

Unstoppable. That word describes the 2025 football season of Indiana University, which was a former losing team that persevered, play-by-play and game-by-game, to end with a perfect 16-0 season, winning the University's first football title since its first team played in 1887—138 years ago. Now that is grit!

Unstoppable. That word describes our God, who is on the move throughout the book of Acts. From Genesis 1:1, where we read, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” our God has been on the move and He is unstoppable! In the book of Acts, God moves in power through the gospel.

Acts is a book of many “firsts.” In Acts 1, the first group of Jesus followers numbered about 120 after Jesus ascended into heaven. In Acts 2, the first evangelistic invitation was given and 3,000 people were baptized. In Acts 3, the first miraculous healing took place by one of the disciples. In Acts 6, the first volunteer team of servants was chosen according to their gifting and character. In Acts 7, Stephen, the first martyr, died for Christ. In chapter after chapter throughout the book of Acts, God is on the move in the power of His gospel, His good news of both help and hope for each and every person ever to live. Our God is unstoppable!

This morning, in Acts 6-7, we will look at Stephen to discover how God is on the move in our lives. God moved in and through Stephen in the first century, and because God is immutable, He is *still on the move* in your life and in mine. We need to know something about Stephen: he was a plain, ordinary man; there was nothing remarkable about him in terms of status, wealth, or education. He was a part of the church in Jerusalem, where he was not an elder, an apostle, or a pastor in the church. He was just a plain, ordinary guy through whom the power of God was on the move to take the good news to broken, hurting people—and it cost him his life.

Let's do a quick flyover of Stephen's life as told in the 75 verses of Acts 6-7. We first spot Stephen in “First Christian Church—Jerusalem” in Acts 6:1-7. The church had been growing exponentially since its birth in Acts 2. The last membership report we know of is in Acts 4:4, which states there were 5,000 men who had become followers of Jesus. Give each of them a wife and children, and the first and only congregation at this time was a mega-church, as it easily numbered 15,000 to 20,000 people. That growth produced a challenge. “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1).

Greek-speaking widows were not receiving their one meal a day over and again. They literally were starving to death. This was a serious problem that had to be quickly and effectively solved, and Stephen was a part of the solution.

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:2-3)

The twelve apostles would appoint seven men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Who was numbered among them? Stephen. “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism” (Acts 6:5).

It shouldn't surprise us that Stephen is at the head of the list. He was "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit," indicating that Stephen was *permeated by*, *lacking nothing* when it came to God in him, the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he was *permeated with* faith, having trust and confidence in God. Stephen was unstoppable. "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8).

Stephen was full of God's grace, meaning that Stephen was dominated by, permeated with God's mercy and kindness. Stephen knew that God had forgiven him of his sins, and that the gospel, the good news, was the power of God that permeated Stephen's life towards others! And God the Spirit filled Stephen and enabled him to "perform great wonders and signs" among the people.

Some of those people became pea-green with envy, so much so that they agreed to falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy against God (Acts 6:9-11). Their diabolical scheme worked. Their false news caused people to riot. They seized Stephen and took him before the Sanhedrin (i.e., the Jewish Supreme Court) to stand trial against the false charges (Acts 6:12-14). Notice how Stephen, the defendant, appeared on the witness stand: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15).

The hatred, anger, and malice of the courtroom was contrasted with Stephen, whose countenance was like that of God. Imagine what that would have been like! His appearance, his countenance, emanated from within him. Stephen was filled with, permeated with, the Holy Spirit. The only other human to whom this happened was Moses in Exodus 34:29 after he had been with God on the top of Mt. Sinai. Jesus was also transfigured while on a mountain top, but He was both fully God and fully man.

So, the trial ensued and all of Acts 7 is comprised of Stephen's defense, which is really the one and only sermon he ever preached. He was killed because of it. We will not read all sixty verses, but here's what stands out from it during our flyover. Stephen's masterful message covered 1,100 years of Jewish history. He broke his sermon into four simple parts:

- The Patriarchs—Acts 7:2-19: Stephen connected with his listeners as he spoke of Abraham and his descendants. They would have been nodding with approval.
- The Prophets—Acts 7:20-43: He spoke next of Moses, who is called a prophet in the Old Testament. Again, those listening would have been nodding with approval. Maybe an "Amen" was heard with an occasional, "Preach it, brother."
- The Place—Acts 7:44-50: Stephen then made mention of the tabernacle, which was replaced by the temple. The place where God was worshipped was worshipped itself. Those listening would have been applauding Stephen at this point.
- The Person—Acts 7:51-53: But then, all hell broke loose as they hated Stephen for what he then said about the only person who could save them!

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 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— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:51-53)

Stephen was direct and to the point. God was on the move through this man. Stephen told the truth: you not only killed the prophets who predicted that the Messiah was coming, you even murdered Him! Stephen did not get a return invitation to preach! They did the unthinkable.

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 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. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 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. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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. (Acts 7:54-60)

Once again, we read that Stephen was “full of the Holy Spirit” (if it’s repeated...) and was given a vision of what taking place in heaven. Jesus was *standing*, not sitting, at the right hand of God. Jesus said in Matthew 26:64 that He would be seated at the right hand of God. As the Holy Spirit empowered Stephen to die for his faith, it brought Jesus to His feet. Imagine the 71 members of the Sanhedrin plus untold numbers of Jews comprising a riotous crowd of 100-200 people yelling as loudly as possible as grown men covered their ears, dragging Stephen out of the city (let’s do things properly) to execute him. Notice that a “young man named Saul” was there—the one who “approved of their killing Stephen” (Acts 8:1), who would later become a follower of Jesus and be given the name Paul—the Apostle Paul. With his final breath, Stephen asked his Lord Jesus to receive him and not to hold this sin against those who murdered him. His final act was indescribable forgiveness. Using a euphemism of early Christians, Luke wrote that Stephen fell “asleep,” meaning that Stephen died and “woke up in the next life.”

So much for our flyover. It’s time to land the plane. How does Stephen’s story speak into your life and into mine? We can spot four distinct ways in which God was—and still is—unstoppable as He moves in power and it’s all good news. To help us remember these four insights, let’s use the word G.R.I.T. From the life of Stephen, here are four unmistakable ways that the unstoppable power of God is on the move as He brings help and hope to broken people.

G for Grace

In Acts 6:8, we read that Stephen was “full of God’s grace.” In the final moments of his life, with his last and dying breath, Stephen was able to give grace to those who murdered him *because* he had received grace from God. Remember, the Greek word translated “full” means that Stephen was permeated with God’s mercy and forgiveness. Just as sweat oozes from our skin when we exercise, Stephen was oozing forgiveness because he knew he was forgiven. That is our unstoppable God moving in power to bring His gospel—his good news of forgiveness—to others.

Listen carefully. You cannot give what you do not have. Do you, do I, do we forgive others? On the other hand, are we easily offended by family and friends? Are we keeping score of the offenses, reliving them over and over in our minds as we dwell on them, even though 1 Corinthians 13 says that “love keeps no record of wrongs”?

When children are growing up, we often say, “You look just like your mom,” or, “You are a spitting image of your dad.” In Matthew 5:9, Jesus preached, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” When you and I are quick to forgive, when we walk across the room for a conversation, pick up a phone to initiate a call, or send a text to get together with someone who has hurt us, it is then that we look like our dad, our heavenly Father who made peace with us through the death of Jesus, His Son. When we deliberately withhold forgiveness, we are grossly immature as Christians.

Moreover, if we deliberately withhold forgiveness from others, we are walking on thin ice with God. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught a model prayer in which He told us to pray, “And forgive us our

sins as we forgive those who sin against us” (Matthew 6:12). After He finished teaching the prayer, Jesus had a few more comments about the prayer; not about daily bread or His will in heaven being done on earth. No, the only additional commentary that Jesus made about the model prayer was “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15).

R for Relationship

In Acts 6-7, Stephen was in a relationship with God. The question is, are we, are you, am I? Stephen confronted the Sanhedrin, a group of 71 men who thought of themselves as the most spiritual men in all of Israel. They thought they were right with God because they were keeping all the rules of God. They took pride in their patriarchs, their spiritual lineage. They went to the temple day after day. They kept the rules of their religion. They *thought* they were right with God, when truthfully they were far from God. They were lost.

Does that look like us, like you, like me? Do we take pride in our spiritual lineage; grandpa, dad who was a pastor; mom, who leads the church choir? Do we keep all the rules, go to church every now and then, help with the children’s ministry, participate in a life group, give financially? We need to understand something. The gospel, the good news of God, is not about a religion, not about church membership or partnership. It’s about a relationship with Him. God is on the move, pursuing us. He wants us in an actual, ever-growing relationship.

The word “religion” is used five times in the New Testament, and not in a positive way. For example:

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:26-27)

Religion is about rules; the Gospel is about a relationship. Religion is about the outward appearance; the gospel is about our inward, interior walk with God. Once again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about this very truth.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!’” (Matthew 7:21-22).

What does it look like to be in a relationship with Jesus? Stephen showed us! He became like Jesus. Stephen went door-to-door in Jerusalem feeding widows, just as Jesus fed 5,000 men, plus women and children and then did it again with the 4,000. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Stephen served like His Savior Jesus. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and in His power, Stephen performed signs and wonders. In Acts 10:38, we read that in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus went around doing good and healing people. While he was being killed, Stephen prayed to God, asking Him to forgive them. While he was being nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed to God for those who were murdering Him, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” In 1 John 2:6, we read that if we claim to be Christians, we must live like Jesus. That can happen when we pursue Him in a real relationship. When others see Him in our lives, that shouts the gospel—good news—to those in our lives.

I for Impact

Stephen was the first martyr, someone who dies for what he or she believes. All we know about Stephen is right here in two chapters of the Bible. We do not know how where he grew up, what he did for a living, or how old he was when he was murdered. But this we do know: Stephen's short life had an indescribable impact. Did you notice that Saul—who would later become the Apostle Paul—was watching Stephen be murdered? Saul/Paul was there the entire time. What was he thinking when he heard Stephen's testimony about Jesus? What was he thinking when he witnessed how Stephen died and heard Stephen's final words? What was he thinking when he heard Stephen declare that he could see Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and his prayer for God to forgive those killing him? It had an impact beyond our understanding. Saul/Paul would become a Christian and Paul's impact on this world cannot be described in words. He wrote 13 books in the New Testament, planted numerous churches, trained and mentored men to become leaders, elders, pastors, and more. He led people to Jesus, from Roman soldiers in the palaces of the Caesars to the first person to follow Christ on the continent of Europe. And there is yet more! Stephen's murder and martyrdom caused this: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1).

The Christians were driven from Jerusalem, and they took the good news of God with them wherever they went! Our unstoppable God was on the move, and His power took the Church out of Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. The words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 were fulfilled: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Talk about an impact! Stephen's murder and martyrdom impact your eternity and mine! God's power still works in the lives of plain, ordinary people like us, and that power of God's gospel can impact those who live under our roofs and eat at our tables. For God's glory and through His power at work in us, we can impact those beside whom we live and work. Like Stephen, will you, will I, will we *die to self*? In Luke 9:23, Jesus defined what a Christian is: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow after me." Two verses later, Jesus said, "What good is it to gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul?" (Luke 9:25). What good is it to amass a fortune, attain titles and degrees, wield power and position *but not know Jesus*?

T for Truth

Stephen did not mince words. He did not dance around a bush. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen got right to the point with the Sanhedrin and everyone else listening in that gathering. The Holy Spirit convicted those listening, for the Spirit alone "convicts the world (i.e., people) in regard to sin, righteousness and judgment to come" (John 16:8). When the Spirit convicts us, we respond in one of two ways, either in humility or in hostility. In Acts 2, Peter preached the first sermon in the Church and he gave the first invitation for people to surrender their lives to Jesus. In *humility*, 3,000 people were baptized into Christ. In Acts 7, Stephen preached his first sermon to the Sanhedrin. In *hostility*, 71 men killed Stephen, responding in pure hatred, becoming defensive and unteachable when they heard the truth.

How about you, how about me, how about us? When we hear the truth that we have sinned and need Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, do we respond in humility or hostility? When a more mature Christian tries to speak truth into our lives to help us grow up spiritually, do we respond with humility or hostility? Like a line in a *A Few Good Men* from 1992, would it be said of us, "You can't handle the truth"?

Like Stephen, let me be direct. Like Stephen, are you quick to forgive even the greatest offenses? Like Stephen, are you prepared, ready to meet the Lord? Like Stephen, are you willing to die to Christ? Like Stephen, can you handle the truth about the state of your relationship with Jesus?

In humility, surrender your life, once and for all, to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Do NOT resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51)! If you have not surrendered your life to Jesus, be baptized (immersed) right now for the forgiveness of all your sins, past, present and future. In this same moment, God—the Holy Spirit—will enter you. God, the Spirit, will move into your life to transform you into the likeness of Jesus. His power will be on the move in you to forgive, to fix your eyes on Jesus, to be eager to be home with Him someday, to die to self and to live a legacy, impacting family and friends around you.

For those of us who have been immersed, do NOT resist the Holy Spirit! Stephen was filled with the Spirit, and we are commanded to be filled with Him as well (Ephesians 5:18). That filling has everything to do with yielding to Him because He is God in us. Our Holy “roommate” must control us—our minds, our desires, our destiny. Do NOT resist what God in our skin is attempting to do in His power to advance His gospel through us. He is unstoppable because He is God.

Stephen was a Hellenistic Jew, a Greek Jew. The name “Stephen” is not Jewish. It is the Greek “Stephanos,” which means “crown.” The moment Stephen died, when he “fell asleep,” he woke up with a crown. Stephen experienced what Jesus said in Revelation 2:10, “Be faithful, to the point of death, and I will give you a crown of life.”

As we take a piece of bread and drink a small amount of juice, we think about and dwell on the indescribable suffering of Jesus on a cross, crushed with the rage and fury of God *for our sins*. In the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, let us be faithful—one day at a time—and we will receive from Jesus a crown of life.