



# SUNDAY SCHOOL May 3, 2026

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## New Testament: Acts 7:55-60

*Context: Stephen, one of the early church's first leaders, has just delivered a bold speech accusing the religious authorities of resisting God—now, filled with the Spirit, he sees a vision of heaven as the crowd turns violent.*

### STEPHEN'S DEATH

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

When he had said this, he died.

### OVERVIEW

This passage records the martyrdom of Stephen—the first Christian martyr. As he is being stoned, he has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God and responds not with anger or fear, but with forgiveness and surrender. His final words echo those of Jesus on the cross.

### BIBLICAL CONTEXT

#### Immediately Before (Acts 7:1–54)

Stephen gives a sweeping retelling of Israel's history, emphasizing a pattern: God sends messengers, and the people resist them. He culminates by accusing the current leaders of betraying and murdering the “Righteous One” (Jesus).

This enrages the Sanhedrin. The **Sanhedrin** was the highest Jewish religious and legal council in first-century Judea, made up of chief priests, elders, and scribes, who interpreted the Law and handled major judicial matters under Roman rule.

#### Immediately After (Acts 8:1–3)

Stephen's death sparks widespread persecution of the early church. Believers scatter—but this scattering actually spreads the gospel further.

Notably, a young man named **Saul of Tarsus** is introduced, approving of Stephen's death—setting up one of the most dramatic transformations in Scripture.

#### Broader Book Context (Acts)

The Book of Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, traces the movement of the Holy Spirit through the early church.

Stephen's death marks a turning point:



- From **localized faith (Jerusalem)**
- To **expanding mission (Judea, Samaria, beyond)**

Theologically, it reinforces:

- Faithfulness under pressure
- The cost of discipleship
- The paradox that suffering often fuels growth

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Stephen is executed by stoning—a method permitted under Jewish law for blasphemy, though under Roman rule, executions technically required Roman approval.

This suggests:

- Either a mob action
- Or a “look-the-other-way” moment by Roman authorities

The Sanhedrin felt threatened:

- The Jesus movement challenged their authority
- It reinterpreted the Law and Temple
- It attracted growing numbers

**This is less about theology alone and more about power, control, and identity in a volatile Roman-occupied society.**

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **c. 30–33 AD** – Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus
- **Shortly after (mid-30s AD)** – Events of Acts 7
- Stephen’s martyrdom likely occurs within **a few years of Jesus’ death**

**This is very early Christianity**—before formal structures, creeds, or even a fully written New Testament.

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

### Key Terms & Layers

- **“Full of the Holy Spirit”**  
Not just emotional inspiration—**implies being completely aligned with God’s presence and purpose.**
- **“Gazed into heaven”**  
Suggests intense, fixed attention—not a casual glance, but deep spiritual perception.
- **“Jesus standing at the right hand of God”**  
Most references describe Jesus as *seated*—“standing” may imply:
  - Advocacy (like a witness in court)
  - Honor (welcoming Stephen)
- **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”**  
The word for “hold” implies “to set in place” or “charge to account”—a legal metaphor.



## Theological Nuance

Stephen mirrors Jesus' words from the cross—this is intentional. It shows:

- Not imitation for show
- But transformation at the deepest level

### *See Addendum “Who was Stephen?”*

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

At a metaphorical level, Stephen represents what happens when **belief becomes fully embodied**.

This isn't just about dying for faith—it's about:

- Seeing clearly when others are blinded by anger
- Holding peace when surrounded by chaos
- Refusing retaliation even when justified

In a **Grant County context**, this may manifest in:

- Conversations where someone is absolutely convinced they're right
- Social media posts that escalate rather than reconcile
- Local disagreements where identity gets wrapped up in being correct

Stephen's response suggests: The clearest sign of belief is not what we argue—but how we respond when attacked.

He doesn't argue back.

He doesn't defend himself.

He **forgives**.

That's not weakness—it's a different kind of strength.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

#### 1. **Conviction without hostility**

Stephen speaks boldly—but does not retaliate violently.

#### 2. **Recognize emotional escalation**

The crowd becomes “enraged” (literally “cut to the heart”)—we see this same dynamic today.

#### 3. **Refuse the cycle of retaliation**

The instinct to “hit back” is natural—Stephen breaks that cycle.

#### 4. **Live beliefs, don't just state them**

Your sermon title fits perfectly here:

*“Our Lives Reflect Our Beliefs”*—Stephen is the embodiment of that idea.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Why do you think Stephen's words made people so angry?*
2. *What stands out most about Stephen's response to violence?*
3. *How is Stephen's reaction similar to Jesus'?*
4. *What does it mean to be “full of the Holy Spirit” in practical terms?*
5. *Where do we see “crowd mentality” today?*
6. *Is forgiveness in the face of harm realistic—or idealistic?*



## Gospel: John 14:1-14

*Context: Jesus speaks these words to His disciples during the Last Supper, just after telling them He is going away—offering comfort, but also challenging their understanding of who He is and what “the way” truly means.*

### JESUS THE WAY TO THE FATHER

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus said to him, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

### OVERVIEW

John 14:1–14 is a passage of reassurance and revelation. Jesus tells His disciples not to be troubled, speaks of preparing a place, and makes the profound claim:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Thomas asks how they can know the way, and Philip asks to see the Father—revealing their confusion. Jesus responds by reframing everything: knowing Him is knowing God.

***The passage ends with a bold promise: those who believe will do “greater works.”***

### BIBLICAL CONTEXT

#### Before (John 13)

- Jesus washes the disciples’ feet—redefining leadership as service.
- He predicts betrayal and Peter’s denial.
- Most importantly: He tells them He is leaving.



## After (John 14:15–31)

- Jesus promises the Holy Spirit.
- The focus shifts from His physical departure to spiritual presence.

## Broader Narrative of Gospel of John

- John emphasizes identity: Who is Jesus?
- Uses “I AM” statements (echoing God’s name in Exodus).
- Focuses less on parables, more on theological meaning.

**This passage is central to John’s message: Jesus is not just a messenger—He is the embodiment of God’s presence.**

### HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

- Written ~90–100 AD, likely to a Christian community under pressure.
- Early Christians were being excluded from Jewish synagogues.
- Roman imperial culture demanded allegiance to Caesar as “lord.”

Saying “Jesus is the way” was not just spiritual—it was politically and socially disruptive.

It wasn’t: “Here’s a nice belief system.” It was: “This is the ultimate authority—not Rome, not tradition, not empire.”

### HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- Event: ~30 AD (Last Supper discourse)
- Gospel written: ~90–100 AD
- Context: Post-Temple destruction (70 AD), when Jewish identity and early Christian identity were being redefined.

This helps explain the urgency of reassurance: “What does it mean to follow Jesus now that everything familiar is gone?”

### BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

#### Key terms:

- “**Troubled**” – not just worry; deep inner disturbance
- “**Believe**” – not intellectual agreement, but trust/commitment
- “**Way**” – a path, a journey, a manner of living
- “**Dwelling places**” – not “mansions” in the modern sense, but abiding places, relational spaces

“In my Father’s house are many mansions” (KJV) can mislead modern readers into thinking real estate instead of *relationship*.

*See Addendum “In My Father’s House”*

#### Translation Evolution

Each stage carries assumptions: “Way” can sound exclusive in English, but in Greek it’s more like “the path you walk.”



## SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

### “I am the way”

Not a GPS direction. More like: “*Watch how I live—this is the path.*”

The “way” is:

- humility (foot washing)
- compassion
- truth-telling without domination
- trust in God beyond systems of power

### “No one comes to the Father except through me”

This is often heard as: “Only our group is right.”

But metaphorically, it can mean: “No one comes to God except through the kind of life I’m modeling.”

### “Greater works than these” may show up as:

- expanding compassion
- building community
- carrying the message outward

In Grant County terms:

- mentoring someone instead of judging them
- supporting someone in crisis rather than debating them
- being a calming, truthful presence in a noisy media environment

## HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- Move from belief to trust
  - Not “Do I agree?”
  - But “Do I live this way?”
- Focus on recognizing the voice, not labeling enemies
  - (ties beautifully to your recent discussion)
  - Jesus doesn’t list false voices—He forms people who can *discern*
- Resist exclusivity as identity
  - If “the way” becomes “we’re right, they’re wrong,” we’ve missed the way entirely
- Live as presence, not argument
  - Jesus says, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father”
  - The modern parallel: *If people see us, what do they see?*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What do you think Jesus meant by “the way”? A belief? A lifestyle? Both?*
2. *How have you heard “no one comes to the Father except through me” interpreted before?*
3. *What does it mean to “know God” through Jesus in a practical, everyday sense?*
4. *What might “greater works” look like today?*
5. *How do we discern the “right voice” in a world full of competing messages?*



## Addendums

### Who Was Stephen?

Stephen is one of the most important—but often overlooked—figures in the early Christian church. Before his dramatic death in Acts 7, he was already known as a leader, a servant, and a powerful voice for the faith.

#### One of the First Deacons (Acts 6:1–6)

Stephen was chosen as one of seven men to help care for widows and manage daily distributions of food. This role emerged because the early church was growing quickly and facing internal tensions.

What stands out is *why* Stephen was chosen:

- He had a good reputation
- He was “full of the Spirit and wisdom”

This tells us something important: **Leadership in the early church wasn’t about status—it was about character and trustworthiness.**

#### A Bridge Between Cultures

Stephen was likely a Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) Jew, which meant he lived between two worlds:

- Jewish religious tradition
- Greek language and broader culture

That made him uniquely positioned—but also more vulnerable:

- He understood different perspectives
- But he also challenged the established power structure

In many ways, Stephen represents what happens when **faith crosses cultural boundaries.**

#### A Powerful Teacher and Debater (Acts 6:8–10)

Stephen didn’t just serve food—he also spoke with wisdom and performed “wonders and signs.”

He engaged in debates with religious leaders, and Scripture says: They “could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him.”

That’s a key detail:

- His authority didn’t come from position
- It came from clarity, conviction, and presence

#### The First Christian Martyr

Stephen is traditionally recognized as the first person to die for the Christian faith.

But what makes his death significant isn’t just that he died—it’s *how* he died:

- With a vision of Jesus
- With words of forgiveness
- Without retaliation

His death becomes a model of **faith lived all the way through**, not just professed.



## An Unintended Catalyst for Growth

**Ironically, Stephen's death didn't stop the movement—it accelerated it.**

Persecution broke out, and believers scattered beyond Jerusalem. As they went, they carried the message with them.

So, Stephen's legacy includes:

- Courage under pressure
- A shift from local to widespread faith
- The indirect influence on figures like **Saul of Tarsus**, who witnessed his death and would later become one of Christianity's greatest missionaries

## Why Stephen Matters for Us

**Stephen's life asks a simple but challenging question:**

**Is our faith something we believe—or something we live?**

He wasn't an apostle.

He wasn't one of the "inner circle."

He was a servant who lived his beliefs so fully that others couldn't ignore it.

***The most influential people in faith aren't always the most visible—they're the most faithful.***

***Are we living our beliefs in the small, everyday moments?***

## A Modern Connection: Stephen Ministry

Today, the name Stephen lives on through **Stephen Ministries**, an international Christian organization that trains laypeople—called *Stephen Ministers*—to provide one-on-one care to individuals going through difficult times such as grief, illness, or life transitions.

The connection is intentional. Just as Stephen in the early church was chosen for his character, compassion, and spiritual depth—not for status—modern Stephen Ministers are everyday people within the congregation who quietly serve others through listening, presence, and care. Their role reflects a core truth from Stephen's life: **faith is often most powerfully expressed not from the pulpit, but through faithful, behind-the-scenes service to others.**

In that way, Stephen's legacy isn't only about courage in the face of persecution—it's also about **meeting people in their need with wisdom, grace, and steady compassion**, which may be just as meaningful—and just as transformative—today.

## In My Father's House

The phrase comes from John 14:2 in the Gospel of John: "In my Father's house are many mansions..." (KJV)

But the key word "*mansions*" is doing a lot of work it was never meant to do.

## The Original Word Changes Everything

The Greek word is "**monai**" (plural of *monē*), which comes from a root meaning: **to remain, to abide, to dwell**



So instead of:

- luxury homes
- individualized heavenly estates
- real estate in the afterlife

...it's pointing toward:

- **places of belonging**
- **spaces of relationship**
- **ongoing presence with God**

### *Why “Mansions” Happened*

When William Tyndale and later the King James translators rendered the text, the English word “mansion” didn't mean what it means today.

Back then, it meant: **a dwelling place or stopping place along a journey**

Over time, English drifted:

- “mansion” → big, impressive house
- faith imagery → unintentionally became material

So now people hear: “Heaven = everyone gets a really nice house”

Instead of: “Heaven = being fully at home in God”

### **And Here's the Twist Most People Miss**

Just a few verses later (John 14:23), Jesus says: “We will come to them and make our home with them.”

So, it's not just: **We go to God's house...**

It's also: **God comes to dwell with us.**

***That flips the whole idea from: future destination only to present relationship already beginning***

### **Metaphorically Speaking**

This isn't about square footage.

It's about **belonging**.

Think of it less like “a subdivision in heaven” and more like “a family table where there is always room for one more chair”

### **Grant County Context**

We may have grown up with:

- “I'm gonna get my mansion someday”
- faith tied to reward systems

The promise isn't: “**You'll get something later.**”

The promise is: “**You already have a place—with God—and nothing can take that away.**”



That’s a much deeper kind of comfort, especially for:

- people dealing with loss
- uncertainty
- aging
- questions about worth and belonging

### Relating to the Sermon “Our Lives Reflect Our Beliefs”

So, the natural question becomes:

If we believe there is “room enough” in God’s presence ... do our lives reflect that same openness?

Or do we:

- limit who belongs
- draw lines Jesus didn’t draw
- act like space is scarce

For years, many of us have pictured heaven as “getting my own mansion”. But what if Jesus wasn’t talking about real estate ... maybe:

- Heaven is **where we are going**
- But it is also **how we are living**
- Heaven isn’t just a place we arrive at someday ... it’s a relationship we begin living right now.

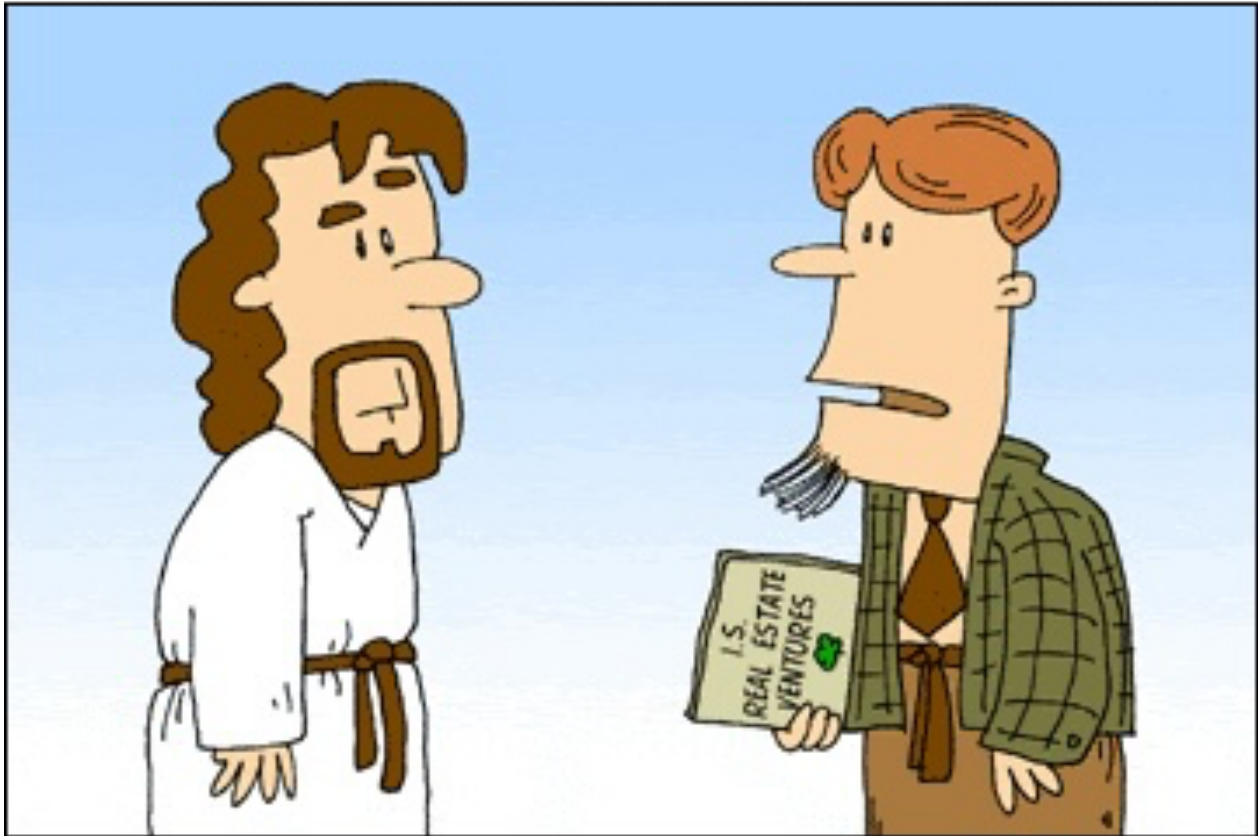
*I still believe heaven is something God prepares for us ... but I’m starting to wonder if it’s also something God is preparing in us.”*



GO AHEAD AND CHANGE "SAUL" TO "PAUL" ON EVERYTHING AND THE TITLE FROM "MASTER PERSECUTOR" TO "YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND" ON THE LETTERHEAD



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I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE AN OFFER ON YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE OF MANY MANSIONS