

# Jesus Takes a Stand. Acts 7:54-8:3

Hi everyone. We're about to read a story where a man named Stephen, right in the middle of chaos, looked up and saw something beautiful that no one else could see.

I have a question for you. If you could catch a literal glimpse of heaven right now for just five seconds, what is the one thing you'd hope to see? In fact, let's do that. Everyone close your eyes as I count to five and imagine what you would see in Heaven. 1...2...3...4...5...

## Introduction

Open your eyes. What did you imagine? Most of us probably pictured a loved one we've lost, or perhaps an answer to a question that has been haunting us. We naturally think of heaven as a place of rest—a calm escape from the chaos of our lives.

But today, we are going to read about a man who got that glimpse, not in a moment of peace, but in a moment of absolute terror. We are picking up the story in Acts 7 where Stephen, a deacon-turned-witness, has just finished the longest speech in the book of Acts. He stands before the Sanhedrin—the supreme court of Israel—facing false charges. But instead of defending himself, he has turned the tables, accusing these religious leaders of betraying the Righteous One, Jesus.

The atmosphere in the room is electric with hate. The text says they were “cut to the heart” and “gnashed their teeth” at him. It is the moment just before a riot breaks out. But in this split second—between the accusation and the execution—Stephen does something strange. He stops looking at the mob who is about to kill him, and he looks up.

Today, in Acts 7:54–8:3, we are going to witness the collision of two realities: the fury of man and the glory of God. First, we will see the fury of the mob and the vision where Stephen finds a deep anchor in a surface storm. Second, we will witness the first martyrdom, where the church learns the true cost of following Jesus. And finally, we will see the aftermath, where God proves that you can kill the messenger, but you cannot stop the message.

As we journey through this tragedy, I want you to keep your eyes on one detail that changes everything. Stephen sees Jesus, not sitting, but standing. And that simple posture tells us everything we need to know: Because Jesus stands for us in heaven, we can have the courage to stand for Him on earth.

## Pray

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## 1. The Vision and the Fury (Acts 7:54–56)

Let's start today's message by reading the first part of our scripture, Acts 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.”*

These verses mark the dramatic climax of Stephen's trial. Having just accused the religious leaders of betraying the Righteous One, the atmosphere shifts from a judicial hearing to a violent mob. While the Sanhedrin is consumed by an earthly rage, Stephen is consumed by a heavenly vision. In the midst of their gnashing teeth, he stands full of the Holy Spirit, looking past his accusers to see the glory of God and the Son of Man standing to receive him.

## Teach

### (The Surface Fury - Verse 54)

*Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.)*

On the surface of verse 54, we witness a chaotic storm of human resistance. The Sanhedrin's response to Stephen illustrates the violent collision between truth and a hardened heart. The phrase, depending on your translation, "were enraged" or "cut to the heart" describes intense emotional turmoil and conviction. However, unlike the crowd at Pentecost who were "cut to the heart" and repented (*Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*), these leaders responded with hostility. This highlights the danger of resistance to the Holy Spirit; a heart can be convicted by truth and yet still choose to harden itself rather than yield.

Their reaction of "gnashing their teeth" is a biblical expression of extreme anger and judgment (*Psalm 112:10 The wicked man sees it and is angry; he gnashes his teeth and melts away; the desire of the wicked will perish!*). This anger was rooted in pride and self-preservation, standing in stark contrast to righteous anger, which seeks justice. We must learn to differentiate between the two—sinful anger seeks to destroy, while righteous anger seeks to restore.

### (The Deep Vision - Verses 55–56)

*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.")*

While the surface rages in the next two verses, Stephen is submerged in a different reality. He is not looking at the mob; he is looking through them, into the depth of heaven.

In stark contrast to the mob, Stephen is described as "full of the Holy Spirit." It is this fullness that empowers believers to face trials with boldness and grace, relying on the Spirit for guidance and strength when human resources fail.

His gaze is "fixed" on heaven, signifying a divine revelation similar to prophets like Isaiah or Ezekiel (*Isaiah 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.*) and keeping this eternal perspective is what helps believers endure suffering. By seeing the "Glory of God," Stephen is transformed and strengthened, proving that experiencing God's glory is the antidote to fearing man's anger.

Stephen identifies Jesus by the messianic title "Son of Man," referencing Daniel's vision of authority (*Daniel 7:13-14 "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*). This affirms the

Fulfillment of Prophecy and the continuity of God's Word, reassuring us of Jesus' authority over all circumstances.

Uniquely, Jesus is seen standing rather than sitting. It has been suggested this posture indicates His active role as an Advocate for His people and His readiness to welcome the first martyr into glory ([Hebrews 9:15](#) *Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.*). This should reassure believers that in our moments of greatest need, Jesus is not passive; He is standing to intercede for us.

Stephen's boldness in proclaiming this vision, even in the face of death, serves as a powerful example of courage while witnessing. He demonstrates that when our eyes are fixed on the reality of Christ, we can stand firm in our faith regardless of the opposition surrounding us.

## Illustrate

Picture the surface of the Atlantic in the grip of a violent hurricane. The world above is a churning theater of chaos: waves rearing up like jagged mountains of glass, the wind shrieking a deafening discord, and the water frothing white with untamed violence. It is a realm of "fury"—loud, destructive, and terrifyingly chaotic. This is where the mob stands, gnashing their teeth, their rage crashing against Stephen like surf against a cliff.

But descend. Go ten fathoms down, then twenty, then fifty. As you sink, the light changes, the noise dampens, and the violence disappears. Five hundred feet beneath the heaving storm, the ocean is not just quiet; it is wrapped in a heavy, sacred stillness. The water here is unaffected by the wind. The hurricane above is nothing more than a rumor, a distant vibration that cannot disturb the silence of the deep.

Stephen is not fighting for breath on the surface; he has been submerged. He is anchored in the "crushing weight of glory," held fast in the currents of the Spirit. The stones may break the surface of the water, but they cannot touch the depth of his soul. He is enclosed in a peace so dense, so absolute, that the storm of human hatred cannot penetrate it. He sees the surface—he hears the noise—but he belongs to the deep.

## Apply

Here are three ways to apply what we have learned in this section to our lives.

[\(Apply: The Discipline of Diving\)](#) First, peace is not found by stopping the storm; it is found by sinking below it. When problems arise, our natural instinct is to "fight the waves"—to argue, panic, or fixate on the problem itself. We exhaust ourselves trying to control the surface rather than seeking the depths. How about practicing the "discipline of diving" today. When you feel anxiety rising, stop for 60 seconds. Close your eyes and mentally "submerge" yourself in God's presence, acknowledging that while the storm is real, His presence is deeper.

[\(Apply: Label the Surface Noise\)](#) Second, Stephen's truth-telling churned the water, causing a violent reaction. But he recognized that while the anger was loud, it could not touch his identity. We often let the "surface chaos" of others' opinions or immediate circumstances dictate our internal reality. We mistake the loudness of a problem for its importance. The next time you face opposition or a stressful interruption, mentally label it as "Surface Noise." Remind yourself: "This is just crashing waves; it cannot touch my deep identity in Christ."

[\(Apply: Weight Yourself with the Anchor\)](#) My third point is that a diver can only stay submerged if they are weighted down. Jesus standing for us is our "spiritual weight." We don't hold onto Him; He holds onto us. We often drift into fear because we are too "buoyant"—we are too easily moved by the currents of culture or

emotion because we lack the weight of glory to keep us grounded. “Weight” yourself this week by memorizing a verse about Jesus’ advocacy like this one. ([Romans 8:34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.](#)) Let the reality that He is standing for you be the heavy anchor that keeps you steady when the current tries to sweep you away.

## 2. The First Martyrdom (Acts 7:57–60)

The next part of the story is revealed in verses 57 through 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.*

We see the trial dissolve completely into a riot. There is no verdict, no sentence, and no legality—only the roar of a mob. They admitted they had no authority to kill Jesus but the mob was so enraged that they were willing to face the Roman empire for breaking the law. Yet, in this brutal moment, Stephen perfectly mirrors his Savior. As they stone him, he offers two final prayers that display the heart of the Gospel: total trust in Jesus for his future, and total forgiveness for his enemies for their present sin.

### Teach

[\(The Anatomy of Hardened Hearts - Verse 57\)](#)

*But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.)*

In verse 57, the scene begins with a terrifying display of resistance to the truth. The Sanhedrin's physical reaction—covering their ears and yelling at the top of their voices—is a vivid illustration of Spiritual Deafness. It wasn't that they couldn't hear; it was that they refused to listen to God's correction. Then we see the crowd rush towards him with one mind to grab him.

[\(A Witness Unshaken - Verse 58\)](#)

*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.)*

Then in verse 58, as we read about them dragging Stephen out, we witness the stark cost of discipleship. Stephen's experience reminds us that following Christ is not safe; it is costly. Yet, in this moment of ultimate trial, Stephen displays courage, he does not recant or soften his message to save his life. His witness boldly challenges us to ask if our faith is conditional on our comfort, or if we are willing to stand firm regardless of opposition.

[\(The Prayer of Trust - Verse 59\)](#)

*And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”)*

Then here in verse 59, as the stones fall, Stephen prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” This parallels Jesus' words on the cross [“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” \(Luke 23:46\)](#). Notably, Stephen prays to Jesus, acknowledging Him as God and the guardian of his eternal soul.

[\(The Prayer of Forgiveness - Verse 60\)](#)

*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.)*

Stephen then kneels—a posture of submission and peace amidst chaos—and cries out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” He refuses to die with bitterness. The text says he then “fell asleep,” a term the New Testament uses to describe the death of believers, implying rest and the certainty of waking up.

## Illustrate

Consider the paradox of a violet. It is a small, fragile, and seemingly defenseless flower. If a heavy boot stomps down on it, it cannot fight back. It has no thorns to tear the flesh; it has no bark to resist the weight. It is simply crushed. The flower is broken; life is seemingly snuffed out.

But in that exact moment of destruction, the violet does something miraculous. It does not release poison; it does not release bitterness. Instead, the very pressure that destroys it forces out its essence. It releases a sweet perfume that clings to the heel of the boot that crushed it.

Stephen is that violet. The Sanhedrin brought the heavy, crushing weight of their hatred down upon him. They surrounded him with the noise of their screaming and the violence of their rocks, expecting to crush his spirit just as they crushed his body. They expected him to curse them, to scream in anger, or to beg for mercy.

But when the heavy boot of persecution came down, Stephen did not break in the way they expected. He didn’t release the foul odor of resentment. Instead, under the immense pressure of death, his spirit released the sweet, intoxicating fragrance of Christ: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

## Apply

Before we move on to the next section, let us take some time to understand how we can apply this today. [\(Apply: Are You Covering Your Ears?\)](#) First, the Sanhedrin screamed and covered their ears to drown out a truth that convicted them. Resistance to God often masquerades as busyness, distraction, or defensive arguments. Is there a topic or an area of your life where you are “covering your ears” right now? Is there a conviction from the Holy Spirit that you are trying to drown out with the noise of podcasts, work, or self-justification? Take 5 minutes of total silence today. Ask God, “Is there something you are trying to say that I have been refusing to hear?”

[\(Apply: Forgiving Your “Stone Throwers”\)](#) Second, Stephen’s final act was to pray for the forgiveness of the very men killing him. This is the distinct mark of a Christian: loving our enemies. It is easy to love those who love us. But who is “throwing stones” at you right now? Who is slandering you, overlooking you, or hurting you? Write down the name of that person. It might feel impossible, but pray Stephen’s prayer for them: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Release the debt they owe you, it’s not because they deserve it, it’s because Jesus released the debt you owed Him.

[\(Apply: Resisting the Rush\)](#) And for my third point to consider here today, are we part of a mob? It is human nature to find safety in the crowd and to join in with the collective anger of our culture. Are you drifting with the “rush” of the crowd in your workplace, school, or social circle? Are you laughing at jokes you shouldn’t, agreeing with gossip you know is wrong, or staying silent when you should speak? Meaningful witness often requires standing alone. Commit to one act of “standing” this week—whether it’s speaking up for someone being gossiped about or sharing your faith when it’s socially awkward.

### 3. The Aftermath and Dispersion (Acts 8:1–3)

As we continue and read Acts 8:1-3, we see that Stephen's death was not an isolated tragedy; it was the spark for a wildfire.

*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. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*

What began as a mob execution turned into a systematic campaign to destroy the church. Yet, this dark moment contains a strange paradox: the attempt to crush the gospel actually caused it to spread. We see the church mourning a loss, facing a monster, and being pushed out of their comfort zone to fulfill the Great Commission. Back in verse 58 we met a “young man named Saul,” who guards the outer garments of the executioners. Remember the last time I was up here? I talked about the “The Paul that was Saul that had to waste away so that the Paul that is Paul could be revealed”. Here we are introduced to “The Saul that is Saul that will waste away so that the Saul that will become Paul could be revealed”. I am so excited to study that transformation with you but unfortunately we will need to wait a few more weeks for that to happen. But in the meantime, we will see what Saul can do.

#### Teach

##### (The Scattering - Verse 1)

*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.)*

Verse 1 of chapter 8 begins with a chilling note: Saul was there, “consenting” or approving heartily to Stephen's execution. But Stephen's death was not an end; it was a catalyst. On that very day, a “great persecution” broke out, shattering the comfort of the Jerusalem church. This pressure forced believers out of Jerusalem and into “Judea and Samaria.” This was not an accident; it was the forced fulfillment of Acts 1:8 (*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*). The church had been comfortable in Jerusalem, but God used the “storm” of persecution to blow the “seeds” of the Gospel outward. Interestingly, the text notes that “the apostles stayed behind.” While the flock scattered to spread the Word, the shepherds remained in the danger zone, perhaps to show courage, maintain the church's headquarters, or stand firm as a testimony to the Sanhedrin. This teaches us that God often uses our greatest discomfort to accomplish His greatest purposes.

##### (A Protest of Grief - Verse 2)

*Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.)*

While the mob celebrated, a group of “devout men” did something dangerous in verse 2: they buried Stephen and made “great lamentation” over him. In Jewish law, those stoned for blasphemy were often denied public mourning to signify their shame. By mourning deeply and publicly, these men were validating Stephen's character and protesting the Sanhedrin's verdict. It was a brave act of defiance. This act highlights the importance of the Christian community. Even in the face of threat, they refused to let Stephen be forgotten or dishonored. Their example calls us to stand with those who suffer for the truth and to honor those who have served faithfully, resting in the hope of the resurrection even as we grieve.

##### (Zeal Without Truth - Verse 3)



*But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.)*

In verse 3, the scene shifts to Saul, whose violence is described with the Greek word *lomainomai* (loo-MY-nom-ahee), a term often used for a wild beast tearing at meat or an army destroying a city. He didn't just target public meetings; he invaded the privacy of "house after house," dragging off both men and women to prison. Saul's actions illustrate a terrifying truth: zeal without truth is destructive. He believed he was serving God, but he was attacking God's people. We must ensure our passion is always guided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, not just religious fervor.

## Illustrate

Picture a campfire burning in the dark woods. A man, angry at the light, decides to stomp it out. He stomps violently, grinding the logs into the dirt, kicking the coals apart to kill the heat. But anyone who has tended a fire knows the danger of this. When you stomp on a fire, you don't just crush the flames; you scatter the embers. Sparks fly into the dry grass nearby. A burning coal rolls into a pile of leaves.

Saul was stomping on the fire of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. He successfully broke up the gathering, yes. But in doing so, he kicked the "embers"—the believers—out of the fire pit and into the dry grass of the surrounding nations. Instead of one contained fire in Jerusalem, he started brushfires of the Gospel in every town those believers fled to. He tried to extinguish the light, but he only succeeded in setting the world on fire.

## Apply

What can we learn from this? I again have three points to share with you on how this scripture can change our lives.

**(Apply: God Uses Discomfort to Move Us)** First, we see that the early church had become too comfortable in Jerusalem. God allowed the "storm" of persecution to break their huddle and scatter them into Judea and Samaria, forcing them to fulfill the mission they had been neglecting. We naturally view discomfort as a problem to be solved, but often it is a tool God is using to move us. Are you currently resisting a difficult change or a "scattering" in your life that might actually be God pushing you into a new purpose? Identify one area of discomfort in your life right now. Instead of praying, "God, take this away," try praying, "God, where are you trying to move me with this?"

**(Apply: Stand with the Persecuted)** Secondly, while the rest of the city celebrated Stephen's death, a group of "devout men" risked their own safety to bury him and mourn publicly. They refused to let the mob dictate who they honored. It is easy to distance ourselves from people who are suffering, unpopular, or "cancelled" to protect our own reputation. True discipleship often requires standing with those that the world has cast aside. Look for someone in your sphere who is currently isolated, grieving, or under attack. "Stand with them" this week—whether through a public word of support, a private meal, or simply sitting with them in their pain.

**(Apply: Anchors in the Flood)** And my last point comes from verse 1. It contains a fascinating detail: "all were scattered... except the apostles." Imagine the scene—thousands of believers fleeing Jerusalem in panic, like leaves blown by a storm. Yet, standing firm in the center of the danger were the apostles. They didn't run. They chose to remain in the "eye of the storm" to hold the center together while the church expanded. When a crisis hits your family, workplace, or community, the natural instinct is to panic or flee. But spiritual maturity is often measured by the ability to stay calm when everyone else is spiraling. Be the "non-anxious presence" this week. When others are reacting with fear or chaos, be the one who stays put, stays calm, and reminds those around you that God is still on the throne.

# Conclusion

We have journeyed today through one of the most violent yet victorious moments in the early church. We began with the deep anchor, seeing how Stephen's vision of the risen Christ allowed him to remain steady even while the surface storm of the mob raged around him. We witnessed the fragrance of grace, seeing how the crushing weight of persecution didn't destroy Stephen's testimony but instead squeezed out the sweet perfume of forgiveness—a love so powerful it mirrored Jesus on the cross.

Finally, we saw the sovereign hand, discovering an event that looked like the end of the church, but was actually its beginning. The stones that killed Stephen didn't stop the Gospel; they became the splash that sent the ripples of truth out to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

The message today is clear: Because Jesus stood for Stephen in heaven, Stephen could stand for Jesus on earth. And that same Jesus is standing for you today. He is not indifferent to your struggle; He is your Advocate, your Anchor, and your King. The world may bring fury, but Jesus brings focus. We do not need to fear the "stones" of this life, because we know who is waiting for us on the other side of them.

# Invitation

As we close, I want to invite you to examine your own heart. Perhaps you are here today and you feel like the "stones" are flying. You feel crushed by circumstances, rejected by friends, or overwhelmed by the pressure to compromise your faith. You need to know that you are not alone. Jesus sees you. He is standing for you. I invite you to stop looking at the storm and start looking, like Stephen, intently into heaven.

But there is a more dangerous question that we need to consider. Miguel poked us last week with a cutting question: are we actually part of the mob? Is it possible that we may be one of those in the crowd—covering our ears to the truth. Are we thinking we are doing God's will when in fact we are working against it like Saul did? [\*Jeremiah 17:9-10 \(The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart; I examine the mind to reward a man according to his way, by what his deeds deserve.\)\*](#) says that our own heart can deceive us, but God searches our heart. Have we been resisting the Holy Spirit's attempt to put us on the right path by drowning out His voice with noise and busyness? Today, the "Saul" in you can stop fighting. Do not harden your heart. Open your ears, look to the Savior who died for you, and find the peace that passes all understanding.

Let us pray.