

The Book of Acts
Stephen – Martyr - a man of Great Character
Acts 6: 8-15

Introduction:

1. We continue our study in this incredible Book
2. For me, one of the most inscrutable, the most mysterious providences is that throughout history, some of the most gifted, powerful, effective servants have died young after a short but amazingly impactful journey
3. Of course, leading the way is our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ, who, we're told, began His ministry when He was about 30 years old.
4. Scholars tell us that, by studying the Sabbath cycle and the cycle of feasts, He had about a three-year ministry
5. We just sang the hymn "*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.*" The original stanza was: "***When I survey the wondrous cross where the young Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.***"
6. David Brainerd, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Jim Elliott, the Roman martyr Perpetua, William Borden, Dietrich Bonhoffer, and Keith Green, among other amazing people, all gave their lives for the gospel.
7. So, it was with the man we're going to begin studying today, Stephen
8. He was the main human instrument in the hand of God
He was chosen from among thousands of Christian men to be one of the seven to care for the daily distribution of food to the Greek-speaking widows in the early church.
9. He was one of three who were workers of signs and wonders, besides the apostles, the others being Philip and Barnabas.
10. As he was dying, he was honored by God to see a vision of heaven open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ready to receive him.

Stephen's Impeccable Character:

1. ***Acts 6:3, "Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them."***
2. ***Verse 5, "Full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."***
3. ***Acts 6:8 - "Now, Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."***
4. To be filled with the Spirit means to be consistently controlled by the Holy Spirit, the indwelling Spirit.
5. Everything starts with the transformed mind.
6. The task of overseeing the daily distribution of food to the Greek-speaking widows of the church took amazing practical wisdom and insight into how to handle such a complex logistical issue. It matters very much in a ministry like that, not just what you do, but how you do it, how you treat people, how you treat the widows.
7. ***Verse 8, "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people."***
8. To be full of grace means that God continually poured His grace, His saving grace, on Stephen, and through Stephen to others.

9. Besides the apostles, Stephen, Barnabas, and Philip were the only three listed in the New Testament to do signs and wonders.
10. He was humble, and he was a powerful, faithful servant of Christ vertically and horizontally, he was selfless, wise, and a loving servant

Stephen's Courageous Ministry:

1. ***Verses 9-10, "Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen."***
2. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.
3. Anyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
4. We understand that Stephen's ministry of proclamation was done in a hostile setting, but we see Stephen's spirit-empowered boldness.
5. Remember Scripture is written to inspire us and give us illustrations, and role models to follow, or even negative role models to avoid, examples of sin like Ananias and Sapphira.
6. Here we get Stephen, and so there was a practical application to say, ***"God, make me bold in my generation."***
7. The synagogue was an assembly of Jews, and any man was invited to comment on the Scriptures or to bring a message of exhortation
8. Stephen would take advantage of these opportunities
9. The Talmud indicates that at that time there were 480 synagogues in the Jerusalem area.
10. Saul was likely involved in these debates with Stephen
11. Stephen's preaching, described in ***Acts 7***, gives a detailed overview of what he preached and the incredible depth and wisdom
12. He was proclaiming that the Old Covenant was fulfilled and now obsolete, because of Jesus's death on the cross.
13. Stephen understood the significance of the moment when Jesus died in ***Matthew 27:50-51***, ***"When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit, and at that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks split."***
14. The curtain in the Temple represented the holy barrier that all sinners had from the presence of God.
15. It separated the Holy Place where the priest ministered daily from the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest could go once a year.
16. ***Hebrews 10:19-22*** says, ***"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way open for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."***
17. God wants us to be close.
18. That also made the animal sacrifices and the temple sacrifices obsolete. It was fulfilled that day because ***"The blood of bulls and goats can't take away sin."*** ***Hebrews 10:41& 8:13***

19. This is effectively what Jesus was saying to her in **John 4: The time is coming, when the temple will be meaningless, and you won't need to go there to worship. God is everywhere. You can worship him everywhere."**
20. Because of Christ, the Levitical priesthood was now obsolete.
21. **Acts 6:7, it says, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."**
22. Look what his enemies said he was speaking blasphemy, that's where I'm getting all this. **Verse 13 & 14, "This fellow never stopped speaking against this Holy Place, the temple, and against the law." The Law of Moses focused on the temple. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down."**
23. What do you think they're talking about? Animal sacrifice became obsolete the moment Jesus died.
24. Look what Stephen himself said in the next chapter about the temple - **Acts 7:48-50: "The Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet (Isaiah) says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is the footstool for my feet. Then Verse 50 'Has not my hand made all those things?'"**
25. He was a man full of God's grace and power, and his words were extremely powerful
26. **Then Acts 6:9-10 "These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the spirit by whom he spoke."**
27. This irresistible wisdom reminds me of the promise Jesus made in **Luke 21:15** about when you're arrested: **"Don't worry ahead of time about what to say. "I will give you words and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to resist or refute."**
28. Jesus operated under the same Holy Spirit and confounded the religious leaders, and it says in **Matthew 22:46, "No one could answer him. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions."**
29. He couldn't refute the prophecies that Stephen quoted, and he consented to the enraged murder of Stephen by the Sanhedrin.
30. Look at **Acts 7:57-58 "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 clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."**
31. It's like he was a ringleader of the plot against Stephen, and **Acts 8:1** says, **"Saul wholeheartedly approved of Stephen's death."**
32. **"He fell to his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Acts 7:60.**
33. There are three accounts of Saul's conversion.
34. The last one says, **"Jesus cried out, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads,' he said. Then I asked, 'Who are you?' [Saul talking] 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'"**
35. Goads, are sharpened stakes placed behind a troublesome beast of burden to discourage the animal from kicking.

Stephen's Victorious Opposition:

1. **Verse 11, "They secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.'"**

2. So, the charge is blasphemy - the same charges leveled at Jesus and His claims to be the Messiah and the Son of God.
3. Blasphemy is a charge punishable by death in ancient Israel.
4. With Stephen, the blasphemy was specifically tied to the temple. **Verses 13-14, "They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this Holy Place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.'"**
5. They stirred up the crowd against Stephen as they did with Jesus, **Mark 15:11: "The chief priest stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead,"**

Stephen's Radiant Face:

1. **Verse 15, "All who are sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and I saw that his face was like the face of an angel."**
2. Scripture says that Moses' face was radiant. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was transfigured before the disciples, and now Stephen's face supernaturally glowed.

Application:

1. If Stephen were here, he would tell everyone of you to believe in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.
2. And God has provided salvation through His only begotten Son.
3. Believe in Him, trust in Him.
4. Don't be stiff-necked and hard-hearted and resist the Holy Spirit and fight against what the Spirit's saying.
5. Secondly, stand amazed at such a servant of God - **Acts 7**, shows just how amazing and wise he was.
6. Every saint that has ever lived or is alive now or ever will live, will be part of our heavenly inheritance.
7. Thirdly, what role am I willing to play for someone else's conversion?
8. What can I do to die to myself, to die to my reputation, to die to my convenience so that other people can be saved?
9. Then, finally, rejoice in the fulfillment of the animal sacrificial system through Jesus Christ
10. Only Jesus can and will take away your sin

