

Life! Journal

Life! Training

Name:

Date:

Acts 7:59-60

And they stoned Stephen,
calling upon God, and saying,
Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And he kneeled down,
and cried with a loud voice,
Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.
And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Unbeatable Faith

*Embracing Suffering
and Rejection
for Christ*

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Welcome to this journey through the experiences and teachings of the apostolic church as recorded in the book of Acts and the Letters written by the apostles. As a member of His body, you will discover His treasures for those who take His Name and receive His Spirit.

Come to the Scriptures with a prayer-filled heart and open mind as you uncover truths for your life. Record these in the blanks provide to help keep yourself accountable in your daily growth. Talk to the Lord when you find yourself coming short in an area. Share with others the riches you find in His living Word.

Day 1: embellished Bible story.

Day 2-6: interactive journal devotions.

Day 7: contemporary stories of faith.

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Rejoice in Rejection

Sold-out believers _____ to _____ for Christ.¹

_____ the _____ in love.²

_____ your _____.³

If the preacher does not take a risk, he is merely entertaining.

Tell the _____ so people see where they ____.⁴

Draw distinctions and sacrifice _____ _____.⁵

Focus on _____, not the _____ rejection.⁶

_____ people get out of _____.⁷

Keep _____ the _____, no matter what.⁸

¹ Acts 5:40-42; 16:23-25; Matthew 5:10-12; Luke 6:22; Hebrews 10:34; 12:2

² 6:10; Isaiah 54:17; Luke 12:11-12; 21:15; I Corinthians 2:4; Ephesians 4:15

³ 7:3, 7, 26-28, 32-34, 37, 40, 42-43, 49-50, 56, 59-60; II Timothy 3:15-17; 4:2

⁴ 7:2-53; Matt. 13:3-53; 15:1-20; Luke 18:9-14; 20:9-14; 24:27; I Cor. 3:1-2

⁵ 7:2, 5-6, 9-10, 12-15, 21-22, 29-34, 36, 41-43, 48-50, 51-53; Galatians 5:11

⁶ 7:54-60; II Timothy 2:9-13; 3:10-14; Gal. 6:12-15; Philippians 3:18-19

⁷ 8:1-2; 11:19-21; Luke 4:28-30; John 8:59; 10:39; 11:54; Hebrews 11:27

⁸ 8:3-4; 9:24-25; 13:50-51; 14:6-7, 19-20; 17:10, 14; 20:1; Matt. 10:11-23

Dead to Rights

See Acts 6; 7; 8:1-4

Stephen was like a homeboy to me. We both were Greek-speakers by birth, but we were zealous for the Temple and the Law of Moses. When he started talking nonsense, the council dragged him in, to question him.

I was a little put out that he was bringing this bad light on our synagogue—the Jewish purists always looked for a reason to put us Hellenists down because we were born somewhere other than Jerusalem.

The day they called Stephen before the council, one of the elders spoke to me by name, saying, “Saul, you attend the Hellenist’s synagogue, don’t you?”

Of course I did, but I could not help him for I had not heard Stephen’s new revelation they said he was talking about. We convened and the high priest ordered Stephen to explain himself.

I was shocked when he took his seat in front of the group. Everyone just kind of stared at him for a while. He had a glow to him that was out of this world. He looked like he had just come down Mt. Sinai and had a new covenant for us. In contrast, we looked like the Israelites who worshipped a golden calf.

I did not feel this way at first, but listening to him talk, he as much as said we were. He pointed out all the times God had worked outside of the Temple. He told of Abraham in Ur and Haran, how God could speak to him there. Then he showed us that Abraham’s faith wasn’t in the Promised Land, but in the God who promised the land. Abraham did not even have a permanent possession other than a tomb. He told of God working through Joseph and guiding him while he was far away from our holy hill, in Egypt.

Of course, we all listened politely, we Jews love to hear the story of where we came from and who we are. But Stephen was doing more than just story telling that day. And we ended up doing more than nodding off to dreamland.

He told of God working with Moses first in Egypt and then in Midian. Next he talked about how God work miracles and wonders in Egypt and through the wilderness travels. He

When they released him at last, the blood sloshed in his shoes as though he had been wading water. His bloody back looked like beefsteak. Still he trusted God and forgave the men.

About thirty days later one of the mob, who was a janitor at the high school, fell dead in the schoolyard with a stroke. A little later another man died. Then a third man, the one who had actually whipped the young preachers, died horribly in a terrible accident while working for the railroad. A fourth man, who had been a banker, lost his bank business, took tuberculosis and left for Arizona. Later he lost his mind and died.¹

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“I was only a boy when Brother Stovall came to our house. It was at night in late spring. We were all asleep in bed. My father heard him on the front porch and went to the door. Brother Stovall could hardly stand. He had been beaten unmercifully. We learned that his brush arbor in a nearby community had been burned to the ground and that he was taken right after that night’s revival service was over by strong, rough men. They had brought him to the woods near our farm and severely beaten him, leaving him unconscious on the ground.

“He was very sick. His ribs had been broken by kicks. He could not lie down because of pain but sat, holding pillows to himself. We kept him and nursed him through summer. He helped us pick our cotton in the fields, doing more work than anyone else.

“In time, he announced he was leaving. When my father asked where, he stated simply that he was going back to the nearby community, build another brush arbor, and begin his revival meeting again. My father tried to talk him out of it, pointing out that some of the people there had tried to kill him a few months before. But he would not listen. All he would say was, “There are lost souls there who need God. This is what God wants me to do.”²

¹ Mary Wallace, *He Stands Tall*, Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame, 1980, 97-98.

² Pugh, recounting a story told by James Kilgore, 113.

Weeping May Endure for the Night

Bertha Stogner... a beautiful young lady,... was challenged by the Pentecostal experience in Athens, Texas.... She repented and was baptized, but had not yet received the Holy Ghost when she took deathly sick. The Pentecostals of that era were committed, cross-bearing people. They did not mind entering into costly spiritual warfare. This is exactly what the small group of Spirit-filled saints did. They literally camped at the home of this young lady in constant prayer and fasting, asking God to heal her.

Bertha Stogner grew worse. The struggle for her life became so intense that Satan appeared in visual form in the room. However, with bold authority and power, the saints stood between the angel of death and their sister. They literally drove death from the room in the name of Jesus. I have heard her, as my pastor's wife, give this testimony on numerous occasions. Cross people not only know Jesus in the "fellowship of His suffering," but also "the power of his resurrection."¹

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One night at the close of a meeting, a mob of several hoodlums along with other community leaders grabbed young Humbard and another young man after the congregation had left. The young preachers did not resist and were quickly marched off down a street...

Down by a little lake of water were small tables where the men had been gambling and drinking. Gasoline torches flickered, casting a weird light on the hostile crowd.

"Cut a big hickory switch. We're going to give them a whipping," said the leader of the mob. So they cut a six foot long switch and told the men to take off their coats and shirts. One man grabbed the young preacher by the hair of his head, cursed him and pulled him over until his chin touched his knees. Then a half-drunk brute of a man grabbed the heavy switch with both hands and began to whip young Humbard.

pointed out God's plan in giving them a tabernacle as a witness to His abiding power. Finally, he mentioned our Temple—our beloved temple.

Now, at this point, I thought I knew where Stephen was going. He had talked about all that God had done away from Mt. Zion, now he was going to talk about how much greater things were since we had the Temple. We hoped he would steer his story that way, but he didn't.

Instead, he did the opposite. He compared the Temple to the golden calf Aaron made. How insulting. He was saying that since the Temple was just the "work of men's hands" it was only an idol—something distracting us from worshipping the true God.

That took some nerve—at it struck quite a few as well. Then he called us stiff-necked, which meant we would soon be destroyed. He claimed that since our ancestors had killed the prophets we were just as guilty. Then he blew the lid of the boiling pot when he said we were fulfilling the murderous intent of our forefathers by killing the Righteous One they prophesied about—Jesus of Nazareth.

When he said we had rejected the very Law given to us by angels, the group got so mad you could hear some of the men grinding their teeth. I was sure Stephen had suicidal wishes when he looked up and claimed to see Jesus with all the power of God.

My colleagues clapped their hands over their ears and ran toward him. So much for a popular vote. This would not be a casting of the lots but a casting of stones. They dragged him out of town and threw him over the edge.

I stood by and caught the men's coats as they went into action, stoning this preposterous preacher. As he died with stones smashing against him, I heard him cry out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell down and cried out, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin!"

I stood there observing the scene with a sense of smug justice. Being from the tribe of Benjamin like Saul whom I was named after, I felt tall and powerful. However, I could not help seeing Stephen as David, and it haunted me.

¹ J. T. Pugh, *The Wisdom and Power of the Cross*, 1998, 114.

Someone Must Die

Victory requires a defeat. Right does not mix with wrong. Holy cannot meld with hellish. Good fights against evil. Faith calls doubt to arms. Someone must die.

In a military clash, someone must die for their cause. Either the invading army attacks until they are killed off, or the defensive power surrenders control and thus dies to its mission or national identity.

When you take the message of Light into a world of Darkness, someone must suffer. When God spoke Creation, distinctions emerged. When you speak up for truth, you draw a line between yourself and every false, twisted belief system.

Peter preached Jesus to unbelievers on the Day of Pentecost. How did they feel in Acts 2:37?

Thousands died in repentance by giving up their fight, surrendering to Jesus as Lord, and taking His side. When you stand for truth, the someone who dies may be the person who accepts your message and dies to his or her old nature.

Stephen, on the other hand, faced a hostile crowd. He let them know the distinctions in this battle line and declared clearly where he stood. How did they feel, in Acts 7:54?

Unlike Peter's crowd, these unbelievers killed Jesus' witness. When you stand for truth, you may die by rejection.

Wars draw battle lines. You cannot fight in the fog of an undeclared identity. When you side with Christ, you choose to stand out from everything unlike Him. He does not join your team; you join His.

The message of truth causes you to confront sinful humanity with the shock of their sinfulness compared to Christ's perfection. The belief in Jesus as the physical presentation of the invisible God will defy all other para-Christian belief systems. Once the world knows which side you are on, someone must die.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

Could Jesus have been serious about the rejoice part? It is tough to imagine rejoicing when people are laughing at you, firing you, or insulting you because of your witness for Him. Some do not think this is even possible. Perhaps Stephen can educate us on how to live like this.

How did knowledge of God's promises maintain Stephen's boldness and joy in the face of what appeared to be his own demise?

How does it help you live for Jesus and tell others the truth about Him when you know the same promises Stephen lived by?

How does II Timothy 2:11-12 help you have Stephen-like faith in the face of suffering?

Stephen and the other apostles who soon became martyrs could have lived in self-pity. To rejoice in tough circumstances like this, a child of God must see beyond the world around and focus on the one in all power.

Where have you been suffering intimidation and rejection, and how will the vision of Stephen help you refocus your concerns?

A Pity or a Party?

When the crowd turns hostile against him, where does Stephen place his focus, in Acts 7:55?

How can this mindset help you when the winds of rejection blow your way?

Seeing Jesus standing up with all power over all enemies, Stephen rejoiced. He was so dedicated to promote Jesus he forgot to worry about his own safety. In his dying breath, he still could not fault them or blame them for his death. We suffer the pains of rejection the most when we live to preserve our own cause.

Stephen knew that Jesus was defending his cause, so he had no problem standing up for the Lord. How did this young preacher refer to Jesus in Acts 7:56?

This prophetic term comes from a vision of Daniel. In Daniel 7:13-14, the Son of Man (Jesus) appears before the heavenly throne as representative of all the earth. What does He receive for all humanity who come through Him?

Stephen's vision alludes to the promise of Psalm 110:1. How does this connect with the promise of Daniel 7:13-14?

Most people do not evangelize for fear of rejection. When you are winning souls, keep this thought in mind: someone must die. If they do not, you will. However, if you are willing to die for His sake, you will see many turn and die to their old nature so they might live unto Him.

How have people killed you, after you presented the truth of Acts 2:38 and the message of God in Christ?

- Some told others to stay away from me.
- Some mocked me and insulted me.
- Some told lies about me.
- Family members cut me out of their lives.
- Co-workers started joking about me.
- Former friends now ignore me.

Do you think Stephen realized his life was in danger? Answer from Acts 6:9-14.

Stephen's straight talk was risky business. Should he have softened his approach somewhat? Why or why not?

Read Acts 7:51-53. Discuss the risk Stephen took talking to these religious people. Have you ever done the same? Why or why not?

How did the people react, in Acts 7:57-58?

Stephen could have kept his mouth shut and lived a peaceful little life. He put much thought and planning into saying things which motivated people to kill him. If you do not take a risk to shine your light, you are hiding it.

Seeker Sensitive vs. Suffering Savior

The Mega-Church industry has followed close on the heels of Bill Hybels for a few decades. Hybels, evangelical founder of Willow Creek church in Chicago, has built an impressive spread of a church campus reaching as many as 20,000 people each week. At first glance, one might say this was the Book of Acts revisited with thousands coming to embrace faith in Jesus Christ. The live orchestra, multi-media presentations, entertainment-oriented services, scores of need-based ministries, and sin-free preaching, however, demand a second look.

Executive pastor Greg Hawkins and team have taken a second look at their results at Willow Creek and published them in the book he co-authored, *Reveal: Where Are You?* The findings have led Bill Hybels to confess he was wrong in front of a group of thousands of pastors. His new approach built huge numbers, but not true disciples. Many attendees had not even developed the basic disciplines of prayer and study of God's Word.

This community church began in a movie theater named Willow Creek. Not only did they adopt their name from the world, they sought direction from the world on how to build a big church. Hybels surveyed what people wanted in a church, and put together a custom package to draw the largest crowd:

Since 1975, Willow Creek has avoided conventional church approaches, using its Sunday services to reach the unchurched through polished music, multimedia, and sermons referencing popular culture and other familiar themes. The church's leadership believed the approach would attract people searching for answers, bring them into a relationship with Christ, and then capitalize on their contagious fervor to evangelize others.¹

This post-modern concept built a following, but not a flock.

¹ Mark Branaugh, "Willow Creek's 'huge shift': influential megachurch moves away from seeker-sensitive services," *Christianity Today* 52.6 (2008): 13.

People will notice the changes in your style, vocabulary, and conduct depending on whom you choose as friends. If you spend time with skateboarders, you begin to talk, walk, and dress like a skater. Children educated by the secular world have different attitudes and opinions than those [educated by parents](#) with a Christian worldview. How much more this is true if you spend time with Jesus.

While you may not glow like an angel, your attitude will. Spending time with Jesus will grow your boldness to face death with the message of life, as Stephen did. Spending time with the crowd, being seeker-sensitive instead of Spirit-led, and pursuing popularity will make you cave under their pressure. You will fear taking a bold stand for your Lord.

One of the best ways to spend time with the Lord is to pray the way He prayed. Many of the psalms are prayers the Lord used while walking among use.

Acts 7:54 echoes Psalm 35:16. What in Psalm 35 could Stephen have prayed to help him share the heart of Christ?

Acts 7:59, Luke 23:46, and Psalm 31:5 link Stephen with his Lord. What in Psalm 31 applied to Jesus life that Stephen could have learned in sharing His suffering?

Compare Acts 7:60 with Luke 23:34. What had Stephen learned in the study of Jesus and being with Him?

Suffer with Him

Stephen was more than just a zealous Bible school student with plans to change the world. This short narrative about his life reveals where he got his courage and why he made such a stir among those who encountered him.

How do Acts 6:10 and John 7:46 reveal a similarity between Stephen and the One he represented?

How does Acts 6:8 parallel Stephen with Jesus in Acts 10:38?

How does the situation in Acts 6:13 parallel Stephen with Jesus in Matthew 26:59-61?

What did the council realize about Peter and John in Acts 4:13, and do you think they realized the same about Stephen?

What did the council see when Stephen stood before them, in Acts 6:15?

Another person experienced something like this. In Exodus 34:29-30, what caused this man's appearance to change? How could this have applied to Stephen as well?

Perhaps this time around, Hybels and team will get it right. They sense the need for strong biblical teaching to help ground converts in truth (although the leadership's level of understanding Bible salvation and the nature of God in Christ appears crippling low). The weakness in even this new thrust appears to be the motivation, again, to fill a need the people are expressing, rather than God's desires.

Stephen was not trying to meet a need. He was obeying Jesus' mandate to tell the whole truth to the whole world. Peter was not trying to be seeker-sensitive; he was simply presenting a suffering Messiah.

When a church attempts to be acceptable instead of controversial, they cease to please the Lord and try to please man. Big names in evangelical Christianity today are compromisers looking for acceptance instead of apostles willing to die for the cause: Lee Strobel, Rick Warren, Phillip Yancy, Max Lucado, Tony Campolo, James Dobson, Chuck Colson, Steve Arterburn, Luis Palau, Tim LaHaye, Josh McDowell, and Robert Schuller (to only name a few).¹

Is your church Spirit-sensitive more than seeker-sensitive? In what way?

What can you do to keep your church strong for truth and not compromise with popularity and worldliness?

How are you more prone to want to be popular to people instead of with God? What can you do about it?

¹ <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/exposes/hybels/general.htm>

Story of Rejection

Stephen knew God's plan included rejection and suffering from the very beginning. His own sermon shows us his depth of understanding on this subject.

What kind of suffering and separation did the father of the faith have to experience, in Acts 7:2-3?

Who suffered rejection in Acts 7:9?

The children of Israel were sent to Egypt to buy grain. The first time down, they did not recognize Joseph's true identity. In Act 7:13, what happened the second time?

How could this be a picture of Jesus and the Jews?

When Stephen brings up Moses, what does he say this man hoped for, in Acts 7:25?

Who rejected Moses in 7:26-28 and why?

In 7:37, who is Moses referring to in his prophecy? What parallels do you see between the two?

Rejection is a horrible and nasty word. It signifies how people respond to something they see as misfit or despised. The most precious truths of the universe suffer rejection. The most loyal followers of God suffer rejection. More than the beatings, stonings, or hateful accusations, the apostles of our Lord had to be strong against the deathly sting of rejection.

Most people cannot handle peer pressure. They cave in and obey society's expectations. Only a brave few make an impact for the Lord—those who will not be swayed by popular opinion, money, or peers. A believer learns to love Jesus more than any other distraction. When we seek His desires first, others' desires will not change us.

Why did Moses' peers reject him, in Acts 7:39?

In 7:52, how does Stephen prove that his accusers are guilty along with those who rejected Joseph and Moses?

In 7:54 and 7:57, what body language revealed they had also rejected Stephen?

How did Stephen respond to their rejection, in 7:60?

How is his behavior a model for your own life?