

Stephen Is Killed

Passages: Acts 5:12–42; 6:1–7; 6:8–8:1

Memory Verse

“But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’” (Acts 5:29)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Work [Behavior]
God wants us to be victorious over our inner weaknesses and external obstacles.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. God is a God of victory – He helps us overcome our obstacles, both internal and external.2. God blesses those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Act on our faith, even in difficult situations.2. Serve others with genuine love and compassion.3. Preach regardless of the expected outcome.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. Faith Against Opposition
 1. Peter
 2. Stephen
- B. Seven Workers for the Church
- C. Submit to the Spirit and Faith in Hardship

Life Application

1. Upholding Faith in Hardship
2. Serve with Love and Compassion
3. Preach Regardless of Outcome

Memory Verse

Conclusion: No matter the obstacles or circumstances – internal fears and struggles, or opposition from outside enemies – God wants us to have a faith that overcomes.

A. Faith Against Opposition

In the Acts of the Apostles, many of God's chosen workers and followers were persecuted for their faith. They suffered, even to the point of death, in order to bear witness to others about Christ. By looking at the faith of the early church, we can be encouraged to act on our faith, even as we face our own weaknesses or a difficult environment. The early church experienced growing pains; yet, we learned last week that it became stronger even in the face of severe opposition.

Let's look at two examples of early church workers who overcame obstacles in order to share their faith.

1. Peter

Peter was a chosen disciple of the Lord and called by the Lord Jesus Himself (Mt 4:18–19). But despite God's abundant grace upon Peter, he had many weaknesses. He mistakenly opposed Jesus' death and confidently proclaimed he would never stumble in his faith (Mt 26:31–33), yet later publicly denied Jesus three times (Mt 26:69–75). Peter let his own zeal blind him to the truth, and his pride later gave way to his fear of punishment. His inner weaknesses were obstacles to his faith.

Peter eventually overcame these weaknesses. The authorities strictly commanded Peter and the other apostles to stop teaching and preaching in Jesus' name. But they boldly replied, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), and Peter did not stop spreading the gospel (Acts 5:42).

Overcoming Inner Weaknesses

Like Peter, our inner weaknesses may stop us from serving God or sharing the gospel. These may be weaknesses in our character, personality, or behavior. Perhaps we fear rejection, pursue our own self-interests, or are self-righteous or prideful about our wealth or status – possibly even our status as God's children. We may also have greed or lustful desires that turn us from doing God's work. All of these weaknesses within us can affect our service for God.

To preach the gospel, we too must overcome our inner weaknesses like Peter did. It's not easy to overcome our fear of persecution when we preach, but we have a personal responsibility to put in our best effort to transform ourselves into ambassadors for Christ. But this cannot be done purely out of self-determination. Transforming our character must be done with the work of the Holy Spirit within us (Eph 3:16).

When we surrender ourselves to God's Spirit, we allow God to transform us according to His will. If we resist, our weaknesses will often remain. Peter's life reflects this truth. After he surrendered himself to God, he joyfully accepted the imprisonment, beating, and shame that he suffered for Christ (Acts 5:18, 40–41). Eventually, Peter was even able to glorify God in his death (Jn 21:18–19).

2. Stephen

Unlike Peter, very little about Stephen is recorded in the Bible, except for the difficult circumstances he encountered. The persecution of the early church, particularly of believers like Stephen, actually led to the spread of the gospel and the church's growth (Acts 8:4; 12:24). It may not make sense, but the difficult circumstances are what made the church grow.

Acts 6:5 tells us that Stephen was among the seven workers chosen to serve the early church. He is described as a man full of faith, the Holy Spirit, and wisdom (Acts 6:5, 10). Stephen did great signs and wonders through the Holy Spirit's power, showing that he was filled with God's Spirit (Acts 6:8). Stephen was a good witness for Christ, but he faced serious opposition when he tried to share the gospel. Acts 6:8–15 records how Stephen preached in the Synagogue of the Freedman. (Note: Here, Stephen likely preached to the Roman Jews. Roman Jews were Jews freed from slavery and given Roman citizenship by their Roman captors. Some of these Roman Jews, or their descendants, likely returned to live in Jerusalem and set up their own synagogue.)

When Stephen preached in the Synagogue of the Freedman, the listeners opposed Stephen and set about arresting him, bringing him before the Jewish council and falsely accusing Stephen with false witnesses (Acts 6:11–14). Yet, despite his difficult circumstances, the Bible says Stephen's face was like that of an angel in his trials (Acts 6:15). After angering the council with his address, Stephen was cast out of the city and stoned to death. He was thrown into a terrible situation, but his godly character – faithfulness, courage, and wisdom – can clearly be seen. Even when he was being stoned, Stephen did not harbor hatred or anger, but cried out, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60).

Overcoming External Obstacles

Today, we too may face difficult circumstances or a bad environment when it comes to sharing our faith with others. Some may persecute or mock us for our beliefs. Many people are deceived by Satan and often have false ideas about God and Christianity planted into their minds (Col 2:4, 8). Stephen's example teaches us how to overcome the hardships or trials we may face as we do God's work. How did Stephen overcome the persecution of his faith?

Stephen fixed his eyes upon God above. When Stephen was falsely accused and stoned to death for his words, the Bible says Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). The Bible teaches us to "set [our] mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col 3:2). When Jesus faced the excruciating pain of the cross ahead of Him, He looked to the joy of obeying and fulfilling God's will, which helped Him endure the temporary pain of the cross (Heb 12:2).

We too must fix our eyes upon Jesus and the many good examples left behind by others. If we fix our eyes on things above, the difficulties we face here on earth will seem small in comparison to the joy of obeying God. Like the apostles, we may even count it all joy to suffer for God's name (Acts 5:41).

B. Seven Workers for the Church

Acts 6:1–7 records a complaint in the early church regarding unfair distribution of food among the Hebrew and Hellenic (Greek culture) widows (Acts 6:1). In response, the church appointed seven workers to serve and meet the needs of those who were being neglected, resolving the situation through their genuine love and compassion (Acts 6:2–5).

Besides having love, in order to lead and serve the church well, the church requires good and faithful workers. Acts 6:3 teaches us three important requirements for those who serve within the church: 1) be of good reputation; 2) be full of the Holy Spirit; and 3) be full of wisdom. What does it mean to be a person with these three characteristics?

Being of good reputation means being a good example for others. We are a good example to others when we reflect God's character and wisdom in our lives, something accomplished by being filled with God's Spirit. In our day-to-day life, we must try our best to be a good example to others. When we genuinely strive to do what is right even when it is hard, others see our good example and learn from us (Phil 2:19–22; 3:17). Paul told Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim 4:12).

Being a good example to others starts in our daily conduct. It means actively seeking out God, putting effort into our spiritual cultivation, and as a result, bearing fruit in how we interact with others. Over time, our good reputation will be built upon our ability to handle different situations with godly wisdom. However, we must first receive God in faith, because without faith it is impossible to please God (Gal 3:2; Heb 11:6). There are many ways to receive God and reflect His character, but the most basic ways are through hearing, sharing, and learning from God's word, and through prayer. Wisdom must also be received from God, for God freely gives wisdom to those who ask Him for it in faith (Jas 1:5–7).

C. Submit to the Spirit and Faith in Hardship

From the many examples left by the early church, we can see the importance of acting on our faith even against opposition. Stephen is a good example of such faith, teaching us that God will help us overcome even the most difficult of circumstances if we continue to do God's will.

Acts 6:9–10 says that Stephen preached the gospel with great wisdom and divine power. Those who heard Stephen's message and words could not resist the wisdom with which he spoke. Even after Stephen was arrested and given a chance to respond to his false accusers, Stephen calmly responded and witnessed for Christ with a great love for his accusers. Stephen's love was so great that he even asked God to forgive his persecutors for wrongly condemning and killing an innocent man (Acts 7:60).

Stephen's example and speech give us at least two important lessons. First, we must continue to witness for Christ and preach the gospel even in hardship. Second, we must not resist the Holy Spirit, but submit ourselves to the Spirit's will and guidance.

Submit to the Spirit

In Stephen's speech, recorded in Acts 7:2–53, Stephen explained to the Jews how God revealed Himself to His people throughout history. When God's people became slaves in the land of Egypt, He raised up a deliverer, Moses, to lead God's people out of Egyptian bondage (Acts 7:20–36). Stephen then admonished them, saying, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51). Just as the Israelites had rejected Moses, the Jews had also rejected the Messiah (Acts 7:52).

A key message we must learn from Stephen's speech is that we take care never to resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). The Jews to whom Stephen preached resisted the Holy Spirit, and they eventually killed Stephen so that they would no longer have to listen to the truth.

The reason we often resist God's Spirit is because our own fleshly and sinful desires naturally suppress God's truth (Rom 1:18; Jas 4:1–2). We often deceive ourselves about what is valuable, exchanging the truth of God for the lie, because it's often easier to go along with the lie (Rom 1:25). Just as a person caught cheating on a test may lie to protect himself, we often lie to protect ourselves.

But Satan's deception can be overcome through reliance upon God and His Spirit, as well as by acting

upon God's word and submitting to the movement of God's Spirit within us. The more we surrender ourselves to God's will and Spirit, the more we are able to overcome any opposition that rises against us (Rom 6:13, 16–18; Gal 5:16). In contrast, the more we present ourselves to sin and lawlessness, the more we will live a life of constant sin and lawlessness (Rom 6:19). If we continue to surrender ourselves to sin, it will eventually lead us to death (Rom 6:23).

Because the consequences are so serious, Stephen warned his persecutors that they should not resist the Holy Spirit or the Holy Spirit's work. Unfortunately, those who heard Stephen's message could not accept it and stoned Stephen to death.

Share Our Faith

The apostles were arrested and imprisoned when they tried to share the gospel (Acts 5:17–18), and Stephen was falsely accused before being stoned to death. Although we may not experience physical persecution, we may still face hardships when we try to preach the gospel. The opposition we face may be Satan's work or that of evil people (1 Thess 2:18). It can show itself in many forms, such as attacks – physical, verbal, or social – or persecution of our faith. The angel that freed the apostles told them, “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life” (Acts 5:20). From the angel's deliverance and encouragement, we see that God wants us to share our faith even in difficult circumstances.

One of our greatest challenges is preaching to those who refuse to listen. The reason people often refuse to hear the truth is because they don't want to face the weight of their sins – the truth cuts them to the heart (Acts 7:54, 57). When people don't want to listen, it's difficult to continue to reach out to them. When God called Isaiah to speak His word, Isaiah asked, “Lord, how long?”, to which He replied, until His judgment comes (Isa 6:11–13). This means we must continue to preach even when others refuse to hear it. This requires our love for those who do not listen, for the lost can only receive eternal life when someone with enough love shares the truth.

It's easy to share our faith when there is no opposition, but the important lesson we must learn is to share our faith even when it's difficult to do so. When we face hardships, it is easier to give up or give in than to continue. But if we stop doing God's work when we face any obstacles, the church's work will soon completely stop in the face of opposition.

Check for Understanding

- 1. What did Peter teach us about transforming our own character?** This cannot be done purely out of self-determination; transforming our character must be done with the work of the Holy Spirit within us. When we surrender ourselves to God's Spirit, we allow God to transform us according to His will.
- 2. What opposition did Stephen face in preaching the gospel?** When Stephen preached to the Roman Jews, they opposed Stephen and set about arresting him, bringing him before the Jewish council and falsely accusing Stephen with false witnesses. Later, he was dragged out of the city and stoned to death.
- 3. From Acts 6:3, what qualities are required for a good church worker?** 1) Be of good reputation; 2) be full of the Holy Spirit; and 3) be full of wisdom. Being of good reputation means being a good example for others by reflecting God's character and wisdom in our lives, something accomplished by being filled with God's Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit and with wisdom means receiving God in faith.
- 4. What lessons can we learn from Stephen's example and speech?** First, we must continue to witness for Christ and preach the gospel even in hardship. Second, we must not resist the Holy

Spirit, but submit ourselves to the Spirit's will and guidance.

- 5. What kinds of hardships might we face when preaching the gospel? How does God want us to respond to these challenges?** The opposition we face could be Satan's work or that of evil people, and can show itself in many forms, such as physical, verbal, or social attacks or persecution of our faith. God wants us to share our faith even in difficult circumstances.

Life Application

1. Upholding Faith in Hardship

Most of us have not faced the same level of hardship as the early church workers, but we nonetheless can learn a valuable lesson from their example: we must act on our faith even in the most difficult of situations. Acting on our faith in the face of hardship is a conscious decision that we must make.

Jesus gave us the mission of being witnesses for Christ (Mt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). As we try to fulfill this mission, we may face persecution or reproach for Christ. When this happens, it's always easier to give up. But we must remember that being persecuted or reproached for righteousness' sake is a blessing according to the Bible (Mt 5:10; Lk 6:22; 1 Pet 4:12–14).

It is hard to act when we face opposition against our faith. But that very same faith will help us to overcome our inner weaknesses and external hardships. We must believe that God's will and way always prevail, no matter the situation (Rom 8:28), and that God protects and delivers those who love Him (Dan 3:17). We must have faith that, even if God does not deliver us from physical persecution as in Stephen's case, God still has His good will for us. When we are guided by our faith in Him, God is well pleased.

2. Serve with Love and Compassion

Acts 6:2–5 teaches us about overcoming differences within the church through love and compassion for others. By showing a genuine love and compassion for those in need, the early church avoided further division within the church. Having freely received the gospel, we should freely share it with others regardless of their race, culture, or background. Although a particular church may have a majority of believers from one culture, that does not mean that other cultures should be neglected or treated differently. God's love and truth go beyond our cultural or other superficial differences (Gal 3:27–28).

Even knowing this, we may sense discord between church members based on differences in culture, gender, age, or social statuses. It is natural for people to focus on such differences, so visitors may also start to feel these gaps between church members. For example, if English and Chinese-speaking church members never interact during church worship services, visitors will sense that the members are disconnected. But if we have love and compassion for those who are different from us, we encourage ourselves and others to look beyond surface characteristics and connect back to God. This shows our unity in Christ and allows us to reach out to others more effectively (1 Cor 9:19–23).

It's not always easy to show love to those who are different from us, but if we truly have love, we will find a way to bridge the gaps that we feel between ourselves and others. For this reason, the Bible calls love the "bond of perfection" (Col 3:14).

3. Preach Regardless of Outcome

Stephen's willingness to witness to those who disputed with him about the gospel (Acts 6:9) shows that Stephen shared his faith regardless of whether his Jewish audience would convert. Stephen knew that his audience was stiff-necked, hard-hearted, and resisted the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51); yet, Stephen

continued to share the truth of the gospel with them in love. Today, we should do the same.

Stephen's example teaches us that we should not let the probability of conversion or the willingness of our audience determine whether or not we should preach. The Bible teaches us, "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2). Being ready "in season" refers to those times when we readily expect fruit. In contrast, "out of season" refers to those times when we may not expect fruit. This means that no matter the expected result, we must still take up the mission to do the work that the Lord Jesus gave to the church. This is our mission.

Our mission may be to preach, but the results are always in God's hands (1 Cor 3:6). Changing a person's heart is not something that we can control; only the Lord Himself can open someone to the truth of the gospel (Lk 24:45; Acts 16:14). Therefore, we must not allow the expected result to determine whether or not we preach. Instead, we should courageously share Christ with others, even if we do not think they will believe.

Memory Verse

"But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'" (Acts 5:29)

Meaning

This verse tells us that Peter and other apostles continued to preach and share about Christ even when faced with difficult situations. They may have had some fears but, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, they boldly continued to preach Christ and obey God's command to preach the gospel to the world, even in the face of severe opposition.

Conclusion

We will face obstacles many times in our journey of faith. These obstacles may be our own internal fears and struggles, or opposition from outside enemies. But God's wants us to have a faith that overcomes no matter the circumstances. This can only be accomplished with the help of God's Spirit, who will transform us. When we are transformed by God and filled with His Spirit, we can become good examples to others of how to live by faith in Christ. We will become good and faithful workers of good reputation and filled with the Holy Spirit, the wisdom to know what is right, and the will to do it, even when it is difficult to do so.

Lesson 3 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What does the memory verse teach us about how to preach the word of God?
We must continue to preach even if we face difficult situations. We may have inward fear but, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we can boldly continue to preach the gospel.
2. What do Peter and Stephen teach us about overcoming our internal and external obstacles?
To overcome our inner weaknesses, we must surrender ourselves to the Spirit and allow God to transform us according to His will. To overcome external obstacles, we must fix our eyes upon Jesus.
3. What stops us from submitting to the Spirit? How can we overcome this?
Our own fleshly and sinful desires naturally suppress God's truth. But the more we surrender ourselves to God's will, the more we are able to overcome any opposition that arises against us.
4. Why is it important that we share our faith even when we face opposition?
Because the lost can only receive eternal life when someone with enough love shares the truth, and this is our mission from Christ.
5. What does it mean to preach regardless of the outcome?
Stephen shared the gospel even knowing his audience were hard-hearted and resistant to the Spirit. Likewise, we should courageously share Christ with others even if we don't think they will believe.
6. What kind of obstacles do you encounter in your faith? How can you overcome these?
Personal answers.