

## **Acts 6:8-8:2**

### **Maybe you are called to die, you are always called to sacrifice**

#### **Introduction**

Hey Guys,

My name is Cole Simpson, excited to be with you this evening. I am on staff here at Citizens church, wife and I moved here about a year ago to start JCFOM with him, been cool to be a part of what he is has done so far and we are expectant for him to continue to work amongst our midst.

Happy Valentines day! I know there is a large range of emotions on today, some people love it, fav day of thle year, just got back from a weekend away, feeling rejuvenated. Others don't even recognize it, or so Tim tells me. And for some of us Valentine's day is difficult whether it be because of loss or things not reaching our expectations. Regardless of where you are at, excited you are here.

Today we are continuing in our book of Acts. And we are skipping a few chapters but let me catch you up.

In acts 4 peter and John get arrested for preaching the word, they are told they need to stop or else, peter says you do what you need to do but we have to keep preaching, they are beaten and released, keep preaching and more people get saved

Acts 5 is more of the same, apostles are arrested, they are released count it a joy to endure suffering like Jesus, and keep preaching, and people keep getting saved.

And then we come to Acts 6-8 which is a turning point in the book of Acts. Up to this point The Holy Spirit has been saving people left and right, started out with 120, at least 12,000 people have been saved (population is at most 50k) just imagine that in a few months ¼ people in this city have become Christians. Wild.

But God Said that this message would go to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. And so far we are just in jerusalem. Nobody has gone anywhere else. And the way God is going to change this, how he is going to accomplish this is through the death of a layman named stephen. An ordinary man, who was gifted, and realized that the Kingdom of God was not primarily about him. The way God is going to accomplish His purposes of getting the gospel to the nations is through the suffering of His people.

At the beginning of Acts 6 there are some disputes happening in the church over taking care of the poor and the widows. The apostles appoint 7 godly men to serve as deacons to run the administration and mercy side of things, so they can focus on preaching and prayer.

Acts 6 starts with the apostles appointing 7 deacons for the ministry of taking care of the poor and widows. God unifies the church, uses it to save a bunch of priests, like Tim talked about last week our greatest witness is our love for one another, apologetics didn't save these guys, their love for one another did.

Crisis avoided. New leaders. All is well. Then we get to verse 8.

**8** And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

This is a transition in the book of Acts. And Stephen. What the writer is telling us is that Stephen, is going to change things for the church. His ministry and how he is treated is going to shift how everything has worked.

This man has been doing great things, as a result of his ministry people are coming to know Jesus, specifically priests and that is starting to ruffle some feathers. The Jewish elite, the religious rulers, are going to bear false testimony against Stephen, which will eventually result in his death, sound like anyone else we know? You are going to notice some significant parallels between how Stephen and Christ were treated,

**9** 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. **10** But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. **11** Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." **12** 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, **13** and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, **14** 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." **15** And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. **7:1** And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Here Stephen is, standing in front of the supreme court, being accused of blasphemy which he knows very well can lead to his death. So what does he do?

Stephen preaches a sermon. In fact he preaches the longest sermon in the book of Acts, longest sermon given by a layman, where he tells the priests 3 basic points.

- Your fathers missed the point. They did not understand God and what he was trying to accomplish and replaced him with a cheap works based salvation. (Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses and the law, Solomon and the temple)
- You missed the point.
- You need to repent

**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." **54** Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. **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." **57** But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. **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. **59** And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." **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 calls them to repentance. And they respond by stoning him. They drag him out of the city and hurl stones at his body until he dies. Stephen became the first man apart from Christ to be killed for his faith. And like Christ his last words are a prayer of intercession for his persecutors. Begging God to forgive them, they know not what they do.

So how does this story. The story of a man who is bold in his faith translates to us today, what can we learn from Stephen?

### **1. You may not be called to be a martyr, but you are called to give your life**

Most likely you will not be a martyr for the faith,

- This still happens, people put the number at 8 a day
- It is possible this could happen, if you are called to overseas missions etc

But regardless the calling is the same for you as it is to Stephen, to give your life, pick up your cross daily **Matthew 16**, Stephen is a great example that our life is not about us.

One of the things that really hit me about this passage is the humility of Stephen. Here is what we know about Stephen, the apostles need to pick leaders for the church, they are coming to a crisis, division is beginning to occur in the church, and they need to appoint leaders to make sure the widows and the poor are taken care of, as we said earlier they have roughly 12,000 choices, and they pick 7 of which Stephen is one. What does that mean?

It means Stephen is thought of incredibly highly, his character and his giftings stand out, people notice them and then after he is appointed it's stated that because of Stephen specifically, because of what he is doing God brings multiple priests, multiple pharisees to the faith, the group of people that are most hostile to the church.

Stephen stands out among 12,000 and then he stands out again among 7. What is the job given to this man that is so clearly gifted? Waiting tables and organizing food trains. That's his job.

This is particularly convicting for me, because I hope I would have the attitude of Stephen here, to do all things excellently and to the glory of God but if I am being honest I think part of me would of thought this job was below me. I think I would have walked up to the apostles and said have you noticed all the things I am doing? The miracles God is using me to perform, the pharisees that are coming to know Jesus as a result of my ministry. Maybe I have graduated past organizing food trains? Maybe this is not a good use of my gifting and wiring.

**Laura Jones story.**

But that's not how Stephen responds. Stephen understands that everything about his life is not about him, from the way he served, to how he responded to his persecution, to his death. Everything was about the kingdom of God.

**The truth is Stephen had to learn how to live for Christ before he could die for him.**

I think our generation can be quick to ask the question how can God use my specific gifting and wiring for the kingdom? And that is not a bad question but it might be the wrong question. **as believers we are called to serve, and often we will serve in areas we are not passionate about, nor necessarily gifted in, but they will be areas of great need.** The right question is what do the people around me need from me? And often the answer will be something that will bring no glory to you, that you're not particularly interested or excited about and that is okay.

**Your life is not about you. My life is not about me. As believers our lives are about King Jesus.**

The Bible labors this point over and over again, our lives our not about us, the son of man did not come to be served but to serve. The example given to us as believers by our savior, by the apostles, by basically every Biblical character that we would aspire to be more like is that their lives are marked by service and sacrifice. They do not see their lives as primarily their own, but instead they know they have been adopted into the family of God and their lives are a living sacrifice to the one who saved them, to the one who sacrificed more than we could ever possibly sacrifice. The one who served more then we could possibly serve

**What does this look like for you?**

- **Money-** it means God is asking you to sacrifice your money. **You will have less money because of your relationship with Jesus.** You will have less than the people who make a comparable amount of money to you, because your life will be marked by generosity. I am not just talking about what we commit to give to the church as members here, the pattern we are shown in acts is whenever there is a need the church provides, that means we are called to give probably more then we are comfortable giving.
- Might look like having a smaller house so you can be generous
- Might look like letting members live with you for a time
- Might look like doing a job that you are not passionate about because it allows you to give money and resources for the expansion of God's kingdom
- Might not be able to buy that PS5, or that new car, or fill in the blank because you are going to choose to have less so the people around you can have more
  
- **Time-** It means God is asking for you to sacrifice your time. **You will have less time for you because of your relationship with Jesus.** You have been given the time you have been given, everyone's seasons of life is different, but as a believer your life should look distinctly different then the lives of non believers who are in the same life stage, does it? When people look at how you spend your time is it obvious that you value the things of Jesus, or would how you spend your time show that you value the building of your kingdom.
  
- Will have less nights a week getting to do what we want to do, and more nights serving the needs of the people around us
- We do things like showing up to help people move on our Saturdays
- Might not get to be able to keep up with that new show
- Might not be able have as many hobbies as we want

- **Relationships**- it means God is calling you to make sacrifices in your relationships. Like Tim spoke about last week, we need to spread the Gospel both in word and deed. **You will lose friends because of your relationship with Jesus.** You are going to have to have some uncomfortable conversations, if you have friends that you have known for 3 months and you have never had a gospel conversation, you probably need to repent. After this gathering you need to call them and say, I am sorry I've actually been selfish, I need to tell you about Jesus.

The pattern shown to us in Acts is the people of God sacrificing greatly, and the spirit of God blessed it.

Sacrifice is how the people of God were able to provide for every need amongst them

Sacrifice is how the people of God saw people added to their number daily

Sacrifice is how the gospel didn't stay in Jerusalem, but went to people that were their enemies, went to other nations.

Sacrifice is how men and women left careers, jobs for the gospel.

Sacrifice is why Peter ends up in prison and yet preaches to the prison guard and he becomes a Christian.

**Sacrifice is a marker of believers**

The life of a Christian is not a life of notoriety, it does give us anything according to the ways of the world, your life and your families life will be worse by every worldly measure if you are walking in step with the spirit.

But, God will use it to bring dead people to life. He will use it draw you closer to him to rely on him more fully. He will use it for his glorification. And that is the point. Everything else is dust, a vapor in the wind.

## 2. God is always sovereign

**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."

This scene, Stephen about to die, encircled by his executioners simultaneously brings me so much peace and is completely terrifying. Because on the one hand God is there, he is there when Stephen is facing this terrifying mob. He is there and in teaching team we talked about the fact that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God, this is the only time we see him stand, Walker and Tim were so excited by this fact.

But as I thought about it more it really began to hit me, Stephen is standing there, if it were me I would be terrified, and then I see Jesus standing there looking at me, smiling. I don't know that he said anything but I can imagine him whether it through words or action communicating to stephen, I am so proud of you. Well done good and faithful servant. And that brings me so much peace, to know that God is there, that he loves me, that because of the cross I get to hear well done good and faithful servant, that the holy spirit that was in Stephen was in you and me, that we have access to the same Spirit that stephen did when he was doing these amazing miracles and works for the expansion of the Kingdom of God. Such good news, I can't think of anything better.

And

At the same time, we know how the story ends don't we? God doesn't step in, he doesn't send a host of angels to protect Stephen. No he lets it happen. He is there, he has every ability to stop it, and he chooses not to.

**God is always there and his plans are not our plans.**

You see sacrifice will lead to suffering. It is one of the promises that Christ gives us while he is on the earth, they will hate you like they hated me. Our lives will be worse when we actually understand what Jesus is calling us to, at least on this earth.

There aren't a lot of disciples of Jesus who we can look at and say, man their lives got remarkably better after they became a Christian, no most of them die or are exiled because they cared more about the spreading of the gospel than their comfort or satisfaction.

They knew it wasn't about them, let's keep reading.

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

And Saul. Like Stephen, Saul will change the way the church works for the rest of history in large part because of Stephen.

This act, the death of Stephen, is the means that God uses in order to spread the Gospel to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Stephen's death begins one of the greatest persecutions on the church in history and it lasts for hundreds of years. And because of it Christians fled. They fled all over the globe to get away from the persecution of Rome, each one of us if we were able could most likely track our salvation back to this moment the death of Stephen and the salvation of Paul.

And as I read this, as we talked about Stephen and Paul and what they both did, How God used them for the expansion of the Kingdom, I thought of Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, the last words he wrote before his execution in Rome

**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.**

If you knew that someone would become a Christian/have their eternity changed, but it would come at great cost and sacrifice to you, would you choose it?

I think Paul answered yes to this question, so did Stephen. What about us, what am I willing to sacrifice for the expansion of the kingdom of God.

Because this is our charge of believers. We get to be a small part of the expansion of God's kingdom, we get to have a life of fulfillment, joy, and love but also a life of great sacrifice. As believers we should be able to tangibly see how our lives are worse in this world, because we are not living for this world.

The freedom of the gospel is that we don't have to have it figured out, its not about our performance, we get to be in process and the calling is clear.

Practically what does this look like?

What does it look like for us to lay our money, our time, our relationships at the feet of Jesus. To say all I have is Christ

What areas are you afraid of sacrificing in? Where do you need to sacrifice?

Sit down this week and ask the question how are you sacrificing for the Kingdom of God. The Bible is clear that we will be persecuted, how are you being persecuted? If you can't find the answer you may need to autopsy how you live your life, Sacrifice is mandatory to the life of a Christian. In your group this week ask your CG to be honest with you, how am I being selfish, how is my life about me instead of Jesus. Listen to what they have to say and repent, by the grace of God and the power of his spirt we are able to change.

**Lets pray.**

**Communion.**