

- ***READ ACTS 6:1-7*** While we have rightfully spent much time talking about the success of the early church in the first century, we must also take time to acknowledge that not everything perfect. In **Acts 5:1-11** we read of two disciples, Ananias and Sapphira, lying to the Apostles and the Holy Spirit and being struck dead for their sins. Shortly after we find the Apostles again be arrested and threatened with death if they didn't stop preaching a message of Jesus being exalted to God's right hand as Prince and Savior. (**Acts 5:31**) Additionally, in what we just read, there were internal issues within the church that had racial undertones. Those who were naturalized Jews felt as if their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. (**Acts 6:1**) Such an issue within the church could've really caused problems for the Apostles and those early disciples, but thankfully the wisdom of the Apostles prevailed in that they decided to appoint some capable men over this task to make sure things were done as they ought to be done.
- The plan was for the church to select from among themselves seven men who were known of good reputation and who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These were men who could be trusted to make sure that such a work was carried out correctly and responsibly. This was done in an effort to make sure that the work the Apostles were doing was able to continue to be done. From among the church Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas were chosen as men who could do this work. After bringing them to the Apostles so that they might all pray and be confirmed to this work, the Scripture tells us that the word of God continued to be spread. From this, I conclude that these men were carrying out their work well since the Apostles were able to continue their devotion to the preaching and teaching of the Gospel message.
- This section of Scripture should fill us with great joy seeing a church overcome a problem that could've really caused great harm. However, it is quickly countered with a very sad happening in which Stephen is eventually killed for his willingness to speak the truth. At least according to what we have recorded within Luke's account of the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen is the first disciple who was martyred for the sake of Christ. He was the first disciple who willingly gave up his life if it meant the Gospel message heard by those who were in need of hearing. This evening, I would like for us to take some time considering Stephen and the circumstances surrounding his death because I believe there are some very strong lessons that can be learned from what happened to this great man of faith. Let's begin by looking closer at this man, his message, and the response of the hearers.

I. Stephen, His Message, & The Hearer's Reactions

A. Stephen was numbered with those who specially served the Jerusalem church

1. As mentioned a moment ago, Stephen was not just a disciple, but he was specially chosen by the church to be in charge of this task of feeding those Hellenistic Jewish widow disciples who were in need. This seems to be a natural progression of what we have seen in **Acts 2:41-47**. These disciples had a deep love for one another that led them to freely give of themselves so that no one among them would have any physical need. This must have been a big task especially considering that *"the disciples were increasing in number."* (**Acts 6:1**) Therefore it makes sense that the Apostles would call for seven men to be appointed to this task.
2. Stephen, being one of these seven men, is said to have been *"full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."* (**Acts 6:5**) I believe we can conclude that his having the Holy Spirit was not simply a comment of his life being changed through obedience to the Gospel, but that this man was one who was given miraculous gifts. This is clearly supported by what we see in **Acts 6:8**. Stephen not only served this church in this special capacity, but he was also very active in seeking to share the love, grace, and mercy of God with others. This message was simply being confirmed by the miraculous ability that Luke tells us Stephen possessed. He was a strong disciple who surely had a deep abiding love for his fellow man.

B. Stephen spoke an appropriate message to the gathered audience.

1. This love for his fellow man led him to be willing to speak the truth of the Gospel with those who were around him. Much like what we see with Peter and John in **Acts 4**, the Holy Spirit was with Stephen in this teaching that he was doing, and those who opposed him were not able to combat the *"wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."* (**Acts 6:10**)
2. This led the men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (men who were more than likely themselves Hellenistic Jews) to trump up false charges against Stephen so that they might have compelling reason to take Stephen before the Council. They were eventually able to make up charges that Stephen had spoken blasphemes against Moses, God, the temple, and the Law. They even brought up Jesus and how He had "changed" things concerning the Law.
3. Yet, as Stephen stood before them, the text tells us that his face was like that of an angel. (**Acts 6:15**) He must have had some radiance about him being filled with the Spirit, and he goes on throughout **Acts 7** speaking to these Jewish men about their failures as the Jews...the chosen people of God.
 - a) **Acts 7:1-8** — Stephen begins by going back to the beginnings of the Jewish people. Their renowned father was Abraham, and he was famed for his faithfulness to God in getting up and going to a land that had been promised to him by God. He was given the three special promises of his people having a great land, people, and eventually through his seed all of the nations would be blessed. This was all made possible through God giving Abraham and his wife Sarah a son even though both were advanced in age. From Isaac came Jacob, and from Jacob came the twelve patriarchs after whom all of the tribes were named.
 - b) **Acts 7:9-16** — Stephen then recounts the time that Joseph and his family spent in Egypt prior to his passing. He was able to achieve a high position before Pharaoh, and through that he was able to bring his family down to Egypt where they were able to thrive and grow as a people into a great nation.
 - c) **Acts 7:17-29** — After Joseph passed along with the Pharaoh who was loyal and cared for Joseph and his people, there arose a Pharaoh who was unaware of Joseph and didn't give his people the care they once had. Abraham's people had grown into a mighty nation as God had promised, but this Pharaoh treated the people harshly and even sought to cull their numbers through the killing of babies. Yet, God provided and a great leader rose up in the form of Moses. He spend his younger years in Egypt, but eventually he had to leave. He lived in the land of Midian and fathered two sons before the Lord called him back to Egypt.
 - d) **Acts 7:30-36** — Forty years after leaving Egypt, Moses is called by the Lord through the burning bush to go deliver His people from the iron fisted rule of the Egyptians. The lost son of Abraham's people eventually returns to Egypt and through the working of wondrous signs he was able to take the people from Egypt and lead them towards the land that had been promised to their father Abraham so many years before.
 - e) **Acts 7:37-50** — Unfortunately, the people's opinion of Moses and Jehovah quickly soured as they rebelled against Moses and their God. Stephen states that the people were "unwilling to be obedient" to Moses. They even went so far as to create a golden calf that they worshipped as if it was the God of heaven. Their disobedience led God to give them up to the false God's that they had sought to serve, and so continued the history of Israel. They continually went to and left the Lord. They ignored the messengers of God, even those who were the best among them such as king David. For this reason he wasn't even able to build the Lord's house.
 - f) **Acts 7:51-53** — Stephen concludes his speech by rebuking the gathered audience for following in the same footsteps of their forefathers who had rejected God and His messengers.

C. Sadly, the audience rejected the truth, God, and murdered Stephen.

1. As Stephen finishes his message about these people repeating the same mistakes as their forefathers, they were *"cut to the quick."* (**Acts 7:54**) This is not the first time we have seen people convicted by truth being preached. Many in the multitude in **Acts 2** were also cut to the heart. However, the reactions by these two groups were polar opposites. The people in **Acts 2** asked what they needed to do in order to be saved, but those in this text began to gnash their teeth at Stephen.
2. During what must have been a big commotion, Stephen looks up into the heavens and sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Stephen exclaims what a wonderful sight he was seeing, but that only leads the people to grow more angry. They cover their ears like children and rush Stephen pushing him out of the city. Once outside the city, they begin stoning Stephen after laying their robes at the feet of one Saul of Tarsus.
3. As Stephen is being killed, his focus is still on his Lord Jesus Christ, and he cries two things out to God. The first was that Jesus receive his spirit, and the second was that this sin not be held against those who were killing him. After these two statements, Luke records that Stephen, the faithful man who was full of the Holy Spirit, fell asleep and departed this world. This text might very well fill us with some sense of anger for a good and godly man being unjustly killed, but there are some good lessons that we can learn from what we have just considered together.

II. Lessons Learned

A. We can find teaching opportunities by going to the people.

1. As Austin has stressed so much in his class on discipleship, disciples were designed to make other disciples. (**Matthew 28:19,20**) This is done through the teaching of others concerning the Gospel and their need for Jesus. The easiest disciples strongly embraced the need for them to be busy teaching and spreading the Gospel message. Though they were facing persecution they did what was called of them to do. *"Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."* (**Acts 2:42**)
2. Stephen was simply continuing on the work being done by others. Luke recorded that Stephen was using the gifts that had been given to him to teach those who would listen. Luke specifically records that Stephen did these things "among the people." (**Acts 6:8**) It very well might have been that Stephen was one of those that was going to the temple to teach. He could've been like Paul and had the habit of spending time in the synagogue teaching. All we know for certain is that he was out and among the people, and he had great success in others being able to hear the truth of the Gospel message.
3. We would do well to recognize the opportunities that surround us to do the same things. Many of us are out among the people on a daily basis at work, at social events, sporting events, or other activities our kids might be in. We would do well to keep our eyes open for those opportunities to teach. Others of us don't have so many natural opportunities, so it might be that we have to manufacture opportunities in some way. It can be so easy for me to spend all of my time working here in my office. This is where I get my best work done, but in doing so I am missing opportunities to interact with others and have some sort of influence on them. Austin's advice of getting out and studying or doing some work at a local coffee shop or something is really good advice. Stephen was able to teach by being among the people, and we can find those same opportunities if we are willing to do the same thing.

B. Those who oppose truth will have no good response to it.

1. In this story of Stephen, we read that his opponents had no response to the wisdom and Spirit of the message with which he was sharing with them. As it seems to be in many of those types of situations, instead of sitting down and trying to calmly reason with those with whom they

disagreed...they had to resort to false attaches or character assassination. This certainly isn't the first time we have seen such a thing. This is what the opponents of Jesus did all throughout His ministry. After healing a blind and mute man in **Matthew 12:22**, the crowds began to put two and two together and speculated that Jesus might just be the Son of David. The Pharisees weren't having any of that and instead tried to accuse Jesus of being in league with Beelzebul. (**Matthew 12:23,24**) They had no real response to what Jesus did, so they had to reach for whatever might stick. This was the same tactic used by those who would eventually put Jesus to death. They had to grasp for false accusations.

2. The reality is that the truth is the truth, and those who are opposed to truth often can't make logical arguments against plain truth. Sure there are things that are disputable, but there are some things that are pretty clear from a consideration of Scripture. Sadly, those who aren't willing to accept plain teaching will sometimes resort to hateful attacks against our character or our faith simply to put the heat somewhere else rather than on themselves. If you have ever experienced such a thing then you know how frustrating it can be for folks to pretty clearly see the truth, and yet the resort to defensive attacks against us instead of submitting to truth. Unfortunately, these people took things to the extreme when confronted by Stephen's strong teaching, and yet even in this sad story we can learn one final important lesson.

C. Our love for souls must prevail regardless of the outcomes of our efforts to teach the lost.

1. Stephen was willing to put himself out there among the people and to endure the harsh criticism of those who disagreed with him because he truly loved the Lord and wanted for others to have the opportunity to be exposed to the truth. They weren't willing to accept truth and even turned violent against Stephen, but that didn't stop him from speaking the truth because he knew that his efforts were approved by God. (**Acts 7:55,56**)
2. Even as they grew all the more violent against him...even as they threw rocks at him and beat him to the edge of death...Stephen cried out to God to simply receive his spirit. But even more...we see Stephen exhibiting a heart of true compassion by asking God to not hold this sin against them. These people were killing him, and yet his heart was set on his desire for them to be saved from their sins.
3. Surely this was done in a manner that was very similar to what Jesus did as He was being crucified on the cross. **Luke 23:34** records that Jesus cried out to the Father, "*forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.*" Only someone who possesses a heart that truly loves all people would be willing to have such an attitude and express it out loud. Jesus and Stephen had that attitude and mindset...do we?
4. It can be so easy for us to allow our feelings to get hurt and write off those who are not willing to accept the truth of God's Word, but the true test of our heart for others will be seen in how we respond to those who reject us, God, and the truth. Even if they treat us poorly and speak ill of us, it is our responsibility to love them just the same. Will we continue to pray for them? Will we be there to teach if another opportunity arises? This attitude of love towards those who are difficult in teaching was first in Christ and Stephen, and it must be found in us, as well.

The story of Stephen's brave efforts in teaching the truth to those around him should encourage us in knowing that God will strengthen us to do this good work that has been given to us to do. Even though this story ends in his death, we can find joy in having faith that he was received by His Father because of his faithfulness and courage. May we seek out those opportunities to teach others, may we prepare ourselves for negative responses, and may our love for our fellow man and our Lord be what fuels us to be busy in this good yet sometimes difficult work. Stephen gave his life for His Savior, will we be willing to sacrifice even lesser things to accomplish the work of sharing the Gospel? May God strengthen us to be willing to do that very thing.