

## ACTS 6:8-15 (17)

### INTRODUCTION

This passage marks a transition in the book of Acts. Up to this point Peter has been the dominating figure, fulfilling his calling by taking the gospel to the Jews. However, now another major person looms on the horizon that is the apostle Paul who is introduced to us in his unbelieving and opposing nature at the end of chapter 7.

Following Paul's conversion, which is recorded for us in chapter 9, Peter begins to fade into the background and Paul becomes the central figure in Acts from chapter 13 onwards. Now between these two dominant figures is Stephen whose ministry was brief but whose death must have left a deep impression on young Saul.

Perhaps Stephen's martyrdom was used by God to prepare Paul for his encounter with God on the Damascus road. It is Stephen that we are going to consider this week and next Sunday as well.

### 1. STEPHEN'S CHARACTER (vs. 5 & 8)

Last week we discovered that Stephen's name appears first on that list of men who were chosen to distribute the food to the needy widows. The fact that Stephen was chosen reveals something of the high regard that the church had for him. These verses that we are looking at now tell us why the church should choose someone like Stephen. He is described as a man full of God's grace and power. Of course earlier in this chapter he is described as being full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (v 5).

The word translated "full" both in verse 5 and here in verse 8 means to be "filled up," Stephen was totally filled to the brim with faith, the Holy Spirit, grace and power. That is another way of saying that Stephen was completely controlled by the Holy Spirit, and as a result he was full of faith, grace and power.

The content of his faith is revealed in his sermon in chapter 7 where he proclaims with absolute confidence that God was the ruler of all history (7:1-51), and was in complete control of Stephen's life. Stephen knew that whatever happened to him was God's plan for him and that included death by stoning. It was this confident faith that enabled Stephen to face death with great assurance and confidence (7:59-60).

Now my dear friends could someone write this about us, that we were full of faith? Is our faith displayed in our confidence that God is sovereign and in control of all that is happening in our world and in our church and life? That means that God is in control of the bad times as well as the good times.

The pain and distress that we suffer, the disappointments we face the times of trials and temptations, the loneliness and stress that we have to cope with are all part of God's supreme plan for us. So often Christians say they believe that God is sovereign and in control of our lives but when it comes to living that truth out during times of hardship then many of us live as if He was not in control.

Sometimes Christians even blame God for what has happened to them and have even stopped coming to church or stopped reading their bibles because of what they consider to be God's harsh treatment of them. But that sort of reaction and attitude is not living as someone who is full of faith.

Faith means having supreme confidence in God and in all that He is doing even though we may not understand or work out what He is doing or why He is doing it in our lives. Job is an example of someone who faced trials and difficulties and temptations that many of us will never face yet he demonstrated his supreme trust and faith in God, even though everyone else was blaming God.

Stephen was also a man “full of the Holy Spirit,” which involved obeying God in everything and following the lead of the Holy Spirit as God’s truth was revealed to him. But as we turn now to verse 8 we read that Stephen was “full of grace.” Now grace flows from faith and the Holy Spirit. It is because Stephen was full of faith and was filled with the Spirit that Stephen is given grace to face persecution and even death.

Now think about this; here is a man who is full of grace someone who could be gracious to others even though as we read in this section he faced persecution and opposition. In fact his sermon in chapter 7 is full of grace for those who were opposing him. You see it is because he had complete confidence that God was in control that he could act and react graciously.

He did not need to get angry or feel hatred for those who opposed him he knew that His God was in control of his situation and that those mere human beings who were being hostile to him were fulfilling God’s ultimate plan for Stephen’s life. Stephen knew that God had a purpose for his life and that whatever that purpose involved he relied upon God to give him the grace that he needed to cope with whatever his future held. Although he did not know it that future would be short and God’s plan included dying as a martyr for his faith.

But Stephen committed himself fully into God’s hands even at the point of death (7:59) and he was willing to endure anything in the knowledge that His God would give him sufficient grace at his moment of need. Stephen’s graciousness is even seen towards his executioners when he could have called upon God to judge and destroy his enemies he actually calls upon God not to hold this sin against them (7:60).

You can see why the church would want him to be one of the seven men chosen to oversee and supervise the distribution of food to the widows. He was so full of grace towards others. Now of course all these characteristics go together. He is gracious because he is full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

If we fail to be gracious to others or if we fail to know and experience God’s grace sustaining us in our moment of need then we need to look for sin within our lives, sin that hinders God’s Spirit from filling us and controlling our lives. Are there doubts in your mind that our God is unable to deliver on his promises or that He is not in control? So often the anger that Christians show to one another is as a result of their frustrations with God and their failure to accept his sovereign purposes in their life.

Sometimes our lack of graciousness is simply the result of sin in our lives and our failure to put to death all sinful habits so that the Spirit will fill us with his grace and power.

Stephen we are finally told is a man of power. And that power is seen in the fact that he did many great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Of course such signs were a demonstration that God was with Stephen and that he truly was a man of God who was preaching God’s truth.

We don’t show God’s power in the same way today because the age of signs and wonders as authentic signs has now passed with the closure of the Canon of Scripture. But we still need power to live the Christian life. Power to preach God’s word; and power to speak God’s gospel to others. Now what a challenge Stephen is to us. In many ways he was not a remarkable man he was just like every one of us, but he is a great example to us and a pattern for our own lives. If we

are ever going to live God honouring lives like Stephen, if we are ever going to face opposition and trials then we need to be men and women of faith. We need to be people who submit to God's word and to the control of the Holy Spirit within our lives.

If we do that then God will give us the necessary grace to cope with whatever life throws at us whether good or bad. He will empower us by his Spirit to live consistent lives before others and even power and grace to face death whenever that moment comes to us.

To be like Stephen, means that we must be serious about our Christian faith. We must seriously obey God's word no matter what. We must root out of our lives all traces of sin for sin and disobedience leads to lack of faith, grace and power within our lives because only those who are filled with the Spirit know these blessings in all their fullness.

## 2. STEPHEN'S COURAGE (vs. 9-14)

A man like Stephen who has character is a match for any attack and he was about to face a particular fierce attack. Because Stephen's ministry was very effective opposition arose from members of the Jewish synagogue who began to argue with Stephen. The Greek word translated "began" does not mean that they got up from their chairs and entered into debate but it means that they were stirred into action.

No doubt enraged by their hatred for Jesus Christ and their own love of self-righteousness, they went after Stephen who was proclaiming Jesus Christ and His salvation by grace through faith.

Now it is hard to know how many synagogues are opposing Stephen here as the Greek is inconclusive. There are at least two the Synagogue of the freedmen and another one including Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. To be honest how many there were does not matter for the point is that they arose up to oppose and argue with Stephen.

The word translated as "argue" does not refer to a quarrel but to a formal debate. I wonder could Saul (Paul) have been one of the men who were debating with Stephen after all he did come from Cilicia? The Scriptures do not tell us so we can only ask the question? We are not told the actual content of the debate either some of the content can be inferred from the charges that are brought against him (vs. 13-14) and from his sermon before the Sanhedrin in chapter 7. No doubt the debate centred on the death resurrection and Messiahship of Jesus and the inability of the Law and the temple ritual to save.

However whatever the precise details of the debate Stephen argument was very convincing, for his opponents were unable to cope with his wisdom or cope with the power of the Spirit who empowered and enabled him to debate with such clarity (v 10).

Now we too need these two things if we are going to be effective witnesses for God's truth. We need wisdom, which if you remember is the ability to practically apply the scriptures to life situations, and we need the Holy Spirit to empower us.

Of course this wisdom comes to us from the Holy Spirit but we must always remember that when we are speaking for the Lord whether is personal witness or public preaching and teaching we need God's Holy Spirit to enable and empower us. We need His help to be able to apply His word to the hearts of those that we are speaking too.

However we also must understand that we are only able to speak for the Lord, and declare His word to others because the Holy Spirit is with us and his power is available to us and if we ask for wisdom it will be granted to us (James 1:5).

Therefore we should not feel intimidated when seeking to tell others of the Lord. You might think that you are not very well educated or that you are not very good at putting words together. But with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and with the wisdom that is available to us then we are all able to declare something of God's truth to others.

Now Stephen's opponents were unable to win the debate so they change tactics and resort to deception (v 11). They secretly persuade some people to say that they heard Stephen blaspheme against Moses and God. It is interesting that these are the same tactics used against Jesus at his trial.

There are no limits that unbelievers will go to in their opposition to the truth of God, God's truth is never neutral, and therefore stirs up a reaction. We must not be surprised when our opponents today tell lies about Christians and make false accusations and even make false charges. Have you not heard the blatant lies that are told about Christians, who oppose Sexual Orientation Regulations, we are being made out to be homophobic? That of course is lies, opposing a practise does not make anyone homophobic but such accusations are made because people hate the truth of God with a passion and are prepared to go to any lengths to have it abolished.

The accusation against Stephen was serious because such an offence according to the Old Testament was punishable by death (Leviticus 24:16), which of course is what Stephen's opponents want. Accusing Stephen of blaspheming against the Law of Moses probably indicates to us that Stephen was denying the ability of the Law of God to save from sin.

He is also charged with blaspheming God by speaking against His temple (v 14) where God's presence dwelt. That accusation probably means that Stephen had spoken to them about Jesus being the temple that he would be destroyed and raised again as Jesus himself had proclaimed (John 2:19-21).

The people were stirred up by those who opposed Stephen although to accuse someone of blaspheming would make it very easy to stir the people, the elders and the teachers of the law up. So they dragged Stephen away for trial before the Sanhedrin. When the trial began false witnesses were produced (v 13-14) and they are called false witnesses not because they said things that Stephen did not say but that they twisted his words, and misrepresented what Stephen actually did say. Is that not a tactic used today.

Occasionally after I have taken a School Assembly the person who is in the room with me usually says something in closing. On most occasions it is not a problem but occasionally they try to sum up what I have just told the children. Sadly my words are twisted and a different slant is put on my words.

Now whether that is deliberate or a failure to understand, I am not sure but on a few occasions I have felt that it was deliberate in order to detract from the truth I have been exhorting the children to believe. How often has Christian truth been misrepresented in our newspapers or on the television? An example of misrepresenting Stephen's words is given in verse 14. Jesus never claimed he would destroy the Jerusalem' temple but spoke about his own body as a temple (John 2:19-21) that would be raised up again after death.

Their accusations against Stephen made him out to be a revolutionary seeking to overthrow the established divine order because they said he wanted to change the customs of Moses handed down to them (v 14). In reality what he probably said was that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament customs he was the reality that the Old Testament customs typified.

But as far from being a troublemaker was concerned he was anything but that, he was a man of peace and grace as we have already seen and as his words at his death demonstrate (7:60). But

that is how it is with those who oppose the Christian faith. They always seek to make the church and Christians look like troublemakers, people who are out to stir up trouble or deny rights to someone else.

My dear Christian brothers and sisters do not be surprised when your words are misrepresented, or twisted by unbelievers. People who oppose the gospel will go to any lengths to malign God's word and God's people that is what we must expect but let's remember we are to speak God's truth to people and leave the results with God. Throughout Acts the result is twofold. Some believe what they hear and many are opposed to it.

That is how it will be in our own day, some will believe and we thank God for that but sadly many will oppose it and we must be prepared for that. Of course some people's opposition is not always hostile or verbal. They can be very polite in the opposition. One way to oppose God's truth is to refuse to listen to it, so they fail to come to any meetings or events this church runs.

Some oppose it by doing nothing about what they hear so it is possible to be at our church services and hear what is said but because you oppose it, you do not respond to it as you should, but continue to reject it. In doing so you might as well be hostile in your opposition to the gospel and to the church because your actions speak loud and clear for you.

But throughout this ordeal Stephen's courage shines through. Despite the opposition and threats on his life he never backed down from speaking the truth he never compromised God's word but he simply continued gently and wisely but boldly to proclaim God's word to the people as we will see in the next chapter. Look at his courage as he boldly rebukes the people for their opposition to God (7:51-53).

My dear friends we too need such courage and boldness when we are facing opposition and that opposition against the church and the gospel is increasing in our own day. But let us ask God for courage to speak God's word gently and wisely and to do so without compromise.

Sadly some churches that once were clearly evangelical have compromised mainly because of the pressure placed upon them by those who oppose the gospel message. Therefore we need to constantly be on our guard and constantly seek God for grace and wisdom and power to continue to contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude v 3).

At the end of the day what is important for the Christian and the Christian Church? It is not the approval of men but the approval of God. That is what mattered to Stephen and the very last verse gives us such a contrast (v 15). We have the disapproval and opposition of the Jewish leaders and people and the wonderful approval of God upon Stephen. As Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin accused of being a blasphemer of God, "his face was like that of an angel." This is an unusual expression but it is intended to show the contrast. The people do not approve of Stephen but God certainly does.

Stephen was someone who walked closely in fellowship with God and something of God's glory radiated from him. God answered these false charges by putting some of his glory upon Stephen and by so doing showing his approval of Stephen. Surely the lesson for us is very simple. In the midst of all the opposition that we might face either personally or as a church what is it that really matters?

It's not that a few individuals think well of us but that God approves of us. Surely that alone will spur us on to remain faithful and to continue to proclaim God's word and to do so wisely graciously and powerfully as the Holy Spirit enables us.

Amen