

# 04

## SESSION FOUR

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# The First Martyr of the Church

### SESSION SUMMARY

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God's Holy Spirit empowers Christ-followers to endure suffering for His sake. Whether that suffering takes the form of false accusations, death, or other variations, our faithful witness in the midst of suffering is a testimony to Jesus Christ—the One who came to fulfill the law and the prophets and to save us from our sin. When we suffer in faith, we are following in the footsteps of our Savior and confirming His worth above all things, even our very lives.

### SCRIPTURE

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Acts 6:8-15; 7:44-60

# THE POINT

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**God calls us to make much of Jesus, even when we are persecuted.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

Have you ever heard the phrase “delayed gratification”? It is commonly understood to be the conscious choice to avoid one pleasurable thing because avoiding it will lead to greater pleasure in the long run. For example, I may stay in school for a better paying future job even though staying may not be the most fun thing to do. I may avoid having the extra piece of cheesecake for the delayed gratification of not gaining the weight later.

- **What are some additional examples of delayed gratification? How have you personally experienced it?**

In one sense, Christians operate according to this idea of delayed gratification, especially when it comes to persecution. Persecution can be defined as “any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one’s identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith.”<sup>1</sup> Websites devoted to missions tell you that some of these persecutions result in “beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation...imprisonment, slavery”<sup>2</sup> just to name a few.

Why would someone endure all of that? What stops them from simply denying their faith and changing their lifestyles to avoid persecution? Answer: Delayed gratification in knowing that the sufferings of this age are both light and momentary compared to the “eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17) awaiting those who remain steadfast in their belief in Christ.

### Option 2

Today, we commonly hear the word *persecution*, particularly concerning the church. *Persecution* essentially means *someone causes harm or suffering for others because of their beliefs*. Sometimes persecution is only in word or attitude, but sometimes persecution includes being beaten, tortured, or even killed.

- **What do you usually think of when you hear the word *persecution*?**

Tell students that the top ten countries where Christians are persecuted are: North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Eritrea.<sup>3</sup> If you can find a map of these countries to use as a reference, display that at the front of the room. Before you dig into today’s session, spend some time praying for the Christians in these countries as they endure persecution, that they would stand strong, continue to live for Christ, and help others know Him.

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**God calls us to make much of Jesus, even when we are persecuted.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **Holy Spirit:** third Person of the Trinity
- **Stephen:** recognized as the first martyr of the early church who was stoned to death because he preached the gospel and because of the good deeds he performed

## PLOT

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As the number of disciples grew, the Twelve set apart seven godly men to make sure the widows in the church would be cared for. One of the seven was a man named Stephen, who was recognized for his faith and being filled with the Spirit (Acts 6:5). Stephen performed signs and wonders among the people and showed the Sanhedrin how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. When the leaders heard his testimony, they were outraged. They dragged him outside of the city and stoned him to death.

## TIMELINE

### THE FIRST MARTYR

*Stephen reflects Jesus in his life and his death.*

### THE ETHIOPIAN TRAVELER

*Philip faithfully shares the message of the gospel.*

### PETER VISITS CORNELIUS

*The gospel goes to the Gentiles.*

## STEPHEN FACED HIS ACCUSERS

One of the earliest and most powerful stories of Christians staring down suffering and death comes from Acts 6–7, where a disciple named Stephen was persecuted for his testimony about Jesus. Look how the story begins:

**8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 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, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:8-15)**

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, received a reputation for performing signs and wonders while testifying to the Jews about who Jesus is. As a result, he attracted the attention of men who wanted to argue with him. They challenged him and hoped to stop his testimony, but because he was wise and filled with the Spirit of God, their efforts fell short.

This is a consistent theme in the Book of Acts: ordinary men like Stephen and Peter taking up debates with well-educated clergy and winning. Their unfair advantage in these debates was twofold. First, they were on the side of the truth (which makes winning any debate much easier). Second, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, which gave them supernatural wisdom in what to say and when.

As the story went on, Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin, a body of religious leaders who oversaw the Jewish community. There, his opponents resorted to low and dirty tactics, lying about what Stephen had been preaching and teaching.

- **When has someone lied about something you said or did in order to get you in trouble? How did the false witnesses do the same to Stephen?**  
(p. 34, PSG)

## STEPHEN SPOKE TO HIS ACCUSERS

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Eventually, they called on Stephen to speak. When he spoke throughout Acts 7, he delivered a clear testimony that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the very book they accused him of blaspheming.

**<sup>44</sup> “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him. <sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,**

**<sup>49</sup> “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? <sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?”**

**<sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> 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, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (Acts 7:44-53)**

Stephen’s sermon might sound a little odd us. In order to understand how powerful this message was and why the reaction against it was so strong, we need to keep two things in mind as we read Stephen’s words.

First, to Stephen’s Jewish audience, nothing on earth was as sacred as the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was the high point of all of Jewish history. Their exclusive claim as Jews was that the one true God dwelled with Israel. First, He dwelled with them when they wandered in the desert, manifesting Himself in the tabernacle they carried through the wilderness. After they conquered the promised land, Solomon commissioned a temple to be built in Jerusalem.

Second, Israel was unfaithful to their covenant with God. They turned to the gods and idols of their neighbors. Eventually, they were conquered, the temple was destroyed, and the nation was crushed. For generations, the temple was no more than rubble. The temple’s reconstruction came with a revival. Its presence in Jerusalem was seen as a sign that God would be coming back to Israel and that the Israelites would one day be free from the tyranny of the nations.

When Stephen spoke about where God dwelled, the audience had this history of the temple in mind. God had never been confined to these dwelling places, which no one in Israel disputed, but Stephen also told them that they were missing the point of what was happening in Israel right then. God had come back to Israel, but He wasn’t manifesting Himself in the temple; He was there in flesh and blood. The Righteous One had come, and they had killed Him.

## STEPHEN GLORIFIED CHRIST IN HIS DEATH

The response to Stephen's words was swift and terrible.

**54 When they heard these things, they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 He said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. 58 They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he called out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And after saying this, he died. (Acts 7:54-60)**

It is important to notice how God was with Stephen during the final moments in his life. We often hear stories of Christians enduring beatings, torture, and the threat of death while refusing to deny their faith. We might wonder how someone would be able to keep faith under such pressure. It would be tempting to deny our faith to save ourselves. Wouldn't God forgive us if we did?

Stephen may have felt that immense pressure but didn't cave, and Scripture tells us why: He was full of the Holy Spirit. As the pressure of persecution increased in intensity, so did God's sustaining provision—Stephen looked into heaven and saw God's glory with Jesus standing at God's right hand. Stephen couldn't deny Jesus' lordship in that moment because he saw it clearly, so he cried out in joy and worship, even as the mob raged against him.

A common principle throughout the Scriptures is also at work here: God supplies all we need to obey and follow Him. He provided a ram to Abraham in order to spare Isaac; He gave manna to the nation of Israel as they wandered the desert; He gave us Jesus as an atoning sacrifice to pay for our sins; and here, in a moment of acute suffering and persecution, He gave the power and vision to sustain Stephen. When suffering and trials come into our lives, we can be confident God will supply the strength, support, and encouragement we need to remain faithful.

- **What stands out about Stephen's final words in these verses? Why?**  
(p. 36, PSG)

## TIMELINE

### FROM PERSECUTOR TO PREACHER

*The opposition leader, Paul, is forever changed when he encounters the risen Christ.*

### EARLY MISSIONARIES

*Paul and Barnabas set out to plant churches among the nations.*

### CHRIST ALONE

*Salvation comes by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.*

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Life After Death (p. 36, PSG)

*The Bible teaches that when a Christian dies, he or she immediately is with the Lord (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8). This is what some people call an intermediate state, given that the final state for believers takes place at the future resurrection (Rev. 6:10-11). For those who are not in Christ, life after death results in being separated from Christ in a state of suffering, even though future judgment remains (Luke 16:19-31).*

## CHRIST CONNECTION

The church has a rich history, filled with stories of Christians who were given boldness by the Spirit to face suffering and death while testifying to Jesus. Missionaries have died while sharing the gospel with hostile people. Countless martyrs all over the world and through the years have faced torture and death for their faith in the risen Savior.

In almost every case, these tragedies don't slow down the spread of the gospel message or end with the gospel being silenced. In fact, it's quite the opposite. The persecution of the church and its martyrs is like pruning a plant—the church grows stronger, richer, and more deeply rooted as a result. This pattern can be traced all the way back to the first Christians, beginning with Stephen.

In his death as the first martyr, Stephen followed in the footsteps of his Savior. Both Jesus and Stephen were falsely accused and charged with blasphemy. Both Jesus and Stephen prayed for their executioners. Both Jesus and Stephen entrusted their spirits to God as they died. As a follower of Jesus Christ, Stephen reflected his Master in life and death.

# YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some stories you've heard of Christians suffering for their faith? How have those stories influenced your faith?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can the church learn from the suffering and persecution of saints and martyrs who have gone before us?** *Their example encourages us in our own faith, reminding us that life is short and we should live in light of eternity.*
- **How can looking to Jesus help us keep our motives in check when we need to defend our faith?** *Jesus' own example of humility can serve as a great reminder for us when we feel the prideful urge to win an argument instead of lovingly defending the faith with the goal of helping others believe.*
- **How have you experienced the Holy Spirit sustaining your faith in the midst of trials?** *Answers will vary.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*

# YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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As the culture around us becomes more hostile to Christianity and a Christian worldview, we shouldn't be surprised if we experience hostility similar to Stephen's. Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemy against the temple. In our case, it's more likely that we'll be accused of hateful speech, bias, and intolerance, simply because we hold to biblical beliefs about the value of human life, the meaning of marriage, and the origins of sexuality.

- **How have you seen Christians be falsely accused?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What role does the Holy Spirit play in our response to opposition?** *Among other things, the Holy Spirit gives us courage, boldness, and an eternal perspective during opposition.*



## HEART

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Stephen didn't let the fact that he was right make him judgmental or arrogant in his speech. He may have had some harsh rebukes for the religious leaders, but as he died, he cried out for God not to hold their actions against them. Like Jesus, he asked for mercy for his persecutors. His actions were not motivated by pride—an eagerness to be right and to prove his rightness—but by love. He wanted them to believe in Jesus, not simply to believe him. Preaching, evangelizing, and defending the faith must come from a heart of love and compassion for the lost, not from an ego that simply wants to win.

- **Why do you think people respond better to a humble person than an arrogant one?** *Humility is attractive and desirable to people, while arrogance is generally seen as unfavorable.*
- **What are some ways our inner motives of love can be outwardly demonstrated?** *We won't shy away from sharing the truth in a loving manner or loving others with our deeds and actions instead of just our words, and so on.*



## HANDS

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Spirit-filled Christians find themselves doing many strange and wonderful things. Perhaps nothing is so strange and powerful as the fearlessness with which they can face suffering and death. A supernatural strength sustains them, and it's just as powerful when they face a mob as when they face cancer. Empowered by the Spirit and looking with hope to Jesus, we have a confidence that overshadows the power of death (1 Cor. 15:51-58). Stephen died at the hands of persecutors, but he died with confidence because Jesus is alive, the grave is defeated, and we have nothing to fear in this world.

- **How have you seen faithful suffering encourage believers?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How have you seen suffering open doors to sharing the gospel with unbelievers?** *Answers will vary.*

## ► ADDITIONAL INFO

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### LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items #7 and #8. Item #7 contains a brief biographical sketch of several Christian martyrs throughout the centuries. Item #8 displays an informational map highlighting locations around the globe where persecution takes place today.

### SOURCES

1. “Christian Persecution,” *OpenDoors*, accessed May 22, 2017, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.
2. Ibid.
3. “World Watch List,” *OpenDoors*, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18](http://lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at  
**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit  
**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**