

Signs of Life: Sacrifice

Acts 6:8-15

July 18, 2026

CUSTOM

Introduction

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6:8-15 (NKJV) [8] And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. [9] Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. [10] And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. [11] Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." [12] And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. [13] They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous 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 change the customs which Moses delivered to us." [15] And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

ILLUSTRATION

This is John.

John was a homeless man living in Dublin, Ireland, and one of his closest companions was his pet rabbit, Barney.

One day, Barney somehow ended up in the freezing waters of the River Liffey. The current was strong, and the rabbit began to drown. Without stopping to calculate the danger, John jumped into the river and pulled Barney to safety.

Later, when he was asked why he had risked his life for a rabbit, John said:

■ *"Because he is my child. I love him, and I just wanted to save him. I didn't think. I just jumped."*

There is something moving about that kind of love.

Love has a way of silencing hesitation. When something matters deeply enough to you, sacrifice does not always feel like a complicated decision. There is something stronger than fear or self-preservation

driving you forward.

Now, I am not suggesting that rescuing a rabbit is the same as laying down your life for the gospel. But John's response illustrates an important truth:

QUOTE

We are willing to sacrifice for what we truly love.

Throughout history, countless believers have demonstrated that kind of abandonment for Jesus Christ.

They walked into prison cells. They stood before kings. They faced firing squads. They endured ridicule, rejection, loss, torture, and death.

Many of them were never interviewed. Their names never appeared in newspapers. Instagram, X, and TikTok have no record of most of the great Christian heroes.

But they had discovered Someone more valuable than life itself.

They believed what Paul would later write:

■ *"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."*

That is not the language of a religious fanatic. That is the language of a heart that has discovered the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ.

The world looks at that kind of devotion and calls it extreme. But Jesus never called His disciples to casual Christianity.

He said:

■ *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."*

The cross was not jewelry in the first century. It was not decoration. It was an instrument of death.

Jesus was saying, "Following Me means that your life no longer belongs to you."

That brings us to Stephen.

- Stephen's ministry was remarkably brief. He was not one of the twelve apostles. He did not write a book of the Bible. He did not pastor a famous church or lead a worldwide ministry.
- He was simply a faithful servant who became so full of Jesus that when pressure came, Jesus was what came out.
- Stephen's sacrifice did not begin when the stones started flying. It began long before that, when he surrendered his comfort, his reputation, his need for approval, and his right to control the direction of his life.
- By the time Stephen gave up his life, he had already given Jesus everything else.

Sacrifice is not produced by one sudden moment of courage. It grows out of a life that has already been surrendered to Christ.

What we enjoy today as Christians has been handed down to us through the faithfulness of men and women who refused to be ashamed of the gospel. The Scriptures have been preserved, the gospel has been carried across continents, churches have been planted, and truth has been defended through sacrifice.

Even today, believers around the world gather knowing that worshiping Jesus may cost them their freedom, their livelihood, their family, or even their lives.

We know very little of that kind of persecution experientially, but Stephen's life prepares us for something every Christian must understand:

When Christ fully possesses a life, that life becomes increasingly willing to serve Him, trust Him, speak for Him, and suffer for Him.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6:8-10 (NKJV) [8] And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Steven was a man who was full

Luke repeatedly describes Stephen as a man who was full. He was full of faith, full of power, full of wisdom, and full of the Holy Spirit.

These qualities were not occasional features of his life. They thoroughly marked him. Faith was not merely something he professed. Power was not something he attempted to manufacture. Wisdom was not simply his ability to win an argument. All of it flowed from a life continually yielded to the Spirit of God.

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

What fills a person will eventually come out of that person, especially under pressure.

He was not full of himself.

He was full of faith. He was full of power. He was full of wisdom. And he was full of radiance.

Stephen's life teaches us that a life need not be long to be powerful.

It only has to be full of Christ.

MAIN POINT 1

He was not *full of himself*

We first met Stephen earlier in Acts 6 as one of the seven men chosen to address a practical problem in the church. The Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution, and the apostles instructed the church to select qualified men who could oversee their care.

Stephen was not originally chosen to preach a sermon, lead a movement, or stand before the Sanhedrin. He was chosen to help make sure widows received food.

Yet Stephen did not consider that assignment beneath him. He did not complain that his gifts were being wasted or insist that he deserved a more visible ministry. He faithfully stepped into the need God placed before him, and while he was serving, God began to use him in ways that went far beyond the original assignment.

That teaches us an important principle in the kingdom of God:

QUOTE

Faithfulness in small assignments often prepares us for larger opportunities.

Many people want God to reveal some grand plan for their lives while ignoring the ordinary opportunities already in front of them. They want a platform, but they do not want to stack chairs. They want influence, but they do not want inconvenience. They want God to use them publicly before they have learned to serve Him faithfully in private.

I have often shared this with men I disciple because I have learned it firsthand:

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

How you serve in the shadows determines how you'll respond to the spotlight.

Stephen teaches us this in real time. He was willing to serve where he was needed, and because his heart was fully available to God, his ministry could not be confined to a job description.

He did not approach the Christian life by asking, "What is the minimum required of me?" He lived with the deeper question, "Lord, how completely can You use my life?"

That is the attitude of surrender.

A surrendered believer does not constantly calculate how little they can give, how seldom they can serve, or how close they can remain to the world without technically crossing a line. When Christ has captured the heart, obedience is no longer reduced to minimum requirements. The heart begins to say, “Jesus, You gave Yourself completely for me. I want my life to be completely available to You.”

APPLICATION

Church, we should be willing to rise above the minimum.

When we see a need, our first response should not always be, “Is that my ministry?” Sometimes the better question is simply, “Can I help?”

You do not need a title to become useful in the kingdom of God. You do not need to stand on a stage to make an eternal difference. Some of the most significant work in the church is accomplished by people whose names are rarely announced, but whose lives are consistently available.

Stephen began by serving widows. That was not a lesser ministry. In God's economy, it may have been the very place that prepared him for everything that followed.

Before long, he was preaching Christ with such wisdom that trained religious leaders could not answer him. But the public courage did not appear out of nowhere. It had been formed through private faithfulness.

God knows what He can do with one ordinary person who is not full of himself, but is fully surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

MAIN POINT 2

Full of Faith

Luke tells us that Stephen was full of faith.

Today, faith is sometimes presented as though it were a spiritual method for obtaining the life we want. According to that definition, enough faith will guarantee healing, financial prosperity, personal success, and protection from hardship. Faith becomes a way of convincing God to make our lives more comfortable.

But Stephen's life challenges that idea.

- Stephen was full of faith, yet his faith led him into conflict. It placed him before hostile religious leaders and eventually brought him beneath a shower of stones. His faith did not remove suffering from his life. It enabled him to remain faithful through suffering.
- That is the difference between biblical faith and religious wishful thinking.

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

Faith is not believing God for whatever I want; faith is obeying God because I believe Him.

Faith rests in the character of God even when we do not understand the circumstances He allows. It says, “Lord, I trust You when You deliver me, and I trust You when You call me to endure. I trust You when the door opens, and I trust You when obedience leads me into difficulty.”

Stephen believed that Jesus was worth following whether obedience brought applause or opposition. He did not measure God’s faithfulness by the comfort of his circumstances. He measured everything by the certainty of Christ.

SCRIPTURE

James 2:18 (NKJV) [18] But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

Biblical faith always becomes visible in obedience. It is more than agreeing that certain doctrines are true. It is placing the weight of your life upon those truths.

- When I see someone who is full of faith, I see someone willing to obey God when obedience becomes costly. I see someone who tells the truth when dishonesty would be easier, forgives when bitterness feels justified, serves when no one is watching, and stands firm when everyone else begins to compromise.
- Faith is not proven by how confidently we speak about what God might give us. It is proven by how faithfully we obey what God has already said.
- That kind of faith is not loud merely for the sake of being noticed. It is steady. It keeps obeying when emotions fluctuate, when circumstances disappoint, and when the outcome is uncertain.

Stephen was willing to live on the front lines of obedience because his greatest desire was not personal comfort. His greatest desire was to be used by God.

And that is what full faith looks like: **not a life free from difficulty, but a life so anchored in Christ that difficulty cannot move it from obedience.**

MAIN POINT 3

Full of Power

Stephen was not only full of faith. Luke also tells us that he was full of power. That power was not rooted in personality, natural charisma, or personal confidence. Stephen was powerful because the

Holy Spirit was working through a surrendered life.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 1:8 (NKJV) [8] But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

The power of the Holy Spirit is given so believers can faithfully represent Jesus. It is not primarily given to draw attention to ourselves, build a reputation, or manufacture an impressive religious experience. The Spirit empowers us to speak when we would naturally remain silent, stand when we would naturally retreat, and obey when our strength is insufficient.

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 4:20 (NKJV) [20] For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power.

Stephen's power was evident in the signs and wonders God worked through him, but it was also visible in his courage and steadiness under pressure.

APPLICATION

We sometimes define spiritual power too narrowly. We think only of miracles, dramatic gifts, or emotional moments. Certainly, God performed wonders through Stephen, and we should not minimize that. In fact, it shows us that miracles are not confined to the christian elite (as if there was such a thing), but that any of us can be used by God at any time according to His will to glorify Jesus.

But the power of God was also displayed in the way he endured hostility without losing himself.

It takes power to perform a miracle, but it also takes power to **remain steadfast** while being falsely accused. It takes power to speak boldly, but it also takes power to **refuse revenge** when others deliberately misrepresent you.

The Holy Spirit does not merely empower us to do extraordinary things. He empowers us to respond to pressure in a way that resembles Jesus.

Paul was not dismissing the importance of preaching or truth. He was confronting empty spiritual talk that had no substance behind it.

Many people know how to speak Christian language. They know the right phrases, the proper answers, and the vocabulary of faith. But is God producing anything behind those words? Is there courage, holiness, endurance, self-control, and a willingness to obey when obedience becomes costly?

The kingdom of God is not demonstrated merely by what we say. It is demonstrated by what God is producing in us and through us.

Someone may say, “But Josh, I am weak. I do not have Stephen’s courage. I am not naturally bold, and I do not feel capable of being used by God in a powerful way.”

Good.

That awareness may place you closer to usefulness than you realize. The greatest obstacle to the power of God is not human weakness. It is human self-sufficiency.

Jesus said to the church in Philadelphia:

SCRIPTURE

Revelation 3:8 (NKJV) [8] I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

Jesus did not rebuke them for having “little strength.” He commended them for being faithful with the strength they had.

Apparently, little strength is not an insult when it leads us to depend upon a great God.

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NKJV) [9] And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

God has never been limited by human weakness. He has worked through stammering prophets, frightened judges, ordinary fishermen, and people the world considered foolish and insignificant.

Your weakness does not disqualify you from being used by God. It can become the very place where the sufficiency of Christ is displayed.

There is, however, a difference between weakness and unwillingness.

Weakness says, “Lord, I cannot do this without You.” Unwillingness says, “Lord, I do not want You to use me if it costs too much.”

God can work powerfully through weakness because weakness creates room for dependence. But even great natural ability accomplishes little spiritually when it is not surrendered to Him.

Stephen was not powerful because he had developed an intimidating personality. He was powerful because he had become a yielded vessel. The power did not originate in Stephen. It flowed through

him.

APPLICATION

Some of us have spent too much time telling God why He cannot use us.

- We point to our personality, lack of education, past failures, fear, or limited experience. We assume God must be searching for someone stronger, more gifted, or more confident.
- But God is not intimidated by your limitations. The question is whether you will place them in His hands.

MAIN POINT 4

Full of Wisdom

Stephen was also full of wisdom.

Luke tells us that men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen began disputing with him. These were likely Jewish men connected to several regions of the Roman world, including Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. The name “Freedmen” referred to those who had once been slaves, or who were descended from former slaves, and had gained their freedom within the Roman Empire.

There is an interesting irony in that description. These men had gained social and political freedom, but they were still spiritually bound. Stephen, on the other hand, may not have possessed their status or education, but he had been made free through Jesus Christ.

They came to argue with him, but Luke says:

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6:10

“And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.”

That does not mean they were willing to admit Stephen was right. It means they could not successfully answer him.

They had objections, but Stephen had truth. They had training, but Stephen had wisdom from above. The more they argued, the clearer it became that they could not overcome the message he was presenting from the Scriptures.

There is an important difference between knowledge and wisdom.

- Knowledge knows what the Bible says. Wisdom understands how to apply that truth faithfully in a real conversation, with real people, under real pressure.

- A person can know many verses and still lack wisdom. They may have the right doctrine but present it with arrogance, impatience, or cruelty. Stephen did not merely possess strong arguments. He spoke with a wisdom that came from the Holy Spirit.

Spirit-filled wisdom is concerned not only with saying what is true, but also with representing Christ in the way truth is spoken.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 10:16 (NKJV) [16] “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

Jesus never called His followers to be naïve. It’s not as wise as doves and as gentle as serpents!

APPLICATION

Being loving does not mean we ignore manipulation, refuse to confront error, or become afraid to speak plainly. We should understand how the world thinks, recognize deception, and refuse to be controlled by emotion, flattery, accusation, or pressure.

But Jesus also said we must be harmless as doves. Our wisdom must never become deceptive or vindictive.

The world often reverses that command. It presents itself as harmless while behaving like a serpent. It speaks the language of compassion while using intimidation and manipulation behind the scenes.

Stephen was different. He did not distort his opponents’ words or use dishonesty to gain an advantage. He spoke the truth with such clarity and spiritual authority that they could not answer him.

That should be our desire as believers.

We should not merely aim to win arguments no matter the cost, but rather to be committed to speak the truth in love no matter the cost.

QUOTE

— Pastor Josh

Biblical wisdom is courageous without being combative, clear without being cruel, and gracious without compromising the truth.

APPLICATION

We need this kind of wisdom. We live in a culture filled with confusion, emotional manipulation, and hostility toward biblical truth. We should not be intimidated by that, but neither should we respond in the flesh.

We do not need louder Christians as much as we need wiser Christians.

We need believers who know the Scriptures well enough to answer error and are filled with the Spirit enough to answer with self-control. We need Christians who can listen carefully, identify the real issue, and speak truth without hatred in their hearts.

Sometimes wisdom gives a clear answer. Sometimes it asks a better question. Sometimes it refuses to be dragged into a foolish argument. And sometimes it continues speaking the truth even when the other person has already decided not to listen.

SCRIPTURE

1 Peter 3:15 (NKJV) [15] But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Peter tells us to be ready with an answer, but he also tells us how that answer should be given. Meekness is not weakness. It is strength under control.

Stephen was not timid. He was bold enough to confront Israel's spiritual condition before the highest religious council in the land. But his boldness was not the reckless aggression of an angry man. It was the steady courage of a Spirit-filled man.

His opponents could not resist his wisdom, so they changed tactics. Notice the progression.

- First, they worked secretly. Then they stirred up the people. Finally, they set up false witnesses. They could not defeat Stephen's message honestly, so they attempted to discredit him dishonestly.

ILLUSTRATION

Social media has become a cesspool of manipulation, misinformation, and confident deception. Be careful!

- Most likely, they were twisting truths Stephen had preached about Jesus, the temple, and the law. Stephen was not teaching that God's Word was worthless or that Moses should be rejected. He was proclaiming that the law, the sacrifices, and the temple all pointed beyond themselves to Jesus

Christ.

- **But a distorted truth can sometimes be more persuasive than a complete lie.** They took Stephen's words, removed their meaning, and made him sound like an enemy of God. The same thing had happened to Jesus.
 - At His trial, false witnesses twisted His statement, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus had been speaking about His body and resurrection, but His accusers presented His words as a threat against the physical temple.
 - Stephen is now being treated just as his Savior was treated.
- When they could not answer his wisdom, they attacked his character. When they could not overcome the truth, they tried to silence the man speaking it.
- The goal was no longer to discover what was true. The goal was to make sure no one listened.

And even here, Stephen continued to look like Jesus.

Sometimes having the wisdom of Jesus means being misunderstood because of the truth, opposed because of faithfulness, and falsely accused because people cannot answer the message you carry.

MAIN POINT 2

Full of radiance

SCRIPTURE

Acts 6:15 (NKJV) - And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Stephen has been seized, falsely accused, and dragged before the council. Every eye is fixed on him, and yet instead of seeing fear, panic, or rage, they see something they cannot explain.

His face appears as the face of an angel.

The clearest biblical parallel is Moses.

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 34:29 (NKJV) [29] Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.

Moses' face shone because he had been in the presence of God. Now Stephen stands accused of speaking against Moses, the law, and the temple, yet God causes his face to reflect the same kind of

divine glory.

- There is a powerful irony here. His accusers claim to defend Moses, but they cannot recognize the presence of God resting upon Stephen. The real problem was not that Stephen had rejected Moses. It was that they had rejected the One to whom Moses pointed.

What is striking is when this radiance appeared. Stephen was not in a peaceful worship service surrounded by supportive believers. He was standing in the middle of hostility. Pressure did not extinguish the light within him. It made the light more visible.

That is often what pressure does. It reveals what fills us.

When some people are pressured, anger comes out. When they are misunderstood, bitterness rises. When they are falsely accused, they become consumed with defending themselves.

But Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, and under pressure, the character of Jesus became visible.

His peace was not the absence of danger. It was the presence of God in the middle of danger.

The clearest evidence that someone is filled with the Holy Spirit is not merely that they speak loudly, display a gift, or have an emotional experience. The clearest evidence is that the life and character of Jesus become increasingly visible through them, especially in their most trying moments.

ILLUSTRATION

Oren Stephenson's Parents, Daniel and Rebecca, saying, "We see so much of God's goodness in this."

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NKJV) [18] But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

APPLICATION

There is a radiance that comes from spending time in the presence of God. It may not cause our faces to glow visibly, but people should be able to see that we have been with Jesus.

They should see it in our peace when circumstances are uncertain, in our restraint when we are provoked, in our grace when we are mistreated, and in our courage when truth becomes unpopular.

The darker the world becomes, the more clearly a Spirit-filled life should stand out.

Stephen was not full of himself. He was full of faith, full of power, full of wisdom, and now full of radiance.

And that leaves us with an important question:

When life presses against me, what comes out?

Pressure reveals what fills us.

Conclusion:

Stephen's life forces us to ask a very simple question: **What am I full of?**

Because whatever fills us will eventually reveal itself.

- **Stephen was not full of himself.** He was willing to serve quietly without demanding recognition.
- **He was full of faith**, so he trusted God even when obedience became costly.
- **He was full of power**, so the strength of the Spirit worked through his weakness.
- **He was full of wisdom**, so he could speak truth with courage and grace.
- **And he was full of radiance**, because the presence of Jesus had become visible in his life.

None of that was manufactured in the courtroom. Stephen did not suddenly become faithful when the pressure arrived. The pressure simply revealed the kind of man he had already become.

That is why his sacrifice did not begin when the stones started flying. It began much earlier, when he decided that his life no longer belonged to him.

And that is where sacrifice always begins. Most of us may never be asked to die for Jesus, but every one of us is called to live for Him.

- We are called to surrender our pride. We are called to surrender our comfort. We are called to surrender our reputation, our ambitions, our fears, and our need to control the outcome.

Jesus did not call us to add Him to an already crowded life. He called us to give Him the whole thing. The question is not whether you would die for Jesus in some dramatic moment. The better question is whether you are living for Him in the ordinary moments you have been given today.

Are you available when no one notices?

Are you obedient when it costs you something?

Are you dependent upon the Spirit, or are you relying upon yourself?

Are you speaking truth in a way that reflects the character of Christ?

When pressure comes, does more of Jesus come out?

Again, we do not need to become more impressive. We need to become more surrendered!

Stephen's life was brief, but it was not wasted. His ministry was short, but his witness still speaks. He reminds us that a life does not have to be long, famous, or celebrated to carry eternal weight. It simply has to be full of Christ.

So let us ask the Lord to empty us of ourselves and fill us again with His Spirit.

1. **May we be full of humility**
2. **Full of faith.**
3. **Full of power.**
4. **Full of wisdom.**
5. **Full of the radiance of Jesus Christ.**