



WEEK 5 || ACTS 6:8-8:3

OPPOSED CHURCH

As we saw last week, as the first Christians started spreading the message that ‘the one who died for sin is King,’ there was plenty of opposition.

We’re living at a time when Christianity is no longer the ‘default religion’ of our western culture. What impacts have you seen from this? What other changes do you expect?

STEPHENS SPEECH

For the early church, at first it was just the Apostles, like Peter and James and John who were under fire. By chapter 6, even the *deacons*, like Stephen, were included. His job was to supervise the food distribution ministry to poor widows so the apostles could concentrate on prayer and preaching. But Stephen can't stop telling people about Jesus. He preaches strongly about the way the coming of Jesus has overturned Jewish ways... and the Jewish leaders are enraged!

1. You may have already noticed in this series that the key role of the Holy Spirit is to empower the church in proclaiming Jesus. Take a look at the description of Stephen in Acts 6:3 and 6:5. What's the outcome of this in 6:10?

2. The fact that Stephen's gospel proclamation is full of Spirit-supplied wisdom *doesn't guarantee it will be accepted*. Look at the results in 6:11-14. What can we draw from this?

3. What's the essence of the accusations against Stephen? (6:8-15)

4. In reply to his accusers, Stephen gives a different angle on Israel's history. Read his defence speech in Acts 7, and note references to...
 - a) Moses and the law, and

 - b) the temple.

5. As a group, try to summarise Stephen's response to his accusers. (Sometimes, attack is the best means of defence!)

Make sure you spotted verses 25, 27, 35, and 37-40 in summarising Israel's attitude to Moses, and verses 48-50 in making his point about the temple.

6. How does Stephen summarise the attitude of Israel's leaders in 7:51-53? (Who is it really who's against God's law and the one it pointed to?)

7. What's the outcome for Stephen?

What does 7:56 confirm about the one who died for sin? (See the sidebar for background.)

How does the Holy Spirit help? (What are you reminded of in Stephen's last words in 7:59 and 60?)

8. What's the outcome for the church as a whole in 8:1-3?

'One like a Son of Man'

The Old Testament prophet Daniel foresaw the day when "one like a Son of Man" would ascend on the clouds to the throne room of the Ancient of Days (God) and rule at his right hand over all the nations. (Daniel 7:13-14) All peoples, nations, and men of every language would worship him under his everlasting rule. That's the scene that Stephen glimpses in his final moments.

GOSPEL VISION

9. Look through our vision statement again on page 1. Which parts will be harder as we face opposition?
10. As Stephen faced martyrdom and the church faced increased persecution, they could see that Jesus is fully in charge on his heavenly throne. Do the events of **Acts 8:4-5** give a clue as to one positive outcome of all this?

What warning and comfort can we draw from this account, as people who still proclaim the gospel of the Kingship of Jesus?

Pray for Christians around the world facing active persecution today. Pray for our own situation as the message of Jesus becomes less and less welcome. Pray that by the Spirit, we will grow in confidence to keep on in the gospel mission of calling people to respond to one who died for sin, rose as King, and rules at God's right hand. Remember, **'the one who died for sin is King!'**