

ACTS
Stephen, The Man
Acts 6:8-15

Stephen is one of the most remarkable persons in the whole Bible. His character, prayer life, preaching skill, spirituality, knowledge of doctrine and death were truly remarkable in every way. Stephen was a preaching-deacon and perhaps the first apologist in the Christian Church, for he defended the Faith before the unbelieving world. A remarkable feat for only a deacon.

While I cannot be sure, I think Stephen was a sharp, young, aggressive business- man who was filled with the Holy Spirit and God used him to make an impact upon his generation for Christ. He was a layman who knew his Bible and his Savior and God used him mightily to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Stephen was only a layman but God worked in him and through him as much or more than any of the Apostles.

Stephen was the historical link between the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul. In fact, it was Stephen who was probably responsible for the conversion of the Apostle Paul to Christianity. Stephen was given great insight into the Word of God and through his debates in the synagogue and his steadfastness in martyrdom, he greatly influenced Saul of Tarsus to become a Christian, and Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul.

“And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58).

“And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him” (Acts 22:20).

Some have said that Stephen was “the Paul before Paul.” It is certain that without Stephen there would have never been a Paul, for Stephen was God's instrument to first witness to Saul, the feisty Jewish Pharisee.

THE CHARACTER OF STEPHEN Acts 6:8

Full of Grace (6:8a). “And Stephen, full of grace. . .” -- We know that Stephen was a Hellenistic, Greek speaking Jew who had been converted to Christ under the preaching of the Apostles. He was a deacon in the local church at Jerusalem. Stephen's character can best be described by the word “full.” Stephen was a full man. The Bible clearly describes him as a man “full of grace” and “full of power” and “full of the Spirit” and “full of wisdom” and “full of faith.” These characteristics were part of Stephen's life before he became a deacon in the local church at Jerusalem, not afterwards. Apparently Stephen understood the deep implications of the grace of God in salvation and the Christian life, and being overwhelmed with the grace of God in his experience, he became a very gracious person in his demeanor. Stephen had a winsome way and a lovely attractiveness about his personality. In plain words, he had some “Christian charm.”

Knowing Christ affected Stephen's lifestyle so that he came across in a gracious spirit to others. He was not some sourpuss Christian, always complaining and seeking the sympathy of others, getting on everyone's nerves. He had a graciousness and loveliness about his personality which attracted others to Christ.

Full of Power (6:8b). “And power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.” -- Apparently there were some Christians, like Stephen, in the early church who also had the sign-gifts. They received this gift when the Apostles laid hands on them so as to identify them with the work of the Apostles. Whatever, Stephen experienced supernatural power in his life so as to cause supernatural phenomena in the lives of others. As stated in other messages, the sign-gifts passed off the scene of history shortly after the

death of the Apostles and the sign-gifts are no longer in existence today.

Full of the Spirit (Acts 6:3,5). “But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit. . . and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, . . .” -- Stephen was a man filled with the Holy Spirit. It was the filling of the Spirit which gave him the power to live the Christian life and to speak boldly for Christ before the Sanhedrin. Stephen's secret to victorious Christian living was not in his spiritual gifts (although he was a good deacon and a great preacher), nor in his intellect (although he had a great mind), nor in his training (although he was trained in Scripture), but his secret was the filling of the Holy Spirit. Three times the Bible says Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit.

What is the filling of the Spirit? First, it should be said that the filling of the Spirit is not for the spiritually elite but for all Christians. This is the normal Christian life and when we are not filled with the Holy Spirit, we are living a subnormal Christian life. If a Christian is not in touch with the Holy Spirit, he will not be fruitful and most certainly will never be bold in his witness for Christ. Second, to be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by the Spirit. The filling of the Spirit is contrasted with being drunk with wine. “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). A drunk man is under the control of booze, influenced by the spirits. Alcohol affects a person's walk, talk and actions. Just as a drunk man does strange things and says strange things which seem totally ridiculous while under the influence, so a Christian, filled by the Spirit, says and does things which seem totally ridiculous to the non-Christian world. Third, one is kept from the filling or control of the Spirit because of sin in his life. Sin is expressing our independency from God, having a desire to please self and not God. Whenever a Christian rebels, involves himself in sinful and worldly practices, fails to do what God commands him to do, then the control of filling of the Spirit in one's experience is lost. Whenever the Christian senses that he has transgressed the will of God, he should immediately confess that sin so as to restore the controlling work of the Spirit. Fourth, to be filled with the Spirit is to bring every area of one's life under the control of the Spirit. When God shows the Christian those areas not under the Spirit's control, he must yield control of those areas whatever they might be - materialistic spirit, gossip, sex life, hatred, jealousy, worldly spirit, laziness or you name it. All these areas must come under the control of the Spirit of God. The Christian must never wait for “feelings” for if he waits until he “feels” filled he will probably never be filled. He confessed the sin, claims the filling by faith and trusts God to give him the proper feelings. The Christian must trust God to fill him and thank Him for it in faith for having done it. Receiving the control of the Spirit involves the surrender of the will to Him and trust. Fifth, the filling of the Spirit is a repeated act. It is not something which happens only once. It happens multiple thousands of times in one's experience. The Christian must keep on believing in Christ and then he will be controlled by the Spirit.

“Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his inner most being shall flow rivers of living water.’” But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for this Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39).

When one is controlled by the Holy Spirit, the fruits of the Spirit will become evident in that life. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22,23). The filling of the Spirit is a way of life and it is often described as walking in the Spirit. “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Christians, are we filled with the Holy Spirit? Are we walking in the Spirit? Are we experiencing God's power? Do we see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives? Are we aggressive in spreading the Christian Faith?

Full of Wisdom (Acts 6:3): “But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. . . “ -- When it says that Stephen was full of wisdom, it means more than that he was good with finances and knew how to put the principles of economics into practice. Stephen was wise in the scriptures. In his famous sermon, it appears that he outstripped Peter and James in his Biblical and theological understanding. He had a deep insight into the Holy Scriptures which made him a wise man.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). Stephen knew the Word of God in his head and the power of the Holy Spirit in his heart, and this combination makes for a godly person. Stephen's power, influence and fruitfulness were the product of many hours devoted to the things of God. The final result was that Stephen became an aggressive soul winner and defender of the Faith. “And he who is wise wins souls” (Prov. 11:30).

It takes time to cultivate a spiritual life. It does not come overnight. One cannot hear an emotional sermon, then read the Bible fifteen minutes and pray fifteen minutes and then go out and change the world. No, the Bible must be in the Christian's blood and must be the only basis for all of his actions in life. Do you want wisdom? Then learn and apply the Word of God to your experience. With consistent knowing and applying the Bible to life, you will in time become an effective and fruitful Christian, providing you are walking in the Spirit.

Full of Faith (Acts 6:5): “And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith. . .” -- Stephen believed God and walked by faith. He trusted in the trustworthiness of God. He believed what God said in the Bible and obeyed the commands and principles of Scripture. He stepped out in faith and trusted God for the humanly impossible. He was willing to take the risk of living by faith. The reason Stephen was full of faith was because he was a man of the Bible. He knew the faithfulness of the God of Scripture.

If we want more faith, brethren, we must not beg, cry and pray, “Oh, God give me faith!” No, we must sit down at our desk, study and memorize the Word of God. Faith comes through the Bible. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17 (KJV)).

THE CONFLICT WITH STEPHEN Acts 6:9

“But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.”

Stephen undoubtedly went to the synagogue on the Sabbath as a good Jew should and there he presented the claims of Jesus Christ to the unconverted Jewish rabbis and laymen. This was a Hellenistic synagogue and it apparently had many sharp, intelligent Jews in it. The “Freedmen” were Jews who had been slaves in the Roman empire but were set free. Perhaps Saul of Tarsus also attended this synagogue since Tarsus was the chief city of Cilicia.

Stephen preached Christ in the synagogue, and after he preached, there was, according to the custom, debate over the message. What did Stephen preach? He preached that Jesus was the Messiah of the Old Testament, and that He fulfilled all the prophecies. He probably preached that since Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament, there was no longer any need for animal sacrifices, for Christ is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; nor was there a need for a priestly system, for Christ is our Great High Priest who is able to save forever those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them; nor was there a need for physical circumcision for followers of Christ are the true circumcision in heart who worship in the Spirit of God; nor was there a need for a physical temple because Christians are the true temple of God. Stephen preached Christ and used the Scriptures for everything he said which shut the mouths of his opponents.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEBATE WITH STEPHEN Acts 6:10-12

Abundant Ability (6:10): “And they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” -- Because Stephen knew his Bible and was filled with the Holy Spirit, his words could not be resisted. He was given abundant ability to refute his opponents.

Perhaps one of the debaters was Saul of Tarsus, the brilliant young Pharisee, who later became the Apostle Paul. Perhaps Saul was stirred to anger by the things he heard Stephen say but he could not answer Stephen. Stephen probably dumbfounded Saul that day and even bested him in the debate. This must have been a

slam to Saul, a blow to his pride because he could not answer Stephen from the Scriptures, even though Saul boasted of being wise in the Bible, having set at the feet of Gamaliel, the great teacher.

Accusation of Blasphemy.(6:11): “Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’” -- The leaders in this synagogue wanted Stephen to be put to death. They gathered several witnesses, paid them money under the table, and gave them some trumped up charges against Stephen. These false witnesses claimed they heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. A person guilty of blasphemy under Jewish law was to be stoned to death.

When the Jews could not answer Stephen, they resorted to tactics often employed by people who lose an argument. When they cannot out think or out shout the opponent, they put down the opposition by maligning of character. In this case, these Jews went one step further and found false witnesses to testify against Stephen.

At the root of these Jew's problem was that they put Moses before God; that is tradition and men before the revelation of God in the Bible. Had they had God first in their thinking, they would have been receptive to the Messiah and seen Him as the fulfiller of the Old Testament prophecies.

Arrest (6:12): “nd they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council.” -- They could not resist Stephen but they did arrest him. They apparently roughed him up a bit and brought him before the Sanhedrin for a trial.

THE CHARGES AGAINST STEPHEN Acts 6:13-15

False Witnesses (6:13,14): “And they put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and altar the customs which Moses handed down to us.’” -- These false witnesses gave half-truths, for a bald-faced lie would never have been accepted by the common people. Someone has said “A half of the truth is a whole lie.” Stephen probably did preach that there was no longer any need to worship in the temple and told of Christ's prediction of the destruction of the temple. Stephen undoubtedly taught that all the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law had been fulfilled in Christ. What was said against Stephen was partly true and partly false, but the Jews twisted the truth to make Stephen look like a bad guy. However, Stephen never spoke against Moses or God and was certainly not guilty of blasphemy.

True Christians who are trying to do the will of God, must learn to put up with lies, half-truths and perversions of facts, for the non-Christian world, when they get angry with Christians, often resort to lies to put down the truth.

Face Like An Angel (6:15): “And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.” -- As Stephen heard these trumped up charges, he was calm, cool and collected. He did not panic because he knew he was in the will of God and that they had done the very same thing to his Lord when He was before the Sanhedrin. Stephen's face shown like an angel's because the face is the mirror of the soul. Stephen's soul was filled with the Lord, with the Holy Spirit, with faith. with grace and with power and his face radiated the glory of God. Stephen became closer to being like an angel than any man who ever lived.

Do you suppose Saul of Tarsus saw Stephen's face that day? Perhaps he never forgot that look on Stephen's face and it haunted him until he accepted the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Saved: We who are Christians must ask ourselves, “What was Stephen's secret to power?” If Stephen could experience God's power, so can we today.

(1) Scripture: Stephen was full of the Scriptures. He mastered the Old Testament in his early life and when

he was converted, he became a powerhouse for God.

(2) Trust: Stephen was a man “full of faith” who was willing to take the risks to step out and entrust himself to the One, True and Living God as He is revealed in Christ.

(3) Enlightenment: Stephen had divine enlightenment for men could not resist his wisdom and Spirit as he spoke. Even in the realm of the intellect, Stephen was more than a match for his opponents.

(4) Power: Stephen experienced God's power through the filling and controlling work of the Holy Spirit. Beloved, we would all see more of the Spirit's power if we served Him more.

(5) Honesty: Stephen was of “good reputation.” He was honest. Honest with God, honest with himself and honest with others. He had an open and transparent life with no secret sins.

(6) Entreaty: Stephen was a man of prayer. No man could have prayed as he did at the end of his life, had he not prayed prevailingly all of his life.

“And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ And having said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59,60).

A quote from Dr. J. H. Jowett is very appropriate at this point.

It is in the field of prayer that life's critical battles are lost or won. We must conquer all our circumstances there. We must first of all bring them there. We must survey them there. We must master them there. In prayer we bring our spiritual enemies into the presence of God and we fight them there. Have you tried that? Or have you been satisfied to meet and fight your foes in the open spaces of the world? I am trying to say in the spiritual realm what Lord Fisher once said in the realm of material warfare. He said, “Compel your enemy to fight you on your own drill ground.” Yes, indeed, and when you fight the world and the flesh and the devil on the drill ground of prayer, we have a certain victory. Let us bring our evil thoughts on the field of prayer. Let us drag our mean judgments on to the field of prayer. Let us drive our ignoble purpose on the same field, and our insane prejudices, and our malicious practices, and our tyrannical passions. Let us fight them on our own drill ground and slay them there. Men ought always to bring their evil antagonisms and besetments into the presence of God. Force them into God's holy place and there fight and slay. Men ought always to pray and they will not faint in the heaviest day.

(7) Nerve: Stephen was not a compromiser. He spoke boldly to his accusers and gave them the gospel, even though in so doing he was signing his own death warrant.

We often sing the song, “Dare to be a Daniel” but are there any who would “dare to be a Stephen?” -- to be a person full of power, full of grace, full of wisdom, full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith!

Unsaved. Are you without Christ? My message to you is the same as Stephen's. Christ is the Messiah of the Old Testament. He is the God-Man who came to die for sinners and to save them for all eternity. Christ came to save a people for Himself and will most certainly take all He saves to heaven. Christ is the One who gives the soul peace and rest from the labors of sin. He removes guilt and spiritual pain so as to make a person whole. Are you saved? Do you know your sins are forgiven? Are you sure you have eternal life? If you are not sure, trust Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and He will make you a new creature in Christ.