

# 8

## TELLING THE UNSAFE STORY

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### ACTS 7:1-8:3



The young church begins to experience intensified opposition, and one of its new leaders, Stephen, is executed by the religious authorities for charges of blasphemy. This event marks the beginning of more serious persecution. Yet even amid the rising opposition, God's power can be seen at work preparing for the gospel to scatter from Jerusalem out to the nations. Beginning with Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (6:1-7), the Christian gospel is proclaimed to an ever-widening circle – to Samaria (8:4-25), to an Ethiopian (8:26-40), to a Gentile God-fearer (10:1-48), and to the Gentiles of Antioch (11:19-30). God is setting the stage for Paul's ministry to "the ends of the earth" (1:8).

### STEPHEN TELLS THE STORY (7:1-16)

1. What highpoints in the story of the Jewish people does Stephen bring out in verses 1-16?
2. Read Genesis 12:1-3. What was God's promise to Abraham, and how did he fulfill this promise? (See: 7:5, 17, 30, 36)

### PROOF FROM THE PAST (7:17-53)

Much of Stephen's speech does not seem to be a direct answer to the charges made against him. Instead of a head-on rebuttal of the charges, Stephen has chosen to outflank them.

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and *come after me* cannot be my disciple."  
(Luke 14:27)

“Tell the story *this way*,” Stephen says, “and you will see what I am saying about Jesus and how it relates to everything else that matters.”

3. What pattern in Jewish history did Stephen trace through Joseph (7:9-16), Moses (7:17-39)<sup>1</sup>, and Jesus (7:51-52)? What was similar about these men and their experience with the Jews?
4. Stephen’s speech suddenly stops being a careful historical account of Israel’s history and turns abruptly to a sharp denunciation of his accusers. How does Stephen say his accusers are guilty of the very thing they accused him of in Acts 6:13-14?

## THE STONING & SAUL (7:54-8:3)

What interests people about Stephen is that he was the first Christian Martyr. But Luke’s main concern lies elsewhere. He emphasizes the vital role Stephen played in the development of the worldwide Christian mission through both his teaching and his death. Stephen’s martyrdom magnified the influence of his teaching. Not only did it draw out Saul of Tarsus and contribute to his conversion which led to his becoming the apostle to the Gentiles, but it was also the start of a great persecution which led to the scattering of the disciples “throughout Judea and Samaria” (8:1; 11:19).

5. Read Acts 7:54-60 and list three things you discover about Stephen’s character.

6. How would you like the way in which you follow Jesus to be influenced by Stephen’s example?

“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also *suffer for his sake.*”  
(Philippians 1:29)

<sup>1</sup>Stephen says that God gave the Israelites over to worship the **HOST OF HEAVEN**. The prophets charged Israel that, even during the wilderness years of the exodus, the people continued to worship pagan gods – “the host of heaven”. Presumably, these were astral deities of various kinds as well as “Molech” and “Rephan”. This quotation from Amos 5:25-27 is a damning indictment of a period that many Jews must have seen as the honeymoon period between God and Israel. It was in fact, says Amos (and Stephen), a time tainted by idolatry rather than true worship.