

LIVING HOPE  
STUDY GUIDE:  
BOOK OF ACTS

Acts 6:8 - 7:60

Jesus Changes Everything  
& Claims His Own

THE CALLING & COST OF DISCIPLESHIP



The book of Acts is often titled “The Birth of the Church”, and it certainly tells the story of how, where and when the Church began. It also tells the story of an ever-widening circle of evangelism and salvation. In many ways it depicts the nature of God and describes His power in the story of salvation for succeeding generations. It includes a divine pattern for church government and stories of steadfastness and expansion under persecution. It is often considered to be the most action-packed book of the Bible.

However, the center of the message is the focus on the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies in Jesus Christ. Either Jesus is the center core of the Church, or the Church is nothing. Either Jesus is the center of all you believe, or your belief is nothing. Jesus changes EVERYTHING, and the book of Acts records that change through those He has called and claimed as His own.

## I: STEPHEN — GOD’S SERVANT

READ ACTS 6:8 THROUGH ACTS 7:60

The story of Stephen is a familiar story, often told in Sunday School and highlighted in children’s Bibles. The first Christian martyr is how we know him. But who was Stephen? Not an apostle, he was not one of the men called by Jesus as His disciples. Stephen was one of the seven men, called into the ministry of the Church to serve those who were being neglected. He was a humble servant. He knew the stories of the Old Testament very well and could quote many of the prophets by memory. He had an intimate relationship with God and had claimed Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the one who came to redeem him. He was fearless in the face of persecution and resisted the religious leaders of the Jews for making worship of God a burden of man-made boundaries and traditions. Stephen was a strong agent of change, and the Jewish leaders became afraid of his influence, and intimidated by his wisdom, gifts of healing and eloquence in preaching Jesus Christ. Stephen lived in the public eye!

## II: STEPHEN’S ARREST

Stephen was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. He was falsely accused of blasphemy and disobedience of the law – both charges the Sanhedrin used to remove challenging people from their lives. Often, religious experts despise change, preferring their existing religious systems. As Stephen stood before them, he remained calm and respectful, even when challenged by false witnesses. Note that his face shone like an angel, as if he was already preparing to meet Jesus.

When challenged, Stephen responded with a strategic retelling of the history of Israel. He reminds the spiritual leaders of their story using familiar references to the Covenant with the patriarchs and God's statement, "I am the God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." His eloquence and his words were supported by a consistent godly life and Christ-like demeanor even under immense pressure. Stephen's sermon reminds us that the Church or God's family is called to be rooted in His word, His truth, His plan of salvation. We cannot deviate from the gospel in an attempt to be politically correct or over tolerant of tradition and culturally imposed boundaries.

Then, as Stephen's discourse continues with the coming of the Messiah, his focus changes to one of accusation, an accusation of killing the long-awaited one, the Messiah. His words require the members of the Sanhedrin to face what they had done, rejected the Son of God. They are livid, and in their anger refuse him a fair trial. When Stephen has the amazing vision of heaven with Jesus standing at the right hand of God and shares this vision with his accusers, his end is decided. They drag him outside the city and begin his execution by stoning – a verdict only allowed with Roman approval. Their fear combined with their self-righteous judgement is released.

Stephen, the servant of many, the healer of the broken, the champion of Jesus Christ is stoned to death. Even in his death his rooted faith in his Savior echoes through time with:

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (7:59)

and in his love and commitment to others he ends with:

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Stephen changed much in the understanding of the claim of Jesus Christ on his life for others to see. Hardship, persecution and even death did not stop him. He was well loved.

"Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him." (8:2)

- 1. What, in the context and culture of the day, would you consider dying for?**
- 2. What does Stephen's life teach you and me?**
- 3. Stephen changed the view of the places where God can be worshipped, other than the temple. All of creation is the Lord's and our worship is not limited to a building. What man made traditions have changed in the church in your lifetime?**
- 4. What criteria should be used when change is or appears necessary? What should never change?**
- 5. Discuss, how you think, God is changing the church through the pandemic?**

At the stoning of Stephen, witnesses and those casting stones laid their clothes at the feet of Saul, a persecutor of the early Church.