifts for spiritual battle.**

Ever since I was a kid, if I could have one super-power, it would be to fly. It would be so fun—seeing the sights, soaring through the air. But here’s the thing I have to confess, I never wanted that super-power so I could help others. Didn’t want to fly like superman. He didn’t fly recreationally. He rescued people from a burning building or keep a train from falling off a bridge...like when I thought of flying growing up I never thought of that. I just wanted it because I felt like I’d really enjoy myself if I had it.

And if we’re not careful, we can look at Stephen and make a similar mistake. We can read his resume here vs6 full of faith and of the Holy Spirit vs8 full of grace and power and say I want that! But why? Is it not extremely easy for our response centered around us? Then I wouldn’t worry so much. I would be happier. I would be a better person. And those things may be true, but if that’s our answer, then we don’t want spiritual power so that the world can be better served but so that we personally can be better off. We want the Spirit as more of a wellness strategy.

But this is the exact opposite of what we see in Stephen. Full of power in vs 8 so that he could testify to God’s glory in signs and wonders. Full of the wisdom so he could preach the Gospel so that vs 10 tells us his Jewish opponents weren’t able to withstand his speaking. Full of the Spirit so that in chapter 6 he can deliver a powerful sermon in response to being falsely accused, full of grace so that he could die loving his enemies. That’s why he had been endowed with these gifts to witness to God’s glory both in his life and his death.

Friends is this why we desire to be filled with the Spirit? To empower us for missional effectiveness? To give us boldness to show and share Christ in our workspaces, at the gym, at the ball park? To give us the courage when we’re scared to? To give us the grace if it doesn’t go like we’d hoped? Oh God deliver us from a mentality that seeks to enjoy your blessings and gifts apart from your calling and mission. Spirit-filled living is characterized by a commitment to using our gifts for spiritual battle.

## **Spirit-filled living understands the difference between dead religion and the Gospel.**

“ vs 13...and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law” That is the temple and the law. Now to understand why this is a serious charge, Judaism was characterized by four main elements: Temple, Law, Land, Ethnicity. To say or do something that wasn’t in the best interest of either of those things was a big deal.

So they bring these charges and the high priest asks him, 7:1 “Are these things so?”—are you speaking against the law of Moses and the temple? Now Stephen could have just defended himself and said, “No”. But instead he goes on offense. And in what is the longest recorded speech in the book of Acts, Stephen lays out starting with Abraham God’s plan to redeem his people and shows them how they only people getting the temple and law wrong is them.

“Guy stop pretending you care about the law” vss 40-43 he gives examples of how from the second God delivered Israel from Egypt they cheated on him—golden calf—false Gods in the wilderness, exile. Then he reminds them in vs. 48 that the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands.” The temple was temporary until Christ came and now God doesn’t place his presence in a building, he places it in people’s hearts and not just Jews—people of all nations. Then he finishes it off with this gem, “51 You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced

beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Don't miss the picture here, there is a way wrapped up in practicing religion that you completely miss God. It is dangerously possible to come to pray and sing and sit and stand and give and live a life of devotion to Christianity, without ever knowing Christ. Christianity never saved anyone. We're not saved by "practicing Christianity". Christianity didn't bleed/die /come back for you. No one in heaven will ever sing a song of praise to Christianity. We're saved a person—the son of God himself and his name is Jesus Christ the righteous.

And I fear that there are scores of people in our churches today who see Christianity and Christian living as little more than a strategy for being a good person and going to heaven when they die and they have absolutely no relationship with him. Like I want to be clear if you're just checking out Christianity... We believe you can be in relationship with God—through faith! Knowing God... that's the only thing that can justify this kind of devotion. I mean, if it's just about being a good moral person and doing your duty there's an easier way than this. But if Christ has come it changes everything! Do you know him? Because when you do you'll see that he is worth living for and he is worth dying for... Stephen thought so

vs 54 says when they heard these things they were enraged and ground their teeth at him. And in the following verses, we see Stephen bravely and lovingly become the first martyr in church history.

But certainly not the last. But we need to realize that what we're about to witness here in the text is still going on today all over the world brothers and sisters being persecuted because of their faith. According to world watch globally 1 in 9 Christians experience high levels of persecution and suffer for their faith. Last year in Nigeria alone, 3731 killed for their faith. This Easter Sunday 320 Christians from bombings in Sri Lanka. For believers in India, violence has increased 400% since 2014. Like this is a reality today. And it's easy for us to be unaware or even apathetic about brother and sisters suffering just like Stephen; that's why we pray for the persecuted every day during both our week of prayers; Secret church. It's one of the things that's even just recently effected some of our missionaries serving in dangerous contexts. And while statistically most of us will not be martyred for your faith, you may very well suffer for it and you need to be prepared... And while gives us a wonderful picture of Spirit-filled living he gives us an equal if not better picture of Spirit filled dying.

So I want us to finish this morning by looking at Stephen's martyrdom and make three observations about suffering well for the glory of God.

### **Spirit-filled sufferers trust in a God who is close and caring, not distant and apathetic.**

Right before they're about to stone Stephen, God allows Stephen to see the throne room of heaven. Vs "55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." What an incredible picture. Heaven is not some galaxy far far away it's simply a dimension that we can't see. Jesus isn't some disembodied spirit—he's still a human. And he's close how close, well according to this account close to enough that if God allowed you to, you could see him with your naked eye—Stephen doesn't have binoculars. And not only is Jesus close in suffering but he's attentive to our situation. Notice Jesus' posture. Every other time you see Jesus in heaven he is sitting and the right hand of God. But notice here he's standing. Standing in approval of his faithful servant. As the people are executing him Jesus is endorsing him. O brother and sisters, in your pain, in your tears don't forget that God is close and attentive.

Stephen's story teaches us that our pain is not a result of God's absence but an opportunity to experience his presence. People in this room struggling with miscarriage, depression, cancer, broken families, painful relationships don't think for one second that God has gotten distracted. Ps. 56:8 says he kept count of all your wanderings and kept your tears in his bottle. He is more than enough and in your suffering will show you just how close he is in ways He never would otherwise. Spirit-filled sufferers trust in a God who is close, not far off...

### **Spirit-Filled sufferers are aware others' needs, not just their own.**

There is a danger when we suffer for our world to shrink completely around our pain and we don't see or care about anything else. Like your pain trumps everyone else's pain. You're having a hard week well I'm having a hard life! And not only does this cause us quite literally to be self-absorbed, it causes us to miss out on seeing and participating in God's work. And Stephen shows us a better way. Vs 58, "Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Imagine stones hitting your head—never see your family again—and saying "Forgive them." He's not calling for vengeance, but grace. If this sounds familiar it's because Jesus did the same thing. In the midst of his pain—totally other centered. Prays forgiveness, saves the thief next to him, appoints a caretaker for his mother. How? The Holy Spirit.

Penny close enough can blot out the sun. The Holy Spirit empowers us to suffer in such a way that we don't forget our pain, but that we can hold it out enough to see others needs and brokenness and care about it and respond to it. Just as amazing as what he says is what he doesn't say "God please make them stop". Bc the Spirit to operate in this moment in a way that other centered. If you are suffering, one of the best things you could do is serve someone else because it forces you to get outside of yourself and glimpse God's glory outside of your personal darkness. And not only does it allow you to serve someone else, but it shows the world that even in suffering, Jesus is more than enough...which leads to our final observation...

### **Spirit-filled sufferers trust that their witness for Christ is never a wasted effort.**

"And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...vs 4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word." Don't miss this. Stephen's death and the persecution that followed was the catalyst that led to the spread of the Gospel outside of Jerusalem. It was right here where the Gospel began to go to the nations. In fact, a few verses later we see someone come to faith from Ethiopia. So for as much as we can say about Stephen's life, his biggest contribution was in his death. We don't look at this story and say aww man what a waste of talent and giftedness. What a use! It was like fertilizer for the gospel. Don't miss the irony: Satan's plans to stop the Gospel only served to advance the Gospel. ~~This is why church father Tertullian said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.~~

This is what happens when we witness! Most of our suffering has little to do with our faith. Because we try to avoid it at all costs. We don't seek suffering. But Jesus said that if the world hated me it will hate you. And I wonder if one of the reasons we haven't encountered more resistance is bc we don't do it. We don't even want an awkward conversation. Not even an awkward moment. Trust God to use you.