



The Scrolls

Helping **CENTRAL BIBLE CHURCH** Families Belong, Become and Go Beyond V22 N5 February 2, 2020

REMEMBERSHIP

“reMEMBER Extremity”

Acts 7:54-8:4

THIS WEEK'S CORE COMPETENCY

Faithfulness

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

“Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.”

Proverbs 3:3-4



What does faithfulness look like?

Someone is “faithful” who is “firm in adherence to promises or in observance of duty,” in other words, someone who is “conscientious,” as in a “faithful employee” (www.m-w.com, s.v., “faithful”) or better yet, a “faithful Christian.” In some contexts, faithfulness connotes endurance in the face of adversity or persistence in the face of opposition. Take Stephen for example. Following his selection “to wait on tables” – to wit, to assume responsibility along with six other men for the distribution of food to the church’s needy widows (Ac 6:5) – he also performed “great wonders and signs” as he proclaimed the word about Jesus (v. 8).

Opponents, who were members of the “Synagogue of Freedmen” (v. 9), comprised of zealous Hellenistic Jews, some of whom had been slaves, challenged his message, accusing him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (v. 11). On the identification of this synagogue, one commentator explains: “Many different synagogues existed in Jerusalem at this time (cf. 24:12). The Talmud said there were 390 of them before the Romans destroyed the city. Other rabbinic sources set the number at 460 and 480, but these may be exaggerations. Like local churches today, they tended to attract people with similar backgrounds and preferences. Many families, that had experienced liberation from some kind of slavery or servitude, evidently populated the ‘Synagogue of the Freedmen’” (Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Acts,” 2020 ed., 156, plano-biblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/acts.pdf).

Perhaps these “freedmen” misunderstood Stephen’s use of Jesus’ words, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (Jn 2:19), or of Jesus’ teaching regarding the destruction of the temple (Mt 24:2). In any case, they charged him with “speaking against this holy place and against the law” (v. 13). Appearing before the Sanhedrin, he defended

himself by proving that his accusers were just like their ancestors who always resisted the Holy Spirit (7:1-53). Enraged by his words, his jurors took him outside the city of Jerusalem and stoned him, proving himself faithful to the message about Jesus to the very end. His final words to his executioners echoed the final words of Jesus, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (v. 60; cf., Lk 23:34). In the face of ongoing opposition, at any point throughout the time his arrest and trial he could have recanted what he declared to be true about Jesus, but he did not. In fact, he only doubled down on his message (7:1-53).

While Stephen’s is an extreme example of faithfulness, we all face the same challenge – persisting in the proclamation and practice of our Christian faith in challenging times. When the going gets tough, do we keep on going? Are we loyal to Christ in good times and in bad? Or do we drift away? Lots of discouraging things can threaten our Christian walk with God: opposition to our testimony inside and outside of our families, unexpected hardships and financial reversals, an untimely serious illness or loss of a loved one. Such things can cause us to pull back from enthusiastically following Christ.

I knew a newly married man once, who together with his bride went off to seminary for further ministry training. During his first semester, he found out he had cancer. Walking back to campus after an unscheduled visit to his doctor during exam week and with the diagnosis still ringing in his ears, he kept repeating to himself, “If I had a son, I wouldn’t treat him like this!” After telling his bride the discouraging news, they could have packed up and returned home. After all, they thought they were doing what the Lord wanted, and what did they get for it? Cancer! But by God’s grace alone, they persisted, and they were faithful.

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

After reading the text, practice your Observation skills by noting the following:

- Circle "Sanhedrin" in v. 54.
- Circle "this" in v. 54.
- Circle "furious" in v. 54.
- Bracket "full of the Holy Spirit" in v. 55.
- Underline "the glory of God" v. 55.
- Bracket "Son of Man" in v. 56.
- Bracket "standing at the right hand of God" in v. 56.
- Circle "stone" in v. 58.
- Circle "the witnesses" in v. 58.
- In the margin next to v. 59 write, "see Lk 23:46."
- In the margin next to v. 60 write, "see Lk 23:34."
- Highlight "all except the apostles" in 8:1.
- In the margin next to 8:4 write, "see Ac 11:19-21."

What one word would you use to describe the TONE of this passage? (i.e., stern, joyful, cautious, etc.)

What word or idea stands out to you in this passage?

What one thing you do not understand in this passage?

Try to summarize the THEME of this passage in one word. If you were going to describe these verses, you might say, "This text is about _____."



DIG DEEPER

Answer the questions to help you apply the passage and prepare for discussion

1. The martyrdom of Stephen interrupted his defense before the Sanhedrin. What was the charge against him, and who brought it? (See 6:8-15.)

2. To what does “this” refer in verse 54?

3. When Stephen looked up into heaven, did he see God? Explain.

4. What do you infer from *where* Stephen saw Jesus standing? (See Lk 22:67-69; cf., Ac 2:32-36.)

5. Jesus is “standing” rather than seated. Does it matter? Explain.

6. To what does “this” refer in verse 57? And why does “this” trigger such a violent response?

7. Stephen’s statements in verse 59 and in verse 60 sound familiar. How so?

8. Does 8:1 mean that no disciples but the apostles were left in Jerusalem after persecution broke out? Explain.

9. Explain how the message about Jesus spread to Samaria and Judea (v. 4; cf., Ac 1:8).

10. **Discussion:** Not only the faithfulness of Stephen but also the faithfulness of others contributed to the spread of the gospel to Samaria and throughout Judea. Talk about it.

Commentary On The Text

The story of Stephen's arrest and trial marks a twofold turning point in Acts. In the first place, it marks the beginning of "great persecution" against the church in Jerusalem (8:1), and in the second place, it marks the introduction and spread of the message about Jesus into and throughout Samaria and Judea (vv. 4-5, 26, 40). One commentator provides this helpful overview: "The narrative about Stephen constitutes a major turning point in Acts. It ends a series of three trials before the Sanhedrin. The first ended in a warning (4:21), and the second in a flogging (5:40), and Stephen's in his death. The Stephen episode is the culmination in the witness to the Jews of Jerusalem, which has been the major subject of Acts 2-5. To this point a growing opposition toward the Christians from the Jewish leaders had been thwarted by the favor of the people toward the young movement. Then the picture changed. The people joined in the resistance to Stephen. With the death of Stephen and the dispersal of his fellow Hellenists, the focus would not longer be on Jerusalem but on Samaria and all of Palestine and, finally, with Paul on the further reaches of the Romans Empire" (John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 183).

Of course, there would have been no trial before the Sanhedrin had there been no charges. These are found in Acts 6:13, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." Ironically, the charges were most probably brought against Stephen by Hellenistic Jews like himself, not Hebraic Jews. One might think that Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews would be more tolerant and less nationalistic than their Hebraic brothers, but that was not the case. The same commentator explains: "The Jews who came from the Diaspora were usually highly nationalistic Jews, having left their homes in the dispersion to migrate to the holy city, the temple city. They were highly zealous for both law and temple. B. Reicke, with considerable justification, labels them 'Zionists.' They would not at all have been open to Stephen's prophetic critique of their religion and worship" (Polhill, 185).

Stephen's harsh accusations against the Jews found near the end of his defense trigger a violent

reaction by the Sanhedrin that brings the trial to an abrupt end. Stephen calls the Jews a "stiff-necked people" (v. 51), who "always resist the Holy Spirit" (v. 51), and accuses them of murdering the "coming righteous one" (v. 52). "You have received the law," he says, "but have not obeyed it" (v. 53). His accusations infuriate the court and bring the hearing to an abrupt close.

While they are gnashing their teeth at him, he is looking up into heaven where he sees God's glory and Jesus standing at God's right hand. When he refers to seeing the "Son of Man," they take matters into their own hands. As one writer says: "Only a few years before, Jesus had stood before this same tribunal and had been condemned for answering affirmatively the high priest's question as to his being Israel's Messiah and for saying of himself: 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of Heaven' (Mark 14:62). Now Stephen was saying, in effect, that his vision confirmed Jesus' claim and condemned the council for having rejected him. Unless the council members were prepared to repent and admit their awful error, they had no option but to find Stephen also guilty of blasphemy" (Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 349). The mob drags Stephen outside the city where they stone him — with Saul's approval.

Immediately, great persecution breaks out against the "church in Jerusalem" (8:1). For the most part, Hellenistic Jewish believers are the ones persecuted, and Hellenistic Jews are their persecutors, although it is Saul, persecution personified, who is their champion. He goes "from house to house" (v. 3), which probably means he breaks into one house church assembly after another, dragging men and women off to prison in an attempt to "destroy" the church. The Greek word translated "destroy" (*lymainō*) is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament with reference to "wild beasts such as lions, bears, and leopards tearing at raw flesh" (Polhill, 212). But ironically, Saul's efforts do not have the desired effect. Rather than contract numerically, the church expands numerically and geographically as "those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (v. 4). Scattered like seed, their message about Jesus takes root in the lives of many in Samaria and throughout Judea.

Word Studies/Notes

v. 54 *the Sanhedrin* “The high court of the Jews. In NT times it was made up of three kinds of members: chief priests, elders and teachers of the law. Its total membership numbered 71, including the high priest, who was presiding officer (see note on Ac 5:21). Under Roman jurisdiction the Sanhedrin was given a great deal of authority, but it could not impose capital punishment (see Mt 27:2; Jn 18:31 and notes)” (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Mk 14:55). “It is not easy to determine whether the stoning of Stephen was only the result of mob action or whether it was carried out by the Sanhedrin in excess of its jurisdiction . . . But if—as we believe—Stephen’s martyrdom occurred sometime in the mid-thirties and during the final years of Pilate’s governorship over Judea (a.d. 26-36), and if—as we have argued—the Pharisees were not prepared to come to his defense in the council, conditions may well have been at a stage where the Sanhedrin felt free to overstep its legal authority” (Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 351-52). On the other hand, “There is no legal process here. The Sanhedrin may have been gathering evidence against Stephen, but the angry crowd took the verdict into their own hands when Stephen saw Jesus as the Son of Man” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 310).

v. 54 *furious* Lit., “were cut to the quick” (see 5:33; cf., “cut to the heart” 2:37). “‘Cut to the quick’ is a figure of speech that describes being painfully wounded. Stephen’s charge of always resisting God’s Spirit convicted and offended the members of the Sanhedrin. They retaliated fiercely. ‘Gnashing (grinding) their teeth’ (as a sign of anger) pictures brutal antagonism” (Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Acts,” 2020 ed., 181, planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/acts.pdf).

v. 55 *full of the Holy Spirit* Cf., Ac 6:5. To be “full of” something is to be characterized by it or in this case, be controlled by it (cf., Eph 5:18).

v. 55 *glory of God* Cf., Lk 2:9. “No one has seen God at any time” (Jn 1:18). Stephen did not see God directly, but he saw God’s “glory,” namely, God’s brightness, the manifestation his presence (Lk 2:9; Rev 21:11, 23). “The Hebrew OT and the LXX viewed ‘the glory of God’ (Heb. *kəbôd* YHWH, Gr. *doxa theou*) as ‘the manifestation or revelation of the divine nature’ and as even ‘the divine mode of being’ itself (cf. TDNT, 2:233-47)” (Longenecker, 350).

v. 56 *Son of Man* Cf., Da 7:13.
“Stephen announced his vision and described Jesus

as the ‘Son of Man,’ this being the only time after His ascension that someone used this title of Jesus in speaking of Him (cf. Rev. 1:13 and 14:14 where ‘Son of Man’ was used of Him in writing). This was a title of the Messiah used by Daniel that implied the universal aspect of His rule (Dan. 7:13-14). Only Jesus used this title of Himself in the Gospels. It was His favorite designation of Himself. He had used it of Himself when He stood before the Sanhedrin not many weeks earlier (Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Stephen was virtually saying that his vision confirmed Jesus’ claim to be the Son of Man” (Constable, 183).

V. 56 *standing . . . God* See Lk 22:69; cf., Mk 14:62; Mt 26:64. “The standing position may thus depict the exalted Christ in his role of judge. If so, Stephen’s vision not only confirmed his testimony, but it showed Christ rising to render judgement on his accusers” (Polhill, 208).

v. 58 *stone* “The picture of Stephen’s stoning does not fit what is known of Jewish execution by stoning. According to Mishna, *Sanhedrin* 6:1-6, stoning took place outside the city and the actual stoning was done by those who had witnessed against the condemned person . . . In formal stoning victims were stripped and pushed over a cliff ten- to twelve-feet high. They were then rolled over on their chests, and the first witness pushed a boulder (as large a stone as he could manage) from the cliff above. In the unlikely event the victim survived this first smashing, the second witness was to roll a second boulder from above. The picture of Stephen’s stoning is radically different . . . The picture in Acts is of an angry mob pelting Stephen with stones” (Polhill, 209).

8:1 *all . . . apostles* Luke sometimes uses “all” to mean many as he does here. “That a community of believers is still present in Jerusalem (8:26; 9:26, 28, 31; 11:22) means that Luke is using hyperbole here and that one wing of the church likely feel the most pressure” (Bock, 318). “We should probably understand the persecution recorded here as directed primarily against the Hellenistic Christians of Jerusalem rather than chiefly against the whole church” (Longenecker, 353).

Other Texts to Consider

Galatians 1:13

“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.”



APPLY THE TEXT

CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE TEXT

Remain faithful to the Lord and to the message about him because God will use your faithfulness to expand the outreach and ministry of the church.

CENTRAL MESSAGE FOR YOUR LIFE

(Rewrite the Central Message above to personally apply to your own life)



3 LIVING QUESTIONS

The “Living Questions” are simple questions we may ask of any text in order to apply the Bible to our life. Answer the questions below as personally as you can.

1. What does this passage teach me about God?
2. What does this passage teach me about myself?
3. What does this passage lead me to do?



FAMILY TALK

Even on our worst days we aren't likely to experience the kind of persecution some of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world deal with day after day. I confess I take for granted just how fortunate I am to own several Bibles. What's more, I have access to technology that makes 2,027 versions of the Bible available in 1,375 languages with just a few clicks. This religious freedom isn't a reality to all Christians around the globe. In countries such as North Korea or Somalia, believers could be imprisoned, tortured, or even killed for possessing a Bible. Our first reaction is typically to shield our children from this and other kinds of persecution. However, we would be wise in responding by teaching our children about the persecuted church bearing developmental consideration. I encourage you to be proactive by introducing your children to stories about missionaries such as Corrie ten Boom, Amy Carmichael, or Jim Elliot. Empower your kids by encouraging them to pray for missionaries in a specific country known for persecution. Though we might not be physically near other believers, we can care for our Christian family through prayer. Remind them of God's great love for His people. As in the case with Stephen in Acts 7, God doesn't always intervene; however, He is a source of hope and promises to be with us always (Matt 28:20). This reality is a difficult subject to cover with your children, but don't miss out on the opportunity to see their hearts grow for God and His people. We are praying for you!

What Does The Bible Say?

What does the Bible say? Acts 7:54-8:4

1. What was Stephen full of?
2. What did Stephen pray?
3. What happened to the apostles?

What Do You Think?

What good came from everybody but the apostles being scattered?

What Do You Do?

Make two bookmarks to help remind you to pray for suffering Christians. Keep one for yourself and give one away to a friend that joins you in prayer.

CORE COMPETENCY: Faithfulness

I am loyal with God and others so they know they can count on me.

MEMORY VERSE: Romans 12:15

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

KidPIX COUPON

Earn 1 KidPIX Token by completing the CENTRAL Kids Bible Study on this page and another token by memorizing and reciting the memory verse for this week.

Questions: kids@wearecentral.org

- _____ I completed my Bible Study
- _____ I memorized this week's verse
- _____ I brought my Bible to church
- _____ I brought a friend



CHILD'S NAME _____

GRADE _____

PARENT SIGNATURE _____

OUR CORE COMPETENCIES

CENTRAL BELIEFS

Authority of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Church (Ephesians 4:15-16)
I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Eternity (John 14:1-4)
I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

The Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9)
I believe the Holy Spirit convicts, calls, converts and changes me as a child of God.

Humanity (John 3:16)
I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Identity in Christ (John 1:12)
I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-4)
I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became man, died for sinners and rose from the dead.

Life Purpose (Acts 20:24)
I believe I am a steward of God's resources and have been redeemed to participate in His Kingdom purposes for His glory.

Personal God (Psalm 121:1-2)
I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Salvation by Grace (Ephesians 2:8-9)
I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.



CENTRAL VIRTUES

Love (1 John 4:10-12)
I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Joy (John 15:11)
I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace (Philippians 4:6-7)
I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself and others.

Patience (Proverbs 14:29)
I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness (1 Thessalonians 5:15)
I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others

Faithfulness (Proverbs 3:3-4)
I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Gentleness (Philippians 4:5)
I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Self-Control (Titus 2:11-13)
I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Grace (Colossians 3:13)
I demonstrate forgiveness, mercy and generosity to others, even when they have offended me.

Hope (1 Peter 1:3-5)
I have a growing anticipation of God's promises and my secure eternity with Him.

Humility (Philippians 2:3-4)
I choose to esteem others above myself.



CENTRAL PRACTICES

Bible Study (Hebrews 4:12)
I study the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Biblical Community (Acts 2:44-47)
I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Compassion (Psalm 82:3-4)
I seek to serve the last, the least and the lost in my community.

Disciple-Making (2 Timothy 2:2)
I multiply godly beliefs, virtues and practices in others to encourage their spiritual growth in Christ.

Evangelism (Acts 1:8)
I share Jesus with others through personal proclamation and demonstration of the gospel.

Generosity (2 Corinthians 9:6-11)
I gladly give my resources to fulfill God's purposes.

Prayer (Psalm 66:16-20)
I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-Mindedness (Matthew 6:33)
I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts (Romans 12:4-6)
I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Worship (Psalm 95:1-7)
I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

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The Scrolls Bible Study is a spiritual growth resource of Central Bible Church, Fort Worth, Texas.

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