**Sermon Based Community Group Leader Guide**

**Acts 6:8-8:3**

**\* Read Acts 6:8-8:3. Open in Prayer.**

**\* Sermon Overview**

In this sermon, Pastor Aaron will emphasize the mission of God and the redemption and restoration brought by Jesus, the Righteous One. Pastor Aaron will spend his time on Stephen’s sermon, telling the story of the mission of God just as Stephen did many centuries ago. The questions we are left to answer are these: (1) Have we trusted in Jesus, the Righteous One, for salvation? (2) If the answer is “yes,” then are we currently participating in God’s mission?

**\* Prompt Questions**

1. Was there anything that stood out to you in the pastor’s sermon? Are there any clarifying questions that you may have regarding the sermon?

2. How have you been seeking to apply the sermon in your own life this week? Or, what is one way that you can apply the sermon to your life this week?

3. What was the take away from the sermon for you? If you had to sum up the main idea of the sermon in one sentence, what would it be? What main themes do you see in the text and did you hear in the sermon?

4. How have you seen God at work this week in your life and in the lives of those around you? How has God been working in you this week through His Word, through prayer, through the body of Christ, and through service/evangelism? What were the highlights and lowlights of your week? How can we be praying for you specifically?

**\* Observation/Interpretation Questions[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Note: Please do not feel compelled to get through every one of these questions. I have given them in hopes that they will drive us back to the text so that we may diligently search the Scriptures as the Bereans did (Acts 17:10-15). These questions will give us a grasp of what the text says/means so that we can apply the text to our lives. I would encourage you to spend the majority of your time on application questions so that we can become “doers of the Word and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

**1. What is the context of Acts 6:8-8:3?**

*Luke wrote Luke and Acts (written around A.D. 62) to Theophilus in order to give him an accurate account of the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and to tell how Jesus continues to work through Spirit-empowered witnesses to carry the gospel to the end of the earth without hindrance and with boldness. Acts 1:8 serves as the theme verse of the book and as the outline for the book, for chapters 1-7 focus on Jerusalem, chapters 8-12 focus on Judea and Samaria, and chapters 13-28 focus on the end of the earth. The risen Lord sends His Spirit to empower followers of the Way to be witnesses who proclaim the kingdom of God to the end of the earth.*

*Stephen—a man with a good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, full of faith and of the Spirit, full of grace and power—becomes the first Christian martyr, as he dies proclaiming the mission of God and the hope of the gospel found in Jesus. Not only was Stephen a servant of the church, he was also a mighty servant of God in proclaiming the gospel and performing signs and wonders. Due to Stephen’s witness, some of those from the synagogue of the Freedmen rose up to challenge Stephen. When “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking,” they resorted to making false accusations—Stephen blasphemes God/temple and Moses/law, which is the same accusations they made against Jesus. After the high priest asked Stephen to make a defense, he preached a sermon detailing the mission of God—including the history of Israel, the hard-heartedness of the people in rejecting God’s servant/deliverer/redeemer, and calling people to faith in the Righteous One. The structure of Stephen’s sermon can be seen in five parts: stories regarding Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the tent of witness/the temple, and the challenge/confrontation of the religious leaders. Ultimately, Stephen argued that it is the religious leaders who blaspheme God/temple and Moses/law because they do not understand the nature of the temple or the law. Stephen argues, “You are the one who dishonors God, disobeys the law, and dismisses the True Temple (Jesus) because you have rejected the Righteous One.” Stephen’s claim enrages the crowd to the point that they cast him out of the city and stone him to death. As a result, the church is persecuted, scattered, and ultimately, multiplied as the Word/gospel increases wherever these disciples scatter.*

**2. What is going on in Acts 6:8-15?**

*Sometime after the widow conflict, Stephen—who was full of grace and power, full of faith and of the Spirit, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, with a good reputation—was performing miracles and proclaiming the name of Jesus in Jerusalem. Some of those from the synagogue of the Freedmen, of the Cyrenians (North Africa), of the Alexandrians (Egypt), and those from Cilicia and Asia (modern-day Turkey) rose up to dispute Stephen. Yet, when they could not dissuade him from the truth, these people stirred up the mob and encouraged false witnesses to claim the following: “Stephen blasphemes God and Moses” (v. 11), or more specifically, “Stephen speaks words against the temple and the law, claiming that Jesu of Nazareth will destroy the temple and will change the customs that Moses delivered” (vv. 13-14). All of this commotion led to the arrest and trial of Stephen before the Sanhedrin, eventually leading to his death. Acts 7:1-8:3 detail the events of his trial/sermon, his death, and the fruit that came from his death.*

*Note that the description of Stephen as full of grace and power connects him with the apostles (see Acts 4:33).*

*I. Howard Marshall writes, “If he (Stephen) attacked the scribal elaboration of the law, this would count as an attack on Moses, and if he attacked the Jews for tying the presence of God to the temple, this would have been sufficient to lead to the opposition which he encountered. It is noteworthy that it was the same jealous concern for the temple by Jews of the Dispersion which formed the occasion for the later arrest of Paul (21:28).”*

*I. Howard Marshall writes, “The Freedmen were Roman prisoners (or the descendants of such prisoners) who had later been granted their freedom. We know that a considerable number of Jews were taken prisoner by the Roman general Pompey and later released in Rome, and it is possible that these are meant here.”*

*Of Stephen’s face shining like an angel, I. Howard Marshall writes, “The description is of a person who is close to God and reflects some of his glory as a result of being in his presence (Exod. 34: 29ff.). It is a divine vindication of Stephen, and an indication of his inspiration to make his defence.”*

**3. What is going on in Acts 7:1-53?**

*In the sermon, Pastor Aaron will spend his time walking through Stephen’s sermon, emphasizing these themes: (1) the mission of God; (2) redeemer sent and redeemer rejected; and (3) redemption and restoration brought through Jesus, the Righteous One. As a tool to walk through this sermon, Pastor Aaron will present this sermon as a timeline, a retelling of the history of Israel to remind them of the mission of God from the beginning. The key markers on the timeline will be the following: Abraham, Isaac/Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jesus Christ—the Righteous One.*

***Abraham (Genesis 12-25; Acts 7:1-8)***

*In his sermon, Stephen made mention of Abraham’s call (vv 1-5; Genesis 12), his descendants’ slavery (vv. 6-7; Genesis 15:12-16), and his sign of the covenant—circumcision (v. 8; Genesis 17). Note the following: (1) God speaks to Abraham outside of the holy land, which implicitly indicates that God’s presence is not contained to the temple; (2) God makes promises to Abraham but does not fulfill all of them immediately; thus Abraham walks by faith in God’s promises, as God’s people are to do. Yet, in the sermon, Stephen will continually note that Israel rejects God’s sent deliverer, who brings God’s Word. Unlike Abraham, his descendants reject God.*

***Isaac/Jacob/the Partriach (Genesis 24-36; Acts 7:8-16)***

*Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons (the Patriarchs) get a passing mention in Acts 7:8-16). Genesis 24-36 indicate for us that God is faithful to his promises as he provides for Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons. From the perspective of these generations, the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham was still to come.*

***Joseph (Genesis 37-50; Acts 7:9-16)***

*Stephen tells the story of Joseph for two reasons: (1) The story of Joseph finishes the promise mention in Acts 7:6-7; thus, God is seen to be a faithful God; (2) The story of Joseph highlights the rejection of God-sent redeemers. From this story, we continue to see God’s faithfulness to his promises as he provides for and preserves his people.*

***Moses (Exodus through Deuteronomy; Acts 7:17-43)***

*Stephen tells the story of Moses in three parts of 40 year increments: his birth and upbringing (vv. 17-23; Exodus 1-2), his exile in Midian (vv. 23-29; Exodus 2-4), and his deliverer role (vv. 30-43; Exodus 3-Deutoronomy 34). Note the following: (1) God’s faithfulness in preserving his people by raising up a deliverer; (2) Israel’s rejection of the God-sent redeemer, specifically highlighted in the golden calf story (vv. 24, 35-43); (3) Note that Stephen is demonstrating that the religious leaders are the one who blaspheme Moses/disregard the law because they are the ones who reject Moses and the law.*

***Joshua (Joshua; Acts 7:44-45)***

*Beginning in Acts 7:44-50, Stephen turns to the second charge against him: that he blasphemes God by rejecting the temple. In this part of the sermon, Stephen mentions Joshua bringing in the tent of witness as Israel takes possession of the promised land. Remember, the reason for their victory, for their dispossessing the nations in the land is the very presence and power of God who fights for them.*

***David (1 Samuel 16-2 Samuel 24; 1 Kings 1-2; 1 Chronicles 11-29; Acts 7:45-46)***

*Stephen mentions that David desired to build a temple for God, but it would be his son, Solomon, who would build the temple.*

***Solomon (1 Kings 1-12; 2 Chronicles 1-9; Acts 7:47)***

*Stephen notes that Solomon built the temple, but he argues from Scripture that God is not contained in a building (see Isaiah 66:1-2; 1 Kings 8:27). In response to those who charge Stephen with blaspheming God and the temple, Stephen claims that they are the ones who blaspheme God if they believe he can be localized/contained in a building.*

***Jesus Christ—the Righteous One (Acts 7:51-53)***

*In closing, Stephen notes that Israel rejected the God-sent prophets, which is a rejection of God’s Word. He uses prophetic language that denotes judgment/unbelief: “stiff-necked people,” “uncircumcised in heart and ears,” “resist the Holy Spirit.” Stephen’s point is this: “You are the ones who blaspheme God and Moses, not me. You disobeyed His Word and dismissed His servants, and ultimately, rejected His Son, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. You missed what all of the law/prophets/writings and temple pointed to: Jesus Christ.” Though the prophets foretold the coming of the Righteous One (see Deuteronomy 18:15ff; 2 Samuel 7:11-16; suffering servant songs of Isaiah, and more, the people rejected the prophets. In the same way, they rejected Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*

*I. Howard Marshall writes, “It can be seen that these two themes correspond to the charges made against Stephen. (1) So far from speaking against the law or saying that Jesus would change it, Stephen argued that in the past it was the Jews themselves who had rejected Moses and the God whom he worshipped. They offered idolatrous worship, they resisted and killed the prophets, and they failed to keep the law. (2) Stephen argued that the Jews had had in succession the tabernacle (which was moved from place to place) and the temple as places to worship God, but God himself had declared that he was not tied to these places. If, therefore, Stephen spoke of a new ‘place’ of worship for God, this was simply in line with Old Testament teaching.”*

**4. What is going on in Acts 7:54-60?**

*In this passage, we see Stephen imitate the Lord in his death and the people imitate their forefathers as they murder Stephen. Those who murdered Stephen were enraged, gnashing their teeth, stopping their ears, and crying out in a loud voice. Yet, in his dying moments, Stephen sees a vision of Jesus and responds with the heart of Jesus: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” This dying prayer would be answered as Saul would soon be redeemed/forgiven and restored (see Acts 9).*

**5. What is going on in Acts 8:1-3?**

*In these verses we see the fruit of Stephen’s death. Saul, who would later be redeemed and restored, is presented as the chief persecutor of the church. Due to the persecution, the church is scattered and multiplied in Judea and Samaria. God uses the death of Stephen to move the gospel into Judea and Samaria. While the gospel goes into new areas, the apostles remained in Jerusalem to shepherd the Jerusalem church through the fires of suffering/persecution.*

**\* Application Questions**

Note: Please do not feel compelled to use every question, for you will have time for 3 to 5 questions. I’ve tried to offer enough for you to pick the ones you think will best fit your group, as you know what your ladies or men are going through at this time and may need to hear. Also, please note that these questions might be adjusted to reflect what the pastor calls us to do in application of the sermon.

1. Note the character of Stephen—good reputation (v. 3), full of the Spirit and of wisdom (v. 3), full of faith and of the Spirit (v. 5), full of grace and power (v. 8). Who is it that creates this kind of character in Stephen? What are the means by which we grow in Christlike character (look back at Acts 4:23-31)?

2. When you see the boldness of Stephen and the apostles, what do you think? Do you struggle to be bold in your witness? If so, why? If not, why not? What do we need to remember to be bold in our faith and what do we need to do to be bold in our faith (see Luke 21:10-19; Ephesians 6:18-20; Colossians 4:2-6; 1 Peter 3:15; and other passages)?

3. What reasons do people give for rejecting Jesus? What ought we to do when people give their reasons for rejecting Jesus? Also, when people revile us for our faith in Jesus, how should we respond? When people make false accusations about our character and faith, what should we remember and how should we respond?

4. In Acts 7, what do you notice about Stephen’s sermon? Are you familiar with the stories that Stephen shares in this sermon? What does Stephen’s sermon teach us about man (hint: they continually reject God-sent leaders/deliverers/redeemers because they are stiff-necked, uncircumcised people)? What does Stephen’s sermon teach us about God?

5. In the sermon, Pastor Aaron plans to emphasize the mission of God as found in Stephen’s sermon. How do we see the mission of God in this sermon? What role do we play in the mission of God today?

6. As you read through Stephen’s sermon, note the initiative of God in bringing about his purposes/plans: God of glory appeared (v. 2), God removed him (v. 4), God spoke (v. 6), God gave him (v. 8), God was with Joseph and rescued him and gave him favor and wisdom (vv. 9-10), Moses was beautiful in God’s sight (v. 20), God spoke to Moses (vv. 31-34), God sent Moses as ruler and redeemer (v. 35), God will raise up a greater prophet than Moses (v. 37; note that Jesus is this prophet), Moses received living oracles from God (v. 38), God turned away and gave them over to their idolatry (v. 42), God drove out the nations (v. 45), David found favor in the sight of God (v. 46), God sent the prophets (v. 52), God sent the Righteous One (v. 52). You could probably trace the hand of God in more verses than just these in the sermon, but this gives you an idea of God’s sovereign hand at work to bring about a people for Himself, a people of whom He will say—“I will be there God and they will be my people.” How does remembering this truth encourage us to endure the times we are living in today? How does remembering this truth encourage us to be God’s witnesses, joining Him in His mission?

7. How do you see sin at work today leading people to reject the Righteous One? Take time to pray for unbelieving friends, family, coworkers by name. Pray that God would draw them to Himself, that He would give them a receptive heart to the gospel, that He would give you opportunities to share the gospel in word and deed with them, and that when those times come that He would empower you with boldness to share the gospel in word and deed.

8. Notice the hostility to the gospel in verses 54-60, but also notice the Christlike character of Stephen in the face of death. How does the hope of the risen and exalted Christ empower us to live boldly? What is it that leads one to live and die in a Christlike way?

9. Citywide persecution came against the church in Jerusalem, yet God uses this to scatter the church all over Judea and Samaria. Ultimately, the gospel will increase in those areas and then to the ends of the earth. God brings good out of evil. How have you seen God bring good out of evil this week? Later in Acts, we’ll see that God answers Stephen’s prayer as Saul will become a believer. How does this encourage us to trust in the power of the gospel alone to save?

10. Here are some good questions to reflect on and act on this week (these were passed along to me by Pastor Aaron and Dr. Jones):

A. What do you take as the main theme from this sermon?

B. What have you learned today about Jesus’ character that has affected you daily?

C. Do you have any clarifying questions concerning the sermon?

D. What did the Holy Spirit convict you of because of His Word today?

E. Will you ask forgiveness and what will you change?

F. Will you be willing this week to pass on to someone else what you’re learning about Jesus? How will you be intentional this week to do so?

11. In his book, Asking the Right Questions, Matthew Harmon gives the following instructions/questions for understanding and applying the Bible:

A. Understanding the Bible

1. What do we learn about God?

a. Look for God’s character (who he is, what he is like).

b. Look for God’s conduct (what he is doing).

c. Look for God’s concerns (what things, events, people, he is concerned about).

2. What do we learn about people?

a. Look for aspects of what it means to be created in God’s image.

b. Look for the fallen condition.

c. Look for how God’s people should live.

3. What do we learn about relating to God?

a. Look for things to praise and thank God for.

b. Look for sin to confess and repent.

c. Look for promises and truths to believe.

4. What do we learn about relating to others?

a. Look for how we should interact with and treat others.

b. Look for ways to pursue reconciliation with others.

c. Look for specific ways to love, serve, and care for others.

B. Applying the Bible

1. What does God want me to think/understand?

2. What does God want me to believe?

3. What does God want me to desire?

4. What does God want me to do?

**\* Sermon Take Away**

If you have been redeemed and restored by Jesus, the Righteous One, then you are called/commissioned to participate in the mission of God. Are you surrendered to and living on mission for King Jesus?

**\* Bible Reading Plan**

1. Monday—Ephesians 1; 1 Kings 3

2. Tuesday—Ephesians 2; 1 Kings 4-5

3. Wednesday—Ephesians 3; 1 Kings 6

4. Thursday—Ephesians 4; 1 Kings 7

5. Friday—Ephesians 5; 1 Kings 8

6. Saturday—Ephesians 6; 1 Kings 9

7. Sunday—Philippians 1; 1 Kings 10

**\* Unhindered: A Study of Acts (Part 1)**

1. October 29th –Acts 8:4-40

2. November 5th –Acts 9:1-31

3. November 12th –Acts 9:32-11:18

4. November 19th—Acts 11:19-30

**\* Advent 2017 (Passages are Likely to Change)**

1. November 26th—Luke 1:1-25

2. December 3rd—Luke 1:26-38

3. December 10th—Luke 1:39-56

4. December 17th—Luke 1:57-80

5. December 24th—Luke 2:1-21

**\* Unhindered: A Study of Acts (Part 2)**

1. January 7th—Acts 12 (Herod’s Persecution and Death/No government can stop God’s church)

2. January 14th—Acts 13-14

3. January 21st—Acts 15:1-35

4. January 28th—Acts 15:36-16:5

5. February 4th—Acts 16:6-40

6. February 11th—Acts 17:1-15

7. February 18th—Acts 17:16-34

8. February 25th—Acts 18:1-23

9. March 4th—Acts 18:24-28

10. March 11th—Acts 19:1-41

11. March 18th—Acts 20:1-16

12. March 25th—Acts 20:17-30

--. April 1st (Easter Sunday)

13. April 8th—Acts 21:1-26

14. April 15th—Acts 21:27-22:29

15. April 22nd—Acts 22:30-23:35

16. April 29th—Acts 24:1-27

17.May 6th—Acts 25:1-12

18. May 13th (Mother’s Day)—Acts 25:13-26:32

19. May 20th—Acts 27:1-44

20. May 27th (Memorial Day Weekend)—Acts 28:1-31

1. For this discussion guide, I used the following resources: Darrell Bock, *Acts;* I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*; John B. Polhill, *Acts*; Derek Thomas, *Acts*; R. Kent Hughes, *Acts*; R. C. Sproul, *Acts*; John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of* Acts; Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesu in* Acts; ESV *Study Bible*; *NIV Zondervan Study Bible.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)