



ATTACKS UPON LIFE: WHEN LIFE IS TAKEN

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 6:7–8:4

12th Message

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This fall Emily and I decided to remodel one of our bathrooms, which we thought would be a fairly straightforward project. But after the bathroom was gutted our contractor discovered that there was a six-foot gap in the foundation beneath a bearing wall that had been cantilevered for support. Another piece of the foundation had also been removed by a plumber when he was not able to gain access to the crawl space to change out the plumbing and was replaced with dirt and bricks. The bearing wall was now supporting a two-story addition and had dropped $\frac{5}{8}$ ", evidenced by an unsightly crack in the exterior stucco that ran from the roof to the ground. To repair the faulty foundation was no small task. With very little room to maneuver the contractor had to dig new footings to pour a new foundation and a concrete shelf to support a 20,000 lb. capacity hydraulic jack to lift the base plate back to its original height. At times like this one learns the importance of a solid foundation.

The Scriptures liken the church to a building that is being built at ground zero, out of the death and burial of God's Son. No longer are Jerusalem and its temple the spiritual center of the world. It will be Jesus and his apostles who have been placed as cornerstone and foundation stones of God's new temple (Rev 21:14; 1 Pet 2:4-7). The foundation has been perfectly set and secure so that anyone who builds his life on the teaching of Jesus and the apostles will stand secure.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." (Matt 7:24–25 ESV)

In Acts 4–7 Luke documents the attacks the devil unleashes upon the new community of believers. When the devil first attacked the church, instead of extinguishing the flame of its witness he fanned the fire of its zeal and the apostles came away with a heightened awareness of the majesty of God and a greater boldness in their witness to the world. The devil's first mistake, as Derek Kidner suggests, is that "In driving God's servant to prayer the enemy has already overreached himself."¹ As the apostles respond to each new attack by faith, the church continues to grow and spread through the city like a raging river that overflows its banks and inundates the entire city. To the devil's horror countless numbers of Israel's priests are now becoming "obedient to the faith" (6:7). Utterly frustrated, the evil one plays the last card left in his hand — death. The church in its infancy must face the severest test of its faith. How does faith respond to the tension created between God's sovereignty and power with martyrdom? And on a personal level, what happens to your faith when innocent life is taken?

I. Stephen Becomes a Target (6:8–15)

A. Stephen's grace and power (6:8–10)

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the

Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. (Acts 6:8–10)

Luke shifts his focus from the apostles to two men who were set aside to "wait on tables," Stephen and Philip. Though they were commissioned to serve tables so that the apostles could maintain their focus on the word of God and prayer, the Spirit equipped them to do far more and they find themselves caught up in a more public ministry of healing and teaching. Luke's description of Stephen as "filled with grace and power" and "doing great wonders and signs" suggests that Stephen, like Jesus and the apostles, has been given the gift and ministry of a prophet. A waiter has turned prophet.

You never know what new thing God will do when you lay your hands on someone and pray for God to work through them. It's critical for the growth of the kingdom that you do not view your "ministry" as limited to what leaders in the church mandate, or fall into the trap of believing that a "ministry" has value only when a pastor or elder is present. The church is like an orchestra, where every individual has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to play an instrument. The conductor is the Lord, who directs when and where you use your gifts, and God determines the impact (1 Cor 12:4–6). The pastors are like music teachers, who equip you to read the musical scores and encourage you to keep your eye on the conductor who is leading the symphony to the glory of the composer. This is how the apostles trained the early church. Prompted by the Spirit, Stephen took every opportunity to preach the gospel in the Greek-speaking synagogues that were made up of former slaves and their descendants from the diaspora of the lands mentioned (it is not clear whether Luke has one synagogue in mind, or several). It is likely that Saul of Tarsus was among the hearers, since he was from Cilicia.

B. Trial by slander (6:11–15)

Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (vv. 11–15)

The wonders and signs associated with Stephen had made him popular, but his message provoked controversy. When his opponents rose up to argue, as Jesus promised his disciples, Stephen was given "a mouth and wisdom," which his adversaries were not able to refute (Luke 21:15). Defeated by Stephen's Spirit and wisdom, his opponents resort to false witnesses to slander him. As John Stott writes, "When arguments fail, mud has often seemed an excellent substitute."² Sadly the same pattern occurs in the church when people hear things they

don't expect and are presented new ways that may threaten traditional ways of understanding. In recent years I have witnessed several biblical scholars who I hold in highest regard, not only for their faithful scholarship, but also for their godly character and friendship, come under similar attack. One of them, N. T. Wright, comments, "People today find real debate about actual topics difficult, and much prefer the parody of debate which consists of giving a dog a bad name and then beating him for it, and lashing out, too, at anyone who associates with the dog you happen to be beating at the time."³

The accusations against Stephen strike at the very heart of Israel's national symbols — the temple, the law, the land and God's holiness. Under centuries of pagan domination these had become sacred boundary markers for which many Jews had sacrificed their lives. Stephen's opponents believe that his teachings threaten all that is sacred in Judaism and therefore he is accused of blasphemy, a charge that, if it stuck, would result in the death penalty. Their slanderous accusations whip the crowd into a riotous rage and they haul Stephen before the Sanhedrin.

The tension mounts, for Luke has not yet allowed us to hear what Stephen had said until the charges are made. All we notice is that his countenance has dramatically changed. "His face was like the face of an angel," a fearful omen for his captors. Tom Wright imagines it like this:

A kind of light, illuminating Stephen from the inside. A kind of serenity, humble and unostentatious, but confident and assured. In the middle of arguments, controversies, false accusations, and now a serious charge before the highest court, he found himself standing, as the Temple claimed to stand, at the overlap of heaven and earth.⁴

How will Stephen answer? He could have dismissed the charges as false, but he doesn't. Instead he retells Israel's story from its beginning with Abraham and Moses in order to give his hearers a new lens to see where they have arrived. Without a new perspective they will never understand who Jesus is or the implications of the gospel. Stephen's speech is the longest single discourse in Acts and is, as Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "the key Luke provides his readers for the interpretation of his entire two-volume series."⁵ I will do my best to summarize "what" he said and then will focus our attention on "how" he spoke, and how his voice still speaks today.

II. Retelling Israel's Story with a New Lens (7:1–53)

A. Abraham's story: God is Pilgrim God (7:1–8)

And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" And Stephen said: "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child." (vv. 1–5)

To counter the accusation that Stephen spoke against God and his holy place, Stephen begins with "the God of glory," who is the primary actor in salvation history.

God is the first subject mentioned (7:2) and his are all the main actions: God appears (7:3), speaks (7:3, 6), moves (7:4), gives an inheritance (7:5), promises (7:5), judges (7:7), gives a covenant (7:8)...God appears where and when he wishes, directs and moves

peoples, and issues promises that are open-ended, to be fulfilled in surprising ways.⁶

Whenever God appears in new ways heaven and earth come together, time stands still, and that place becomes holy. But throughout Israel's history God never remains in one place to be confined in a holy cage. God is a pilgrim God, on the move traveling wherever his people go. He appeared to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees and traveled with him to Haran. He appeared to Joseph in Egypt and to Moses in Midian. From the days of Joshua to David God not was confined to a building, but lived in a tent. Even at the dedication of the temple Solomon acknowledged that the "house" that he built could not contain God. "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs 8:27). And quoting the prophet Isaiah,

**"Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool;
what kind of house will you build for me,
or what is the place of my rest?
Did not my hand make all these things?"** (vv. 49–50)

Stephen highlights the fact that though God called Abraham to the land of promise, "he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length (v. 5)." Therefore the Land of Promise wasn't Israel's final destination, but a sign of a greater reality. As the author of Hebrews writes, "by faith he [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land...For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder are God...But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb 11:9–10, 16).

The point is significant for, as we saw in chapter 5, Christians were beginning to cheerfully sell their ancestral land for the purposes of the kingdom. This would be unthinkable if the resurrection of Jesus had not ushered the kingdom into a new realm with boundless dimensions of time and space. To summarize Stephen's first point, God is a pilgrim God, who transcends time and space.

B. The purpose of the law: The story of God's faithfulness

Stephen retells the story of Joseph and Moses with a new lens in order to subvert the Sanhedrin's narrow understanding of the law. The primary purpose of the law is not to articulate holy ordinances to be rigorously kept or to designate man-made shrines to make pilgrimages to. The major concern of the law (which is primarily composed of narrative stories) is to document God's faithfulness in raising up deliverers to rescue his people in new and unimaginable ways. In Joseph's case, his family was rescued from famine, and in Moses' case Israel was delivered from 400 years of slavery in Egypt.

These stories of God's faithfulness are not designed to keep us locked onto to the past, but to look ahead to a glorious future. History is not static, but ever moving forward. Joseph and Moses become harbingers of a coming Deliverer, a new and greater Moses, who would ultimately save God's people from their sins and write his law on their hearts. Identifying the "prophet to come" is not rocket science, for the "way" God raises up a deliverer follows a consistent pattern throughout salvation history.

C. Joseph sets the pattern (7:9–16)

"And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household...And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers."

(vv. 9–10, 13a)

In Joseph's case he was first rejected by his brothers (because of their envy) and sold into Egypt. But after years of imprisonment God vindicated his servant, reversed his destiny and exalted him as prince over all Egypt. Luke Timothy Johnson highlights this pattern:

The one rejected by his own people, in other words, is empowered through God's intervention, and is now in a position to save the ones who rejected him. The second feature of the Joseph story is the way Luke exploits the double visit of the family to the presence of Joseph. The first visit is one in which they do not recognize Joseph, although, he knows them. The second visit is one in which Joseph makes himself known, they recognize him, and therefore they can be saved from their affliction caused by famine.⁷

D. Moses' story repeats the pattern (7:17–36)

“And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.” (vv. 22–25)

The pattern is repeated with Moses, who God raised up to save his people from slavery in Egypt. When he first visited his people, they did not recognize him as God's deliverer and he was forced to flee “and became an exile in the land of Midian” (7:29).

“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush... Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’ “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.” (vv. 30, 33–36)

In exile Moses encounters God in the burning bush and is commissioned to rescue his people once more. In this second offer of salvation, Moses performs “signs and wonders” in unmistakable fashion as he leads his people in the wilderness for forty years.

E. A new and greater Moses (7:37–38)

Stephen concludes the story with a strong affirmation of Moses' holy privilege coupled with the promise of a new and greater Moses who was to come, who would be raised up according to the same pattern.

“This is the Moses who said to his congregation, ‘God will raise up a prophet just like me from your descendants.’ This is the Moses who stood between the angel speaking at Sinai and your fathers assembled in the wilderness and took the life-giving words given to him and handed them over to us.” (Acts 7:37–38 THE MESSAGE)

In case we miss the point, these stories of God's faithfulness are not designed to keep us locked onto to the past, but to point us forward to anticipate to a new and glorious future, when God delivers his people in new and exciting ways. For as Paul affirmed, “what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it” (2 Cor 3:10). When God moves forward in history his people must move forward with him, leaving behind the shadows for the reality.

F. Israel's faithlessness (7:39–50)

“Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven. As it is written in the book of the prophets:

“Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.” (vv. 39–43 ESV)

Just as the law is a record of God's loyal-love and faithfulness, it is also the sad commentary of Israel's persistent rebellion. Despite God's longsuffering and grace to offer this second more powerful offer of salvation, Moses' leadership is rejected once again. While God was revealing to Moses the true way to worship on the mountain, they were busy at work at the bottom of the mountain making an idol. Then they bowed down and worshipped what their own hands had made! What foolishness and absurdity. As a result, God *gave them over* to the seductive power of idolatry and sentenced to seventy years of exile in Babylon, the world-center of idolatry.

Have you ever been to a film and sat down in the dark as a detached spectator, but soon you find yourself carried along unawares with the plot and drawn into the drama, until suddenly you realize that the movie is about you? Surrounded by images and scenes of your past, you are forced to confront things that you been resisting for a long time. Even before Stephen makes his application, his hearers know where the train is headed. As Luke Timothy Johnson explains,

As Moses went into exile and returned in power, so did Jesus, but his second sending was in the power of the Spirit at work in his prophetic successors. They speak for “the raised prophet,” and it is obedience or disobedience toward them that will determine who will be included in the restored Israel or definitely “cut off from the people,” for now there can be no appeal to ignorance.⁸

Coming full circle, Stephen lands his final critique on the temple, which no longer has any semblance of a “holy place,” for Israel's leaders made it into an idol to be manipulated. The holiness of the temple has been upstaged by the new work God is doing in Jesus, who is building a new temple of living stones housing God's Holy Spirit. And whenever his community, as insignificant as two or three, gathers in his name, the Holy One is present.

G. Israel's story, your story (7:51–53)

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (vv. 51–53)

In retelling Israel's story Stephen leaves no doubt how it applies. Like Peter, he reverses his role from defendant to prosecutor and convicts his accusers of acting in the footsteps of their forefathers who sold Joseph into slavery, those who forsook Moses' leadership to worship the golden the calf, and those who killed the prophets

who announced the coming of Jesus, the Righteous One, whom they betrayed and murdered. Who is the guilty party now?

Stephen's application of Israel's story should make us question whether we, like the Sanhedrin, are comfortably hiding behind false forms of worship and traditions, seeking to manipulate God for our own purposes and positions of power. When Rembrandt painted this scene of Stephen's stoning in 1625, he placed a figure directly behind Stephen holding a large stone overhead. It was his self-portrait, which reflects remarkable spiritual insight for a young man of nineteen years.

III. Stephen's Death (7:54–60)

A. Stephen's vision (7:54–56)

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 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. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (vv. 54–56)

Commenting on the life of English poet Francis Thompson, Tom Wright makes this observation:

...in the middle of his personal suffering he discovered a strange truth. At the very moment when all seems most bleak, just then the presence of Jesus Christ, and his angels can be so real and powerful that it is as though some of the scenes from the gospels are coming true before your very eyes.⁹

In Stephen's case when the curtain is pulled back, he is drawn into Daniel's vision of chapter 7. Suddenly the heavenly court comes into focus. The Ancient of Days is sitting in judgment. Jesus is not "coming with the clouds" to be seated on his throne, but rather he is standing before the Judge giving testimony as Stephen's advocate. For Stephen, the glory emanating from God's throne suffocates all human pretension.

B. Stephen's gift (7:57–60)

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 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. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 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. (vv. 57–60)

Without hesitation the court rushes headlong into judgment, dragging Stephen from the court, casting him out of the city and stoning him. Luke is deliberately sparse in his account, using a minimum of brush strokes to create a striking portrait of this waiter turned prophet. When we piece together the naked facts, their full significance comes into focus. Johnson notes the comparison that

Stephen, like Jesus, is full of grace and power, performed signs and miracles, disputes with those who challenge him – including those who are sent as spies. He is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin where false witnesses testify against him. He is taken

out of the city to be executed. There is the distribution of clothing, though not his own. He asks forgiveness for his murderers and is buried by pious people.¹⁰

God in his grace has made a second offer of salvation to Israel's leadership through a second trial and execution of the Lord's servant.

And his death was not in vain. His death paved the path for the conversion of a young man named Saul. Saul heard his sermons, witnessed his defense, saw his countenance in the face of death and heard his prayer for the forgiveness of his murderers. When the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road, he said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." (Acts 26:14) Goads were prods used to keep oxen moving while working. When prodded, the oxen would sometimes rebel by kicking at the goads. After Stephen's execution Saul went into a rage and "ravaged" the church, going from house to house dragging off men and women and throwing them into prison. The risen Lord saw that Saul's rage was actually an angry response to what he knew was true. Stephen's life and words had presented Saul with the heavenly reality of Israel's story, but he was resisting it. With his conversion Saul became Paul and advanced the kingdom further than Stephen would have ever dreamed. For Paul the church could not be a sect of Judaism for an exclusive few in Jerusalem. It was the universal good news intended for the whole world. Winston Churchill would have called Stephen's martyrdom his "finest hour."

What happens to your faith when life is taken? Are you prepared for life's greatest challenge? Will you see the heavens open suffocating all human pretension, power and pride? Stephen's death was his finest hour. May it be ours as well.

**In God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me?**

(Psalm 56:11)

1. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 201.
2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts, The Spirit, the Church & the World*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 127.
3. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 103.
4. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 106.
5. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 119.
6. *Ibid.*, 121.
7. *Ibid.*, 121-22.
8. *Ibid.*, 137.
9. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 120.
10. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 142-43.