

Power Struggle



Topic

Holy Spirit's power

Theme

The Holy Spirit empowers believers to spread the Word effectively.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will recognize the power of the Spirit in him is greater than the power in the world.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 7

Scripture Focus

Acts 6:8–8:3

Summary

This lesson considers the ministry and martyrdom of Stephen. His life and death illustrate that God's power to build His church cannot be stopped.

Outline

I. Stephen's Irresistible Power (6:8–7:53)

- A. Powerful signs (6:8)
- B. Powerful wisdom (6:9–14)
- C. Powerful appearance (6:15)
- D. Powerful message (7:1–50)
 1. Progress
 2. Expansion
 3. Rebellion
- E. Powerful accusation (7:51–53)

II. Sanhedrin's Incapable Power (7:54–8:3)

- A. Incapable of silencing Stephen (7:54–60)
- B. Incapable of stopping the gospel (8:1–3)

Memory Verse

"And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep"
(Acts 7:59, 60).

GETTING STARTED

Power Struggle

ASK: What do (or did) your children do when you would announce that you needed one of them to help you with a chore? Did they scatter, hoping not to get roped into a chore? (Q1)

ASK: What do you tend to do when you have the opportunity to sacrifice your time to help someone out? (Q2)

Stephen made himself available to God. He then fully relied on the Spirit to give him the power to do what God called him to do. His life is a testimony that the power of the Spirit in believers is greater than the powers in the world that oppose God.

Upon Reflection

ASK: When has something good come from a tragedy in your life?

ASK: Did you recognize God's hand working through the tragedy? Explain.

Today's lesson will focus on a tragic situation in the early church and the introduction of a main persecutor of the church. The end of the lesson will leave the church at a seemingly low point. But God's purpose for the church (Acts 1:8) would not be stopped. Tragedy would propel it toward His will in His way.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Stephen's Irresistible Power (6:8–7:53)

Luke used the life of Stephen to show how the power of the Spirit was irresistible. The spread of the gospel could not be stopped because of such great power.

A. Powerful signs (6:8)

The Holy Spirit indwelt and empowered Stephen. He did great signs and wonders among the people as a means of authenticating the gospel and its messenger, the church. The signs and wonders included healings as illustrations of what the gospel does to a person's soul. The miracles proved powerful when wed with the Spirit's ministry of convicting people of their sin. Hence the gospel spread rapidly.

While the Holy Spirit does not equip us to do miracles today, we do have the exact same power in us. We can be effective for what God has called us to do. The Spirit makes ministry success a given.

B. Powerful wisdom (6:9–14)

Because of the public display of the Spirit's power in him, Stephen soon encountered fierce Jewish opposition. This time conflict came from a synagogue rather than from the temple (6:9). The temple was associated with the Sadducees, while synagogues were associated with the Pharisees. Generally, the Pharisees

surpassed the priests in the use of the law. In addition, the Pharisees held to an oral tradition, which they believed was equal to the Scripture (Matt. 23:1–36; Mark 7:1–8). This oral tradition provided parameters for understanding and applying the written Scripture.

Scholars debate the exact identity of the *synagogue of the Libertines* (or Freedmen, Acts 6:9). However, many believe that the synagogue was made up of former slaves of the Roman Empire or their children. During that time, over two hundred different synagogues existed. Each synagogue tended to attract people with similar backgrounds and ideologies. Many Jewish families who had experienced liberation from slavery gathered together with others in the Freedmen synagogue. The members from this synagogue came from North Africa (Cyrene and Alexandria) and Asia Minor (Cilicia and Asia).

Those former slaves were especially sensitive to any religious or political activity that might alert the Roman Empire. Although the Romans typically allowed self-rule in many towns and cities, any civil disturbances could lead to additional Roman troop deployment and harsh rule. As a result, the Jewish Libertines viewed Stephen's ministry with great distrust.

READ: Acts 6:10. **ASK:** Why was it so hard for the members of the synagogue to resist Stephen? (Q3) *Because his wisdom and words were guided by the Holy Spirit.*

ASK: Given Stephen's submission to God's leading and his reliance on His power, would you expect his conflict with the Libertines to end in his death?

Explain. (Q4) *We are prone to think that being led by the Spirit means we will avoid tragedies. But as Stephen's ministry points out, that is not always the case.*

The Jewish leaders opposing Stephen could not prove him wrong, so they devised a plot against Stephen. They stirred up the people and brought him to the council, called the Sanhedrin (6:12). In the presence of the council, the Jewish leaders brought false witnesses against Stephen. They claimed Stephen blasphemed the temple and the law by teaching that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs Moses delivered to them.

The Jewish leaders attempted to counteract the signs and wonders Stephen publically performed. They wanted to discredit Stephen so they might silence his message. They were interested in preserving the status quo even if they had to use deception and outright lies to do so.

C. Powerful appearance (6:15)

READ: Acts 6:15. **ASK:** What further evidence of the Spirit's work in Stephen's life was evident to all those around him? (Q5) *His face was like the face of an angel's.*

ASK: What expression would be on your face if you were falsely accused? (Q6)

Stephen's face was not normal. He showed no anxiety, worry, or anger. Instead, he looked calm, pleasant, and content. The members of the Sanhedrin were mes-

merized by his face. They couldn't look away.

The change in Stephen's appearance was a testimony to the Spirit's power inside him. It was also a testimony that his message was authentic. Stephen's face reminded the Sanhedrin of how Moses's face glowed every time he returned from the presence of the Lord. The Sanhedrin mistakenly rested their power on the law of Moses. Stephen's connection with Moses was confusing to them. Stephen soon made the connection by way of a sermon.

D. Powerful message (7:1–50)

Stephen did not defend himself. However, he did address the Jewish charge that he had been speaking *blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law* (6:13). He used the opportunity to communicate three overall ideas to the Sanhedrin. These three ideas are interwoven much like a rope to form a strong defense, or apologetic, of the Christian faith.

1. Progress

BIBLE STUDY: Assign the following parts of Stephen's speech to groups of learners: Acts 7:2–8, 7:9–16, 7:17–43, and 7:47–50. Have them determine what part of Israel's history Stephen covered in their passage and report its significance to the rest of the class.

Progress and change characterize God's plan. In his address to the council, Stephen developed four points of progress in Israel's history: The call and life of Abraham (7:2–8), the life of Joseph (7:9–16), the deliverance through Moses (7:17–43), and the construction of the tabernacle (7:47–50).

Implicit in Stephen's address was the point that since God called Abraham prior to circumcision and prior to the giving of the law, then certainly the law cannot be considered as a permanent, completed fixture within God's plan.

Stephen's overall point is clear: Since God had changed so much in Israel's history, no one could say the law and temple were permanent. This was not a welcome message to a group of religious leaders whose continued power depended on the permanence of the law and temple.

2. Expansion

Stephen's second defense focused on the fact that God's blessings are not limited to the land of Israel and the temple. Stephen gave clear examples of God's blessing outside the land and temple. Abraham's call to salvation occurred outside the land (7:2–5). God's blessing of Moses with two sons occurred outside the land (7:29–34). God gave Israel the law outside the land (7:38), and Israel first built the tabernacle outside the land (7:44).

READ: Acts 7:47–50. **ASK:** What points did Stephen make in regard to the temple? (Q7) *The temple was never intended to serve as God's permanent dwelling place. Hence God is much greater than the temple ministry.*

3. Rebellion

Stephen also argued that Israel has always evidenced a pattern of opposition to God's plan. Stephen appealed to five examples of opposition: (1) Abraham

resisted God and stayed in Haran (7:2–4); (2) Joseph’s brothers sold Joseph into slavery (7:9); (3) The Israelites rejected Moses (7:23–29); (4) Israel rejected the living God and true worship by turning to idols (7:39–43); and (5) the purpose of the temple was overstated (7:47–50).

The Jewish people misunderstood the complete purpose of the temple. The temple was not God’s home or place of residence but, rather, a place to worship. Stephen argued that Jesus was God’s new temple. The old temple was no longer needed. Stephen was attempting to validate the new work of God called the church. The Jews had falsely concluded that Judaism was a final stage in God’s plan.

E. Powerful accusation (7:51–50)

READ: Acts 7:51–53.

After his theologically pointed address, Stephen accused his hearers. He referred to them as *stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears* and always resisting the Holy Spirit, just as their forefathers had (7:51). Stephen concluded that the Sanhedrin and their fathers were not true men of faith. To make such a strong statement was ironically powerful evidence that Stephen was not resisting the Holy Spirit like the Sanhedrin were. They knew nothing of God’s power. It was literally written all over their faces. They flashed wild expressions of anger while Stephen looked like an angel.

READ: Acts 7:52. **ASK:** What serious crimes was the Sanhedrin guilty of? (Q8)
Betrayal and murder.

Stephen’s message was brilliant. He could not have communicated a better defense of Christ’s church. Of course the credit for Stephen’s message goes to the Holy Spirit, the One guiding His words and empowering his delivery.

Stephen served with true power by submitting himself to God and letting the Spirit direct his life. By contrast, the Sanhedrin were power hungry. They sought to protect their positions of power by protecting the continuation of the law and temple. They did not recognize that protecting their power rendered them powerless against Christ as He executed His plan to build His church. Nothing they could do or say would stop Christ. In fact, they were about to play right into His hands by making what they thought was the ultimate power move.

II. Sanhedrin’s Incapable Power (7:54–8:3)

A. Incapable of silencing Stephen (7:54–60)

The Sanhedrin were *cut to the heart* (7:54). This phrase indicates a deep, painful wound. The phrase *gnashed on him with their teeth* indicates a brutal, violent hatred. Stephen confronted the Sanhedrin about their own blindness. Even Stephen’s last words were packed with theology that struck at the core of what the Sanhedrin believed. He said, *Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God* (7:56). This one sentence encapsulated three theological truths about Jesus, Whom the Sanhedrin had rejected: (1) Jesus rose from the dead and is still alive. (2) Jesus can stand in the full presence of

Under Jewish law, death could result from a number of violations, including adultery, excessive rebellion, and blasphemy. Under Roman law, however, the Jewish community needed special permission to execute anyone except for cases of temple desecration. Ironically, the scenario that the Freedmen Jews wanted to prevent—anarchy resulting in Roman repression—could have occurred when the mob stoned Stephen.

God's glory; therefore, Jesus must be equal to God. (3) Jesus is the Messiah. A truth indicated by the name *Son of Man* (cf. Dan. 7:10–14). Through this vision, Stephen articulated the full deity and messianic ministry of Jesus. The Sanhedrin rejected God Himself when they rejected Jesus.

READ: Acts 7:60. **ASK:** What did Stephen ask the Lord to do? (Q9) *Not to charge his attackers with their sin.*

ASK: How would you describe the power that was so obviously a part of Stephen's life? (Q10) *Perhaps abundant, amazing, and extraordinary.*

Stephen's request is a testimony to the power of God. God gave Stephen the grace both to face a brutal death without an ounce of concern for himself and to respond to his attackers with love and care. That is awesome power. That is Holy Spirit power!

Conversely, the Sanhedrin used all their power and authority to try to silence Stephen. But the more they tried, the louder his message became. They were completely incapable of shutting Stephen up. His testimony to the power of God still reverberates today.

ASK: What would you expect to happen to the church after Stephen's execution? (Q11) *Logic says the church would cower and die, but instead it was emboldened and alive.*

While in death the material part of a believer sleeps, the immaterial soul immediately enters into the presence of Christ. Stephen saw Christ just before and immediately after he died. In the end he was privileged to be used by God in such a powerful way.

B. Incapable of stopping the gospel (8:1–3)

After Stephen died, the Jews redoubled their efforts to stop the spread of the gospel. But the fire they lit by killing Stephen would soon rage out of control. The more they pursued the Christians, the farther the Christians spread the Word. Luke used the term *scattered* (*diesparesan*, 8:1) to describe the movement of the believers out of Jerusalem. The term *diesparesan* comes from the verb *speiro*, which means *to sow*; it is associated with sowing seed. Believers were scattered like seed. And as scattered seed grows, so also the scattered church grew.

Luke wrote, *Devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him* (8:2). The phrases *devout men* and *great lamentation* suggest intentional courage and piety by those men.

READ: Acts 8:2. **ASK:** How does this verse speak to the notion that God's power will always work to make our lives comfortable and easy? (Q12) *God's power in our lives sometimes works to enable us to face hardship, persecutions, and even death. We should not consider God's power as a safety net against problems and setbacks. God has much bigger plans than keeping us comfortable in this life.*

ASK: How should we respond to tragedies that come as a result of serving

Two facts suggest that the Jews went through the motions of a legal Jewish execution as outlined in Leviticus 24:14: (1) the Jewish leaders drove Stephen out of the city, and (2) witnesses observed the stoning. Furthermore, Luke's inclusion of Stephen's burial indicates an official Jewish execution. Jewish law forbade a legitimate funeral and burial for a legally condemned criminal. Luke implied that those who buried Stephen did so without official approval.

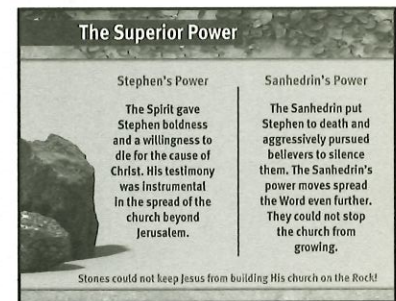
God? (Q13) *We must be careful not to become bitter against God or to doubt his holiness in any way. Instead we should turn to God for both comforting and enabling grace.*

Luke's use of the term *havoc* has the idea of *ravaging with intense fury* (8:3). The word describes wild beasts, such as lions and bears, as they tear away raw flesh or destroy vineyards. This term conveys a sense of intense persecution.

Saul led the hunt to kill Christians and was inadvertently instrumental in driving the Christians to spread the gospel to Samaria (8:1–3). We could say that Saul, who became the apostle Paul, did about as much to spread the gospel as an unbeliever as he did as a believer. For stopping the gospel is impossible. The more it is resisted and suppressed, the more it spreads. The Spirit's power is irresistible and Christ's plan to build His church will never be derailed.

RESOURCE: Display resource 7 to contrast the power in Stephen with the power of the Sanhedrin.

Stephen's ministry culminated in his death, the dispersion of believers, and Saul's appearance on the stage of church history. God was working out His plan for His church—a plan that He continues to work today.



MAKING IT PERSONAL

Power Struggle within

The Holy Spirit still works through believers to further the gospel and build the church. We as believers sometimes struggle in our hearts to submit to the Spirit. Sometimes we are afraid of what God might bring our way if we submit. Other times we are simply selfish and want the authority to call the shots in our lives.

ASK: Are you afraid God might ask you to make sacrifices for the spread of the Word? Explain. (Q14)

ASK: What shots do you want to call in your life? (Q15)

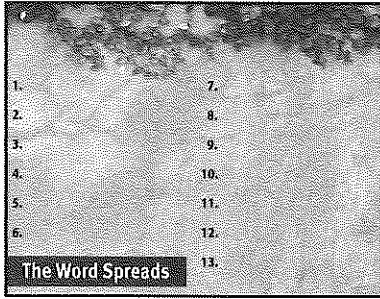
Encourage your learners to consider their internal power struggle with God. Challenge them to submit to God and to make themselves available for His use.

Power Struggle without

The Sanhedrin were incapable of doing anything that would stop Christ from building His church in the power of the Spirit. They could not silence Stephen, and they could not stop the spread of the gospel.

ASK: Do you recognize that the Spirit's power is greater than the power in the world? Why, or why not? (Q16)

ASK: How should that fact affect your church's ministry? (Q17)



The church that believes the power in them is greater than the power in the world will see God do great things through them.

Review Resource

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Recognize the Spirit's power is superior.