

Introduction

1. So far, for the most part things have been going fairly well for the Church in the book of Acts:
  - a. Almost the entire ministry of the Church has taken place in and around Jerusalem
  - b. The Church has experienced massive growth with tens of thousands of Jews coming to Christ
  - c. While they've faced some opposition from religious leaders, the general public thought highly of Christians and the Church
2. But, things begin to change in our passage today:
  - a. Opposition from religious leaders has been growing but so far, it's been limited to warnings and beatings; we now see it escalate to murder
  - b. We see the opinion of the people (e.g. the general populace) begin to change as they get "stirred up" against the Church
  - c. Up until now, all of the growth has come among Hebrews in Jerusalem, but Stephen's murder serves as a catalyst for increased persecution which causes the Church to be scattered, pushing it beyond Jerusalem just as Jesus commanded
  - d. We also begin to see a transition away from Peter's ministry to Paul's, and subsequently less emphasis on Jewish conversions and more emphasis on Gentile conversions
3. We are going to spend the next three weeks covering the events surrounding Stephen's murder:
  - a. Next week we will cover 7:1-53 which focus on his testimony before his accusers
  - b. Two weeks from now we will cover 7:54-60 which focus on his murder
  - c. Today, we're going to cover 6:8-15 which detail Stephen's arrest and trial, and we will hopefully learn something about:
    - 1) His CHARACTER
    - 2) The CHARGES against him
    - 3) His COURAGE
    - 4) And, his COUNTENANCE during his trial

A. The CHARACTER of Stephen (READ 6:8)

1. We were first introduced to Stephen back in v. 5:
  - a. He was one of the seven outstanding men of good reputation who were chosen to oversee the distribution of food to the widows in the Church—Luke mentions him first, and with good reason:
  - b. When we speak of someone being filled with something, we understand it to mean they are consumed by it to the extent that it controls and directs their thoughts, words and actions (e.g. filled with rage vs. filled with love)
  - c. This is the sense in which Luke uses the phrase when he describes Stephen as being "**full of...**" four things
    - 1) First, he was "**full of faith**" (look back at v. 5):
      - a) Faith here is not referring to saving faith but trust or confidence
      - b) Jesus addressed this in the Gospels, and in fact **three** times with His own Apostles! (Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8)

- c) If we're honest, most of us would admit that we struggle at times in the same way the Apostles did with varying levels of trust and confidence
- d) This didn't appear to be the case with Stephen; he was full of confidence and trust when it came to the Lord and we see that played out here with the tremendous courage in which he faced those who ultimately murder him

Ben White giving up his truck at work, believing the "Lord will provide" for him

- 2) Second, he was "**full of the Holy Spirit**" (5):
    - a) As we learned last week, to be filled with or full of the Holy Spirit means to be so permeated by the presence of the Spirit of God in our soul that we allow Him to control our thoughts, words, emotions, behavior...in fact our very lives
    - b) John MacArthur likened this to the wind billowing the sails of a ship to move it along the water, and Alka Seltzer tablets being dissolved in water, fizzing away until it completely permeates the water and you can no longer tell the water from the chemicals
    - c) This describes Stephen—you knew he had the Holy Spirit living inside him, not because it was theologically or doctrinally true, but because you could actually see the Holy Spirit guiding and controlling his life through his words and actions
    - d) When you looked at Stephen, you saw the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control
    - e) NOTE: there's only one other person in the Bible who is said to have been both "**full of faith**" and "**full of the Holy Spirit**"—Anyone know who that is? Barnabas (READ Acts 11:22-24)
  - 3) Third, he was "**full of grace**" (8a):
    - a) We often define the Biblical concept of grace as unmerited favor, and that is true
    - b) However, at the root of grace is the concept of kindness
    - c) In fact, God's grace toward us is described as an act of kindness (READ Titus 3:3-7)
    - d) When Luke describes Stephen here as being "**full of grace**" what he means is that Stephen exuded kindness in his interactions with others
  - 4) Lastly, he was "**[full of] power**" (8b):
    - a) This last description is obviously tied to the next phrase: he "**was performing great wonders and signs among the people**"
    - b) Stephen wasn't performing such amazing feats by his own power, but rather they were demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power just as Jesus predicted (READ Acts 1:8)
2. Takeaway: It's obvious from Luke's description that Stephen was a remarkable man, and he should serve as an example for every believer:
- a. He was quite literally a man who was **full of it** <grin>: full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, and full of power: should these things not exemplify us?
  - b. We see a beautiful picture of these traits in the rest of Stephen's story as we see him respond to his arrest, his testimony, and as he takes his last breath: should these things not be evident in us, especially as we face increasing animosity and persecution?

## B. The CHARGES against Stephen (6:9-14)

1. There is something awfully reminiscent in the events that follow:
  - a. As we go through them today and for the next two weeks, we're going to see how closely they parallel Jesus' own arrest, trial and death
  - b. In fact, in his commentary on Acts, Ben Witherington lists 10 specific ways in which this is true and I will point some of these out as we go through the passage
2. Luke tells us that a group of men from something called the Synagogue of the Freedmen rose up together and began to argue with Stephen (READ 9):
  - a. What was the Synagogue of the Freedmen?
    - 1) It was made up of slaves who had gained or been given their freedom, and who were now living independently
    - 2) We also know these particular men were Hellenistic Jews (e.g. Hebrews heavily influenced by Greek culture) because of the regions from which they came: Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia
    - 3) What we don't know is if Synagogue of the Freedmen refers to a single synagogue or a group of synagogues:
      - a) Scholars debate it, because that's what scholars like to do
      - b) There were over 490 synagogues in Jerusalem at the time and they were often segregated by ethnicity or other common traits
      - c) It's possible that the four ethnic regions Luke mentions suggests four different synagogues, but there is no way to tell
  - b. Luke writes that they "**rose up and argued**" with Stephen and this word argued is a good one here because the word Luke chose to use refers to forcefully expressing differences of opinion—these men specifically came to Stephen because they disagreed with whatever he was teaching and they were intent on calling him out, challenging and disputing with him
  - c. There was only one problem—they were outmatched (READ 10):
    - 1) Do you remember the qualifications the Apostles gave for selecting the seven up in v. 3? They had to be men who were "**full of the Spirit and of wisdom**"
    - 2) Stephen was one of the men they put forward, which means he must have been full of both, and that certainly shows here: "**and yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking**"
    - 3) It's important to note that we're not talking about human wisdom here, but wisdom given by the Holy Spirit and at the time when it's needed:
      - a) Do you remember what Jesus promised His disciples? (READ Luke 12:4-12)
      - b) He promised the same thing again to those saints who would face the harshest persecution during the Last Days (Luke 21:10-19)
      - c) Did you notice the promise from v. 21:15: "**wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute**"
    - 4) That's exactly what we see here—they couldn't match Stephen's wisdom because they were fighting spiritual wisdom with human wisdom and it was no contest!
3. So, unable to refute him, they resort to the same tactics they used with Jesus—false accusations and false witnesses (READ 11-14):

- a. They ultimately accuse Stephen of four of the most egregious sins in Judaism:
    - 1) Blasphemy against Moses and God (11)
    - 2) Speaking against the Temple and the Law (13-14)
  - b. They did this by “**secretly induc[ing]**” men to make the false charges and serve as false witnesses—this word is sometimes used to refer to bribery or paying someone off which is likely the case here
  - c. And, just like they did with Jesus, they “**stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes**” against Stephen, arrested him and dragged him before the Sanhedrin
  - d. What exactly did Stephen say to get them so riled up?
    - 1) Luke doesn’t tell us specifically
    - 2) However, the content of his teaching likely reflects the testimony he gives before the council in chapter 7 which we’ll get to next week
4. Takeaway:
- a. Jesus warned us that the world would hate us because it first hated him
  - b. But, He also promised that the Holy Spirit would give us the wisdom and the words to respond, and that the world would not be able to resist or refute them
  - c. Far too often, as Christians we try to fight the battle with human wisdom and tactics, but as we saw with Stephen our primary weapon is the wisdom given to us by the Holy Spirit

C. The COURAGE of Stephen (6:13)
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1. This brings us to the third thing I want us to see in this passage and that’s the courage of Stephen
2. You may have missed it but there’s a very important phrase in v. 13; it’s translated by the NASB as “**incessantly speaks**” but other translations render it more literally as “**this man never stops speaking...**” (REREAD 13)
3. Now, they obviously twist his words and claim he was blaspheming and preaching “**against**” Moses, God, the Law and the Temple, but we know better; these were the same charges they leveled against Jesus when He preached the Gospel
4. One of the things that irritated these men was that Stephen just wouldn’t shut up about Jesus:
  - a. He didn’t shut up when he was out preaching and performing signs and wonders
  - b. He didn’t shut up when they confronted and disputed with him
  - c. He didn’t shut up when they arrested him and dragged him before the Sanhedrin
  - d. In fact, he kept right on speaking about Jesus ***even as they were stoning him***, right up until he took his last breath
  - e. That’s courage!!!
5. Takeaway:
  - a. Jesus told His disciples, “**Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. 33 "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."**
  - b. We seem to see more and more instances of Churches and Christians abandoning sound Biblical teaching and practice, either to avoid conflict with the world or in efforts to appease the world
  - c. What we need instead is courage! We need to refuse to shut up just like Stephen

#### D. The COUNTENANCE of Stephen (6:15)

1. The last thing I want us to see is what we find in verse 15 and it's Stephen's countenance (READ)
2. What does it mean that the Council "**saw his face like the face of an angel**"?
  - a. Some suggest it might have been something similar to Moses' face shining after he spoke with God on the mountain (Exodus 34:29-35), and this is possible
  - b. Other suggest it was Luke's way of describing Stephen's innocence, much like we might refer to someone today as an angel
  - c. A third option, and one I lean toward, is to understand it as a reference to Stephen's countenance:
    - 1) Countenance refers to one's face or facial expression and how it represents what is going on internally in a person
    - 2) It's amazing how the face reveals someone's emotional state—for instance, take Cain in Genesis 4:3-6: the Lord knew Cain was angry because it was revealed in his face (e.g. his countenance)
    - 3) So, what Luke may be describing here is that as the Council "**fixed their gaze upon him**" what they saw in his face was a man who was calm, controlled, unfazed by their accusations and false charges
3. Takeaway:
  - a. It's easy to lose heart when we see what's happening around us—to our culture, our nation, and even the Church
  - b. But, we must not lose heart; we must not let our countenance fall
  - c. READ 2 Corinthians 4:1-18