



WEEKLY STUDY

Stranger Things - Week Two

(Our August series is a look at the strange and unexpected events that take place in the book of Acts. While we are keenly aware of what is going on in the physical world in and around us, we sometimes lack awareness of the spiritual world which is just as real, only less visible. We'll look with spiritual eyes at the events of the early church to see how God was moving in those days, and what it might mean for our time.)

We were recently introduced to the new church leader named Stephen. Our passage for this week ends with his death at the hands of an angry crowd who found him to be very threatening. We see in him a strange calm during his suffering because he was gifted with a vision of the hope of heaven. As you walk through this week, may you have a Stephen-like focus on the bigger picture.

Please note our prayer focus for the week in the box below. Join us in seeing what God will do as we unite in prayer.

Peace of Christ,
Pastor Mark Youngman

If you are studying with your Providence Small Group or Discipleship Group, you can share from your own daily reflections and consider the Group Discussion questions below. If you would like to get connected visit prov.church/smallgroups.

Prayer Focus:

- Pray for someone you know that is facing a period of suffering. Pray specifically for the Holy Spirit to bring them the ability to see God and to find the power to live even in the middle of their suffering.

DAILY STUDY

MONDAY: ACTS 7.51-54 (NIV)

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

⁵⁴ *When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵*

- The members of the Sanhedrin were in fact among God’s people who had been given the law. They prided themselves in following the details that it required. But, according to Stephen, they had not obeyed it. This implies that obeying is more than just checking off a list, but fully giving yourself to the point of the law, which is to draw or keep God’s people close to Him. When have you found that obedience to God has brought you closer to God?
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- **Prayer Prompt: For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Romans 2.13)**
- *God, teach me to walk the path of obedience, not so that I appear to be righteous, but so I might truly know you and your heart for me. Amen.*

TUESDAY: ACTS 7.54-56

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.”

- The rebuke from Stephen at the end of his speech (7.51-53) was as harsh as any from the prophets of old. The audience tends to respond in one of two ways to a harsh word from a prophet. Either they are cut to the heart and seek forgiveness, or they get angry. These guys got angry. Gnashing of teeth angry. I don’t know about you, but when someone is that angry with me, I tend to look for a solution or return with anger of my own. Not so with Stephen. Because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, he was able to calmly look up and see into heaven. He had irrational peace through God’s Spirit. Have you ever found yourself responding to a situation in a way that surprised you? Describe it.
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- **Prayer Prompt: And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4.7)**
 - *God, Fill me with your Spirit so that I might see beyond the anger and division in front of me. Give me words of truth and the faith to see heaven. Amen.*

WEDNESDAY: ACTS 7.56-58

“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.*

- The response of the Sanhedrin had devolved to them acting like children who refuse to hear what is so clearly true. Only they were dangerous children. It's clear that this was not strictly a spontaneous event. The witnesses knew to lay their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Saul will factor into the rest of the book of Acts (and of course, the rest of the New Testament) but for now it is important to note just how intentionally evil his actions were. The act of stoning was not uncommon but was brutal and barbaric. This case most likely broke protocol as the crowd skipped some steps of conviction in a trial (like that of Jesus). Stephens' words had so incensed the crowd that they couldn't think straight. When has your anger caused you to lose control? What was the result of that loss of control? Offer those times up to God and consider the contrast with a Spirit-filled response.
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- **Prayer Prompt: If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11.13)**
- *O God, you know the anger that exists in the world around me today. And you know the response of my heart when left to its own devices. So do not leave my heart alone. Fill me with your Holy Spirit that I might have your heart towards those who live in anger. Amen.*

THURSDAY: ACTS 7.59-8.1a

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.

And Saul approved of their killing him.

- Stephen's prayers were beautiful and mirrored the prayers of Jesus on the cross, "Into your hands I commit my spirit." Stephen seemed aware that death was likely to be the outcome of his bold faith. He then cried out with his last words, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." Again echoing Jesus "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." These prayers for forgiveness of enemies is a sure sign of the presence of the Spirit.

Everything that Stephen has done in this story was possible because of Jesus. Jesus was his model and Jesus is his salvation. Stephen followed Jesus all the way to suffering death and resurrection into the heaven he had just glimpsed! What images does this account bring to mind? What prayers are you praying for your enemies?

- **Prayer Prompt: I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... (Matthew 5.44)**
- *God, I pray for those who seem to come up against me, either me personally or my community. My spirit is yours, would you forgive those who persecute me? Amen.*

FRIDAY: 1 PETER 3.13-16 (NIV)

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

- The Spirit-filled response to suffering allows those around you to experience what is true. That revelation may cause conviction and/or it may become a source of hope. If we suffer for what is right, there will be redemption. We don't need to be frightened. These words from Peter seem to describe Stephen. Always be prepared to give the reason for the hope you have, and do so with gentleness and respect and you will be blessed. When was the last time you had the opportunity to give the reason for the hope you have?
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- **Prayer Prompt: Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10.23)**
 - *God, give me both awareness and boldness to respond to opportunities of sharing about the hope I have in your Son Jesus. May I do so with gentleness and respect. May I be called blessed. Amen.*

SATURDAY: 1 PETER 4.12-14(NIV)

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

- Peter taught that we follow One who suffered, therefore we shouldn't be surprised when suffering comes. This is not a call to seek suffering, rather to understand that, in this world, there will be suffering. Our context is much different today—our world is outwardly more accepting of those who claim the name of Jesus—but what it means to follow him is still just as counter to the ways of the world. You may in fact face suffering just because you have called yourself a Christ-follower. But the promise communicated by Peter is also just as true for you— you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Are there people or practices that help you hand on to these promises?
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- **Prayer Prompt: he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12.9-10)**
- *God, today I will not hide my weaknesses, I will boast in them. Would you show up in them and give me your power? Make me strong in you. Amen.*

GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a deeper dive into 1 Peter 4.12-19. Read it together aloud and discuss the questions that follow.

1 PETER 4.12-19 (NIV)

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And,

*"If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"*

¹⁹ So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.

- How do you respond to the teaching that we ought to be able to rejoice in our suffering? Are there circumstances when these words might not be the best words to share with a friend that is hurting?
- Peter gives three reasons why we should not be surprised about the suffering we face. Which of these most resonate with you and give you hope in times of struggle?
 - **We are participating in the suffering of Christ.** It's a part of our understanding of baptism. We go under the water, (into the death of Jesus), and come out of the water with a new identity and sense of resurrection. It is new life through a kind of death.
 - **Our suffering hints at the victory to come.** God's glory is as you come out of suffering.
 - **Our perseverance in suffering is the opening sign that God is working towards the restoration of all things.**