

Acts 6:8-8:3 - Felipe Chamy

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[0:00] Good morning, Holy Covenant Church. Thank you so much for having me here. It's a joy to be here with you. I know many faces, but I'm looking forward to getting to know many more.

Thank you also for praying for Neopolis. Keep praying for us as a team here, but also for our partners. We have partners in East Africa, Cuba right now, having really, really hard times. Part of what we see ourselves doing is walking alongside ministry in hard places. And we have seen that. So in Cuba, East Africa, hoping to go into Asia in the near future, etc. So keep praying for us as we just want to see the Lord's work grow, the spread of a word across all cities.

And let me pray for us again as we jump into this beautiful text. It's long, but it's, I hope, an amazing passage for us.

[1:08] Father, thank you once again for the joy of being able to spend time in your word freely.

With no risk of anyone stirring up a crowd to stone us. Help us see these words as words that come from you.

But not just to learn about them. But to actually live them through in our own lives, Father. Pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. In preparing for this sermon about Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church, my wife and I learned that June, in June, Christians celebrate the, what is it, the Day of the Martyr.

I didn't know that until this week. And I don't know if you knew that, but, sorry, June 29 marks the martyrdom of Paul, the Apostle Paul.

[2:27] And that's why this month the church celebrates the Day of the Martyr. And just as Paul, there's a man called, there was a man called Alan Gardiner.

The first Anglican missionary to Chile. I'm from Chile originally, and so is our family. This former British Navy captain turned into Anglican missionary who was left to starve in the Chilean Patagonia.

And years later, because of his martyrdom, people found his journal and a movement of missionaries and church planting was born. The South American Missionary Society was established because of this man's and his team's sacrifice.

This couple of his journal entries. Or, Or a prayer.

Grant, O Lord, that we may be instrumental in commencing this great and blessed work. But should thou see fit in thy providence to hedge up our way, and that we should even languish and die here, I beseech thee to raise up others and to send forth laborers into this harvest.

[4:16] Let it be seen for the manifestation of your glory and grace that nothing is too hard for you. Or we've heard of other stories.

Jim Elliot. Jim and other four missionaries were killed with spears in the Ecuadorian jungle.

Jim experienced this first hand.

But then, Elizabeth, his wife, returned to the very same jungle, the very same tribe, who had killed her husband.

She went there to share the gospel. And several of the natives there became Christians. Paul, Stephen, Alan Gardiner, Jim Elliot, are just a few examples.

[5:38] And what you've been hearing from the book of Acts in this series so far is waves of conflict and persecution. First, Peter and John are arrested for proclaiming the resurrected Jesus in chapter 4.

Then we read of Ananias and Sapphira threatening the integrity of the gospel in chapter 5. Soon after that, the apostles are seized again for proclaiming the gospel and performing signs and wonders.

Interesting, it is one of the Jewish leaders, Gamaliel, who advises the Jewish people and says, in the present case, I tell you, keep away from this man and let them alone for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.

But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God. So they took, at least at the end of chapter 5, Gamaliel's advice, but clearly, judging for, judging by our passage today, it did not take them long to disregard this advice.

[7:08] And at the beginning, at the beginning of chapter 6, another internal conflict threatens the integrity of the church, but the word of the Lord continues to increase.

Chapter 6, verse 7, the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The Lord upholds his church despite the persecution and conflict. And from verse 8 onwards in chapter 6, we have another of these waves of persecution.

And it seems like they've been escalating to the point that we now encounter Christianity's first martyr. The movement in this scene, as we read, is from Stephen leaving and serving Jesus to being rejected like Jesus and ultimately dying for Jesus.

In this movement from life, rejection, and suffering, I believe we find that pattern for our own lives. If you confess Jesus as Lord, you will face this pattern in one way or another.

[8:37] not all of us are called to martyrdom, not as Stephen was, but don't think for a moment that this pattern of ministry, rejection, and suffering is over.

Many Christians to this very day face rejection and opposition akin to the one Stephen faced. So this movement or pattern Luke sets for us an example that we may learn to live, suffer, and die like Jesus because Jesus lived, died, and suffered for you.

We live, suffer, and die like Jesus because Jesus lived, suffered, and died for us. What we have in this long text, it's not just an amazing sermon delivered by Stephen, these are the words of a dying man.

He's facing death and proclaims the gospel bravely. We see his seizing, arrest, defense, and execution.

And as you know from the previous passage, Stephen is one of the seven deacons chosen to serve the daily distribution so that the apostles may devote themselves to prayer and ministry and the ministry of the word.

[10:15] Stephen and the other deacons were men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom. And then Luke specifically highlights Stephen saying that he was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

So we will follow this passage again from the setting to the defense to a sort of reversal. Stephen turns the tables on them and accuses them of idolatry.

So first at the setting where we see Stephen leaving for Jesus. And what's interesting is that even though he was chosen to distribute the tables the first thing we find Stephen doing is teaching and performing signs and wonders.

Did you see that in verses 8 and 10? Luke again reminds us that Stephen was full of grace and power. He has just told us that he was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit but most importantly Luke's expression point us back to Acts 1:8.

Jesus said you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.

[11:37] And Stephen is another example of this promise being fulfilled through the book of Acts. In fact we see him teaching with such wisdom and spirit and that that's a spirit with a capital S that the religious leaders could not withstand it.

Verse 10 another link of Luke another of Luke's strategies to point back to Jesus' promise in Luke 21 we read for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

You will be delivered even up by you will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends and some of you they will put to death.

You will be hated Jesus says by all for my name's sake. So when we get to Act 6 it shouldn't surprise us to see opposition to Stephen.

Jesus warned them about this hatred and suffering even that they would suffer like Jesus did. Jesus was sorry Stephen was living for Jesus serving the church in the power of the Holy Spirit being

used by God.

[13:11] And it's not like the opposition came despite Stephen's character and ministry this opposition came because of Stephen's ministry.

Living for Jesus does not mean a life of peace and prosperity. Notice how this synagogue confronts Stephen from verse 11 onward.

They secretly instigated men who said we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God 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 and they set up false witnesses who said this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

They instigated steered up set up false witnesses charged him falsely. How is Stephen being opposed?

What does this scene remind you of? Let me refresh our minds. Matthew 26. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death but they found none though many false witnesses came forward at last two came forward and said this man Jesus said I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days and the high priest stood up and said have you no answer to make?

[15:00] What is it that this man testify against you? Stephen is living for Jesus and being confronted exactly like Jesus sometimes and more often than not godly living fullness of the spirit and wisdom does not necessarily lead to comfort and peace Christ likeness is not necessarily safe grace and wisdom may lead to opposition sometimes fullness of the spirit and wisdom is the hardest thing to do as Jesus said friends family neighbors colleagues they will not tolerate your wisdom first they will call you crazy they'll say that it's not that important that you should not take yourself so seriously you will risk turning them against you the question then is do you want to be like them and be accepted or be like

Jesus and be rejected Stephen chose the ladder and received God's approval look at verse 15 and gazing at him all who sat in the council saw that his face was shining like the face of an angel that's a rare expression but given the conversations about the law and Moses it's not hard to see how Stephen is compared to Moses just as Moses' face shone when he came down from the mountain with the tablets of the law so also Stephen's face appeared like an angel to those who gazed at him as one author puts it Moses' transformation coming back from Mount Sinai would be meaningful to the audience while perhaps not shining like

Moses something visible and holy is apparent to the members of the Sanhedrin Stephen is living for Jesus and is confirmed as a prophet like figure bringing the truth of God to an unbelieving crowd and as a prophetic figure he's about to deliver a prophetic message so we get into his defense chapter seven begins with the actual quote unquote trial and the high priest says are these things so is it true what they're saying is what he's asking some know that this is not a formal trial this is not a proper court they brought him by force charged him falsely and the high priest is asking a leading question back in verses 11 through 14

Stephen was charged on basically two things speaking against Moses and the law and against God and his holy place he doesn't directly address his accusations instead he this speech looks more like a sermon Stephen's defense speech becomes the prosecution opening statement the accused will turn the tables on them the Jews play a plus two card and Stephen plays a reverse card on them you can argue with me later if that's legal or not let's take a quick panoramic view of this sermon Stephen expounds a biblical theology of the temple throughout God's revelation from the promises to the patriarchs through Moses and the kings to the prophets with particular emphasis on the glory of

God look at how he begins his address in verse two brothers and fathers hear me the glory of God appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran Stephen gives us his main point right here the glory of God or literally the God of glory the God of glory appeared to Abraham long before he was even in the promised land long before there was a temple or even a tabernacle it's only after 400 years being away enslaved that they will come to that place and worship did you see that in verse 7 chapter 7 verse 7 but I will judge the nation that they serve said God and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place so

[20:42] Stephen purposely uses the language of this place whereas in the original it talks about this mountain because that's how his accusers were referring to the temple that he speaks words against this holy place and that Jesus will destroy this place and after focusing on Abraham

Stephen turns to Joseph and introduces a theme of rejection verses 9 through 16 the patriarchs jealous of Joseph sold him into Egypt but God was with him again no temple in a foreign land under a different ruler but God was with him not also that Stephen describes Joseph in verse 10 as one who God rescued out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before

Pharaoh literally God gave him grace and wisdom remember how Stephen was described full of wisdom full of grace look again he's comparing Stephen now with Joseph for us in his wisdom and rejection now from Joseph to Moses verses 17 onwards appropriately the longest section in this speech is on Moses and the law which is a big concern for the Jews note again that Moses was beautiful in God's sight verse 29 perhaps alluding to Stephen's angel like face again comparing him to Moses also look at verse 22 and Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was mighty in words and deeds the connections to Stephen could not be clearer wisdom words and wonders

Stephen is in the same line of prophetic ministry as Moses and Joseph before him just as they are alike in prophetic ministry they are also alike in rejection when Moses tried to reconcile two fellow Jews they answered back saying who made you ruler and judge over us the Jews inadvertently! disregarded Moses not realizing that God had in fact established him as ruler and redeemer over the nation Stephen himself notes this in verse 35 this Moses whom they rejected saying who made you ruler and judge this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush and what of the God of glory well right here appearing in a bush in the middle of a desert not Jerusalem not a temple not a tabernacle the Lord appeared to Moses as he had appeared to Abraham before him listen how the expectations are building up to Abraham God promised an offspring to Moses he promised a prophet like him verse 37 this is the Moses who said to the Israelites God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers this is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers and as the expectations for this descendant of Abraham the Mosaic prophet grew so did their rejection intensify look at verse 39 our fathers refused to obey him but thrust him aside and in their hearts they turned to Egypt saying to Aaron make for us God who will go before us as for this Moses who let us out from the land of Egypt we do not know what has become of him and they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands despite seeing the wonders and glory of [25:27] God during the exodus the people rejected God and Moses replaced them with idols rejoiced in the work of their hands as Paul will later write they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling immortal men and birds and animals and creeping things therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves Stephen describes the same thing here verse 42 but God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven that's a righteous judgment for those who despise the God of glory as they reject God God will reject them perhaps even today there are people some of you rejecting

God know that that is a serious thing to do you reject God God will reject you then and at a much faster pace Stephen summarizes 500 years of history in five verses verses 43 to 48 because perhaps he's a smart preacher knowing his time is up from Moses to Joshua to David and Solomon the bottom line and Stephen's conclusion to this biblical overview is in verses 48 and 49 yet the most high does not dwell in houses made by hands as the prophet says heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool what kind of house will you build for me says the

Lord or what is the place of my rest did not my hand make all these things that's what the Jews confronting Stephen were missing the God of glory and the glory of God is not confined to a physical place this is John Stott conclusion it is evident then from scripture itself that God's presence cannot be localized and that no building can confine him or inhibit him in his activities if he has any home on earth it is with the people that he lives in he has pledged himself by a solemn covenant to their God therefore according to his covenant promise wherever they are there he is also so Stephen having established having established this teaching throughout scriptures that the God of glory dwells in heaven and not in handmade temples Stephen now turns to them and brings the prophetic message to a close Stephen charges them as the appointed prophetic figure in this scene Stephen again addresses them in second person plural which is again a prophet like judgment concerning them he calls them stiff necked and uncircumcised of heart and denounces them saying you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did so do you 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 you who received the law as delivered by angels did not keep it you always resist the

Holy Spirit basically all he has been saying about the people rejecting God's promises and prophets throughout history also applies to his hearers their ancestors killed those who promised and announced the righteous one but they betrayed and murdered the righteous one himself Stephen declares in this statement that the promises to Abraham and the expectations of a Moses-like prophet were fulfilled in Christ but instead of embracing Jesus they rejected and killed him on a cross in murdering the righteous one they are continuing this pattern of opposition to God's purposes and messengers like fathers like sons in rejecting

[31:06] Jesus therefore it is Stephen's accusers rather than Stephen who are the ones guilty of being against Moses and against God they have rejected the one whom Moses and the law pointed and Stephen is no more than repeating what Peter already confessed in chapter three the God of Abraham the God of Isaac the God of Jacob the God of our fathers glorified his servant Jesus whom you delivered over and denied or rejected in the presence of Pilate and this is where the climax of our passage begins as they rejected Moses Joseph and Jesus they now reject and murder Stephen the pattern of life rejection and suffering in Stephen's ministry comes to an end the Jews did not receive

Stephen's remarks well verse 54 they were enraged they ground their teeth at him and then in verse 57 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 none of us have suffered to death we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding our blood but Stephen did and he was only the first after Jesus' sacrifice how are we to stand in the face of rejection and suffering what hope is there for us who might face death in the name of Jesus note the amazing contrast painted for us as they were enraged

Stephen was praying he gazed he contemplated he looked intently into heaven and what did he see two things first he sees the glory of God look at verse 55 full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God remember this whole passage is about the God of glory the issue all along is the dwelling of the God of glory and Stephen gets a glimpse of this dwelling place a preview of the joy set before him as the author of Hebrews writes Stephen considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of this world for he was looking to the reward same is true for us unless we treasure the God of glory and the glory of

God we will never be able to withstand and suffer for Jesus and what else did Stephen see he sees Jesus standing look again at verse 55 full of the Holy Spirit gazed into heaven saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he said behold I see the heavens opened and the son of man standing at the right hand of God notice that we read twice that Jesus was standing at the right hand of God this is the only time in all the New Testament that we find that we find Jesus standing all other occurrences of Jesus at the right hand of God

Jesus is sitting in ancient times the throne room was the courtroom the king has the authority to render judgment in the throne room that's what Stephen is seeing gazing into heaven the real courtroom with the real king judging the final authority is not in the religious leaders the fate of Stephen is not in the hands of his persecutors his fate is in the hands of the most high who is dwelling who is in his dwelling place but why was Jesus standing because if the father is a judge Jesus stands as Stephen's mediator his defendant his advocate his counselor again his fate is in the hand of the one who gave his own life who was rejected and suffered for his people on the cross and is now living and standing and interceding for his people even today standing at the right hand of God

[37:17] Stephen lived and served like Jesus was rejected just as a prophet and Jesus were rejected and now dies for Jesus and like Jesus is falsely accused an innocent man is condemned by fault witnesses taken out of the city not crucified but tortured by a bogus court in a fake trial not only that just as Jesus did on the cross Stephen prays to Jesus asking him to receive him he prays for the forgiveness of those who are killing him Lord do not hold this sin against them all these images and patterns are images the suffering of

Jesus in the life of Stephen but just imagine how powerful it is to suffer and before our persecutors to love them back we too will suffer those who follow in his steps will suffer as Jesus suffered if we are full of wisdom the spirit and power if we proclaim the gospel we will be rejected and at some point we will have hard times doing that but Jesus himself stands for us so that we may stand firm

for him our faith is in the hands of him who died for us to love suffer and die for Jesus because Jesus lived suffered and died for us that's a fuel of missions the fuel for evangelism in the next few verses of chapter 8 Luke introduces us to a man called Saul aka Paul approving Stephen's execution undoubtedly Stephen's life suffering and death for Jesus left a profound mark on Paul's heart most probably it was Paul himself who related these things to Luke as he wrote this book great persecution against the church is exactly what dispersed the church throughout Judea and Samaria this is not an accident this is exactly what Jesus had promised you will receive my spirit and be my witnesses in

Judea Samaria and to the ends of the earth Chinese pastor Zam in the morning pastor Gao Jingjia and his wife Gen Peng were hiding at a friend's house in Beijing they had been living like fugitives because they had gathered with other believers to worship Jesus outside of government approved churches the knock came and they moved quietly downstairs their son was not six years old yet was sleeping upstairs they didn't want to wake him up they knew what this was they knew their time was up Gao was taken and is still today sitting in a detention center in

Guangxi province in the southern China he was charged with illegal use of information networks shorthand for preaching the gospel online his wife gang fled the country with their son they are now in Thailand not able to return to China without risking arrest uncertain whether Thailand will eventually comply with Beijing's deportations request waiting praying wondering in her own words sometimes I wonder if this is real not just Pastor Gao!

[42:17] 18 pastors from this one house church Zion church in China have been formally arrested in a crackdown the largest since 2018 they face lengthy prison sentences more than 100 believers detained in one single raid Sean Long a friend of mine from the Torah program at Whedon College he is now serving as Zion's interim leader from Wheaton carrying the weight of a church whose shepherd was imprisoned in a country where gathering in Jesus' name can cost you everything before the arrest Sean sat down with the church's founder pastor Gene Mingry and asked him directly whether he had considered the possibility that he might soon be taken

Mingry's answer to Sean's question was hallelujah a new wave of revival will follow pastor gau pastor Mingry alan gardiner jim elliott steven paul all just a few examples all praying for us that we would be willing to live suffer and die for Jesus leaving for Jesus might spark opposition but suffering for Christ fuels the mission a Tertullian wrote we multiply whenever we are cut down by you he wrote to the Romans the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church men and women of whom the world was not worthy but men and women who realized that the glory of God and the God of glory is worthy would you join them would you look into heaven and see Jesus standing for you that we might stand for him let me pray father thank you for sending Jesus to die on a cross coming back to life as our mediator standing for us help us being full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom to stand for you Jesus name we pray amen