

# I Wanna Be Like... Stephen

## Devotional

A popular jingle rang in the heads of young basketball fans around the country in the 1990s as kids sought to imitate NBA superstar Michael Jordan: “Like Mike! If I could be like Mike!” Gatorade even resurrected the tune to celebrate its own fiftieth anniversary, reminding me that I was among those kids who sought Mike-likeness. I had the shoes and wore the sweat band on my left forearm. I had a room decorated with Jordan posters. And there I practiced flying through the air with my tongue hanging out as I dunked my Nerf basketball. Whom did you want to be when you were a kid? Many young children grow up wanting to be like their moms and dads. One of my pastor-friends recently observed his little daughter baptizing Cinderella in the bathtub, clearly imitating the actions of her Baptist father! **Regardless of who your model was as a child, every adult Christian should seek to imitate the same model: Jesus.** The goal of the Christian is to be like the Savior. Paul wrote about this pursuit in Philippians 3:10–14. Growing more and more like Jesus was his life’s aim.

In Acts 6:8–8:3 we meet a man who was as much like Jesus as anyone in Scripture up to this point: Stephen. Luke describes Stephen’s Christlike character, ministry, and death. His death, in fact, is the first martyrdom we read about in the book of Acts. Persecution began with threats. It grew to include floggings. In this passage it involves a stoning. My focus here, however, is not on martyrdom. Rather, I hope what we are about to discuss will make each of us wrestle with this question: Do I really want to be like Jesus? To be like Jesus does not mean simply gathering facts about Jesus’s life and then copying Him, like children idolizing their favorite basketball players tend to do. We must not try to be like Jesus in our own power or imagine that we can earn salvation by copying Jesus’ words or behaviors. Rather, as Christians we must realize that we can pursue likeness to Jesus because we have been united to Jesus. Through that union with Christ we can live out Christlike lives (Galatians 2: 20). Through Jesus we are able to bear the fruit of righteousness. Stephen was not sinless; like the rest of us, he needed the Savior. Once he accepted Jesus, he was empowered to live a life that reflected his Savior. As we seek to follow Stephen as he followed Christ, we must first be united to Jesus and be willing to suffer. **But Stephen’s story shows us that suffering connected to honoring the Lord is worth it!**<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 2430-2451). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

# Open it

1. Growing up, what person did you want to be? What was it about that person that caused such a desire?

# Read it

**Acts 6:8-15**

# Explore it

2. How does Luke describe Stephen?
3. What things did Stephen do among the people?
4. What charge did the people bring against Stephen?
5. How did the men act treacherously towards Stephen?
6. What did they see when they looked at Stephen?

# Apply it

We met Stephen in our last study, where he was picked as one of the seven men to help distribute food to the Hellenistic widows in a fair manner. We do not know what kind of a time gap exists between the commissioning of these seven prototype deacons and the incident described in our text. Perhaps Stephen had done well in this administrative job, so that he could delegate the daily details to someone else, freeing him up to preach the gospel. As we saw last week, not even the apostles could do both, so it is not likely that Stephen carried on both ministries at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

7. Stephen goes from serving the Lord in obscurity before Acts 6 to being named as one of the seven servants in Acts 6 to being singled out in Acts 7–8. How does serving in smaller ways equip you for larger opportunities of ministry?
8. What temptations might exist for someone who is seen as a rising star within the church?
9. What biblical principles and practices can help keep us from thinking too highly of ourselves when we experience success that is seen by others?

## WHAT A ROLE MODEL!!!

On that last day of his life Stephen lived as Christ lived. His story is introduced in 6:8 with the statement, *“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”* **He, like Christ, was full of grace.**

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<sup>2</sup> Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-17-stephen-man-acts-68-15>

In the New Testament “grace” refers to the unmerited, unlimited riches of God poured upon us through Christ. God’s riches flowed through Stephen and onto those around him. But there is more. In pre-Christian times the word grace was used to describe the charm of a woman or of one’s speech. **The word’s background suggests beauty, symmetry, rhythm, elegance, loveliness—and all of this was seen in Stephen.** “Full of . . . grace,” Stephen possessed a charm of character that touched even those who did not know its source...Stephen possessed a winsomeness just like Jesus’. **God’s grace can accomplish the same in us.**

Wesley humorously said, “One of the advantages of the grace of God is that it makes a man a gentleman without the aid of a dancing master.” **Grace not only pays for our sins—it changes us. Oh, to be like Stephen—“full of God’s grace”!**<sup>3</sup>

10. What is it about the God’s grace that changes a person from the inside out?

How has God’s grace changed you?

11. The Bible makes it clear that grace is something that God alone can give, but it also commands us to continually grow in grace (see 2 Peter 3:18). What things allow us to grow in the grace of God, and how do we determine if we are in fact growing?

**Finally, Stephen was full of power.** That was a direct result of his being filled with the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8). That he was performing great wonders and signs among the people suggests he was far more than simply a deacon. Instead, his deeds of power show his close link with the apostles. In the New Testament church only the apostles, Stephen, Philip (Acts 8:6–7), and Barnabas (15:12) performed miracles. The imperfect tense of *poieō* (was performing) shows Stephen was continually doing those mighty works, no doubt with the same impact as the apostles (5:12–14). Taken together, verses 5 and 8 give both the Godward and man-ward sides of Christian character. A man full of faith toward God, and yielded to the Spirit’s control, will be gracious toward others and manifest great spiritual power. That a righteous man will do righteous deeds is a basic New Testament principle.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 1777-1787). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, John. Acts 1-12 MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 3648-3657). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

12. Our text tells us that Stephen was uniquely empowered by the Spirit to “perform signs and wonders among the people.” In what ways can we display the power of God on a daily basis?

Stephen was a man “full of faith” in the sense that he was prepared to engage whatever obstacles he faced in the certainty that God was in complete control. He didn’t seem to be afraid of his persecutors. Stephen did not shrink from the fight, as Peter had done in the high priest’s courtyard. Are we too concerned about our reputation when faced with opposition? Do we shrink from asserting our confidence in the Lord when asked to make a stand that we know will prove unpopular? Stephen was fearless in his opposition to the kingdom of darkness, resolute in his determination to remain true to his Lord, and focused on his mission.<sup>5</sup>

13. How do we build up our Christian courage? How does being part of the church community help to make believers courageous?

### **LOOK WHO CAME BACK TO THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD**

Christians in Jerusalem typically attended both the temple and the local synagogues. We are not told to what extent they participated in the temple rituals at this stage, but it is hard to imagine that they were willing to participate in the offering of sacrifices, given their newfound belief that Jesus’ death on the cross made all such sacrifices redundant. Christ’s blood was shed as “one sacrifice for sins for all time” (Hebrews 10:12 NASB), making the sacrifice of animals unnecessary. The blood of Jesus alone cleanses the guilty conscience. In addition, Christians attended the Jewish synagogues. Some have thought the reference to “the synagogue of the Freedmen . . . and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia” (Acts 6: 9) implies that there were as many as five synagogues in the city (even though the word “synagogue” is in the singular). Others have argued that there was only one that included all five distinct groupings.

Whatever the case may be, an important issue emerges: Who were the “Freedmen”? The answer seems to be that the Freedmen (Gk. *libertinos*) were descendants of those who had been liberated from slavery or imprisonment following the war in the time of Pompey (63 B.C.). These synagogues (or, if singular, this synagogue) were clearly Hellenistic, with membership comprising Jews from disparate parts of the empire, including Cilicia, the hometown of Saul of Tarsus (Paul). It is intriguing to think that Saul was possibly a member of the same synagogue as Stephen, and perhaps heard him preach about Jesus Christ. Not only that, but Saul may well have heard Stephen expand on the consequences of faith in Jesus Christ as it reflects on Jewish attitudes and allegiances to the Law of Moses.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, Derek W. H.. Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries) (Kindle Locations 3174-3178). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

14. The opponents of Stephen were men with backgrounds similar to his, maybe even friends of his before he came to know Jesus. Which is more difficult in your opinion—witnessing to complete strangers or to people you know? Explain why.
15. How might Stephen's previous membership in the temple have caused his fellow temple members to respond with such anger and vitriol?
16. When have you experienced harsh treatment from former friends because of your newfound faith in Jesus Christ? How did you respond to this treatment?

Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemous words about Moses and God, demeaning the temple and the law. But in fact, in verse 15, Stephen's face is Moses-like (Exodus 34:29); moreover, his speech clearly shows honor for Moses. And at no point did Stephen use God's name frivolously. **Stephen simply taught that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the temple.** Jesus is the substance, and those things were shadows. Jesus said the same thing about Himself (Matthew 12:6; John 2:19). Thus, Stephen is a victim of the same accusation his Lord endured. This passage is a great reminder that we must tell everyone that if they want to meet God, they don't need to go to a temple or a building; they must go to a person, Jesus. If someone wants forgiveness, he or she doesn't need to practice self-atonement or offer God a sacrifice of bulls and goats; all must go to Jesus, trusting in His work at the cross for salvation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 2502-2506). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

17. What role did the temple and the Law of Moses play within Judaism, and in what ways was Jesus superior to them?

18. How does the world falsely accuse Christians today? What can we do to make sure that these accusations fall flat?

### **IT IS TIME TO SHINE**

Jews associated a glowing face with a person close to God. Stephen, on trial for his life, experienced the intimate presence of Jesus (Matthew 28:20). He addressed his judges with respect (Acts 7:2). But before his defense rested, he would charge them with the very crimes for which they accused him.<sup>8</sup>

19. Why is it so important for us to respond graciously but firmly when we are opposed? What happens when we fail to live out this meek approach amidst opposition?

20. The Lord attested to who Stephen was and what he was saying by causing his face to shine. How can you allow God's light to shine through you this week?

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<sup>8</sup> Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Location 1639). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.  
Note: This study guide was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. [www.villagebible.org/smallgroups](http://www.villagebible.org/smallgroups)