

CALVARY CHAPEL COSTA MESA

– COMMUNITY GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE –

Studies in the Book of Acts

“The First Christian Martyr” – Acts 6:8-8:3

FELLOWSHIP

The persecution of the Church has been part of its DNA and legacy since its founding. The cross and trials of Christ were the birth pains of new life and a relationship with God. While eternity was gained, those that first embraced this path quickly discovered that this world would continue its hostility and conflict with God’s truth and representatives. The church experiences its most serious confrontation yet in the story of Stephen, whose all-star resume would be appealing to any leader looking to stack their team or initiative. He was a servant, scholar, prophet, and evangelist. He acted with character and the hand of God was visibly on his life. Why, with so much apparent value, would his ministry be so short? This is the paradox that western culture struggles with. While society works to end suffering and its associated evils, the church with all of its good and mission is purged over and over again through conflict, pain and death. Interesting that one of Jesus’ first sermons ever recorded cast this expectation of present suffering:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)*

Open Doors is a ministry that seeks to help, empower and equip the persecuted church around the world. Their website records some daunting global stats. Every month 322 Christians are martyred for their faith, 214 churches and christian properties are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians. (see <http://opendoorsusa.com>) They note that 75% of the world’s population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions and they cite the U.S. State Department figures that Christians currently face persecution in more than 60 countries. The New Testament word for “martyr” has its root meaning in being a “witness.” Those that bear their faith with their brokenness give the highest form of testimony with their lives. While we pray and try to support the persecuted church, may we honor them and the Lord by being a witness for Christ in all of our social settings.

READ & DISCUSS

If you have time, read out loud together Acts 6:8-8:3. The seventh chapter of Acts is one of the best summaries of Old Testament found anywhere. Then discuss those areas that can be applied to our lives.

Acts 7:55-56 *But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”*

- *How does one understand God in light of suffering and evil? Why do some blame God for their suffering? Why does evil exist if God is good? How does the Gospel reconcile these apparent contradictions? When did Jesus struggle with suffering or persecution? How did He process or cope with His own fears or anxieties regarding pain and suffering? What can believers model from Christ in their own struggles?*
- *Some might try to ascribe super saint status to Stephen. What made him a normal Christian? What parts of his life were based on character, which parts were education, and what was God. How can believers grow in each of these areas? Which parts of Stephen were fostered in private and which were in group? How does the word “discipleship” encompass these ideas? How do you practice discipleship?*
- *When have you or someone you know ever been persecuted for your faith? What form did it take? Was it passive (e.g. shunning), verbal, or physical? How did you deal with the conflict? How did God help you? How did the family of God help? Who may have this hard time been a witness to?*

PRAY Spend some time praying for the persecuted church and talking about how to actively support them.



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Based on Pastor Brian Brodersen’s message from January 21, 2018.

Watch again: <https://cccm.com/teaching/the-spirit-the-church-and-the-world/video/the-first-christian-martyr/>