

Stephen: Grace under Fire

Saints and Scoundrels – Part II

Acts 6:8-15

Introduction

In our last discussion of the sixth chapter of Acts, we discovered several ageless principles concerning the New Testament church. We observed the church struggling with the sense of unfairness that had developed in the caring of widows. In this observation, we discovered that there is no such thing as a perfect church. Even vibrant, effective, growing churches are not immune to problems and divisive issues. We saw the way the church members grumbled and complained over an apparent lack of fairness, as the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in favor of the Hebrew widows.

In the process of studying their solution, we discovered that indeed, there is no place for prejudice of any sort in the church. Whether it is an issue of social standing, race, education level, financial status, or whatever it may be, it is never right for a saint to act like a snob. As one author put it, “The ground at the foot of the cross is level.”

Another lesson we learned from the way the church handled that divisive, potentially explosive issue is that leadership in the church is not based upon experience, but upon character. This principle introduced us to a man who will arrest our attention for our next few discussions. He will occupy the center stage in the history of this early church and will be known as the man who preached only one sermon, only one time.

Principles on the Study of Biblical Characters

In Acts, chapter 6, we discovered the man’s name, which is identified along with six other men. Verse 5 identifies his name as “Stephanos,” or translated, “Stephen”.

The Greek word “stephanos” means “crown”. One of my Greek lexicons, translated by a man named Thayer, identifies “stephanos” as “that crown that was of royal or exalted rank.” It may also have been a word referring to the wreath that was placed upon the head of a victorious athlete as he stepped forward to the Bema seat to be met by the judges of the athletic contest. Another lexicon added that “stephanos” could have been something that was given to someone for distinguished service in the community.

I think it is ironic that Stephen will live up to his name. He will distinguish himself as a servant of the church and also, as one who will literally, wear the martyr’s crown. He will be the first martyr of the New Testament church.

The lens of scripture now focuses on this man, Stephen. Over the course of the next sixty-eight verses, he will occupy our attention. I want to spend a couple of sessions on his brief life and even briefer ministry. We will discover just what kind of man Stephen is.

Two Mindsets

As we begin the study of a biblical character, I want to give a couple of points for you to consider. We can come to the conclusion, as we study Stephen’s life, that he was some unusual saint who “had it

made” with God; who was a rather incredible character who had extra help from the Lord; who had a better start, perhaps. We might come to the conclusion that Stephen had special privileges from the Lord or had been made a little better than the rest of us by God. That kind of thinking can result in one of two erroneous mindsets.

Complacency

1. The first mindset, that would be wrong when you consider a biblical character, is the mindset of complacency. In other words, that Stephen is such a special class Christian that God would never expect us to live like him.

The mindset of complacency is certainly not the truth. The Bible, and all of its characters, have been given to us, not to put them on a pedestal but, to emulate them. Even the apostle Paul exhorted the believers in the Corinthian church with the rather interesting words that are recorded in chapter 11, verse 1a, of I Corinthians,

Be imitators of me . . .

Whenever we study, in the Bible, the lives of men like Joseph, Abraham, James, Paul, Stephen, and ultimately, the God-man, Jesus Christ, we should hear, coming from the pages of their biographies, the words, “Be imitators of me . . .”. At least we should imitate that which is in their life of good character and of good repute.

Discouragement

2. The second mindset that would be discouraging to the spiritual walk of a believer, would be that of discouragement.

Stephen is such a special kind of Christian that we might erroneously conclude he had special advantages and benefits that would keep us from ever measuring up to his lifestyle. Do not forget that Stephen is ultimately, imitating Jesus Christ, who seeks all of us to become more and more like Him.

Godliness is not the privilege of a few select believers, it is the privilege of submissive believers. It is not a matter of special privilege or special standing; it is not given to a special class of Christian that has this kind of life; it is not some kind of special standing with God. Godliness has everything to do with a special submission to the Lord. You and I can enjoy the consequences of godliness, if, like Stephen

evidently did, we will pursue the character of godliness.

Two Cautions

Let me give two cautions concerning biblical characters.

Do not expect perfection, but progress

1. First, when imitating godly biblical characters, do not expect perfection from them or yourself, but instead, look for progress.

One of my favorite professors used to say, “God isn’t necessarily looking for perfect Christians, He is looking for progressing Christians.”

Do not imitate performance, but attitude

2. Secondly, when studying biblical examples, do not try to imitate their performance, but instead, imitate their attitude.

We cannot repeat performances in different cultures, ages, and dispensations, but we can imitate and emulate their attitude. We will not be hauled in, as Stephen will be in a few verses, before the Sanhedrin to give testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ. We will probably not take a stand before many. And, we will probably not be taken outside the city walls and stoned until we are dead. However, we can learn from him how to respond when placed in a high pressure situation. We can imitate his control and emotional stability. We can learn how to act like Christ.

The Character of Stephen

With that in mind, the question arises, “What can we learn and imitate from the life of one man that God placed in scripture, not because He needed a filler for the book of Acts, but because He wanted to teach us some things?”

Let us find out what we can learn from this man, Stephen. Turn to Acts, chapter 6.

We will pick up our study today in verse 3, where we learn that Stephen was a man who had a,

. . . good reputation . . .

Now, a reputation is what people say about you. Character, on the other hand, is what God says about you. The two can be vastly different. It is interesting

to me that Stephen had a good reputation to those without and obviously, to those within the body as well.

I think it would be interesting to require interviews of secular employers and co-workers of potential leaders in the church. We might inquire, "Tell us what this person is like outside of this holy huddle. Tell us what this person is like Monday through Saturday in order to help us determine whether he, or she, can be involved in the leadership of the church."

This was evidently, part of the requirement for the men who were chosen for leadership in Stephen's time. According to verse 6, the apostle said, "We want to make sure to choose men,

... of good reputation ...

In other words, "Choose men with a good name."

Solomon wrote, in Proverbs, chapter 22, verse 1a, that,

A good name is to be more desired than great wealth ...

They were to find individuals who were known for their purity and integrity in the community. So, they sought these men and came up with, among them, this man, named Stephen.

The passage goes on to repeat the same phrase about Stephen five different times. When you see a phrase, or a grouping of words, repeated over and over in the New Testament, it is not because God is stuttering, but because God wants to impress us with something. So, get a pencil and underline five expressions about Stephen. We read that Stephen was:

- in verse 3,
... full of the [Holy] Spirit and ...
- secondly, full,
... of wisdom ...
- in verse 5,
... a man full of faith and ...
- again, full,
... of the Holy Spirit ...
- in verse 8
... full of grace and ...
- also, full of,
... power ...

Now, in each of these references, the word "filled or full" is the word "pleres," which could be translated "dominated by or controlled by". This translation of "filled or full" denotes a different idea than that which we are accustomed. Let me use an illustration of a gas tank to explain this. We are not gas tanks that need to be filled up, and then, when we get low, need to be filled up again with the Holy Spirit. The word means "dominated by or controlled by".

So, the Bible tells us that Stephen was dominated by five different things. Let us take a closer look.

Full of the Holy Spirit

1. First, verses 3 and 5 tell us that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Stephen was dominated by or controlled by the Holy Spirit.

We have studied the meaning of being dominated by the Holy Spirit in other discussions, so I will not repeat myself. However, it struck me that it would take a man controlled by and dominated by the Holy Spirit to become neither overwhelmed by nor enamored with what had happened to him over the last several months; in fact, over less than a year's time.

If you think about it, it had only been a few months earlier that the Spirit of God had descended at Pentecost and Peter had delivered the first sermon, as it were, of the New Testament church. Stephen was evidently, among those who had received Christ as their own personal Savior; who had accepted the Lord into their own life. Shortly thereafter, this body of believers, that he was involved with, exploded to more than twenty thousand people. The Bible tells us earlier, that they have at least five thousand men listed on their membership role. An explosion was occurring and then, the Bible informs us in verse 3, that among these thousands of men, the apostles said to,

... select ... seven ...

Of these seven men, the first one is this man, named Stephen. The body confirmed that he was filled with wisdom and the Spirit and that he indeed, had a reputation of integrity in the community and among the believers in the Christian community.

In a moment, we will look at Stephen, according to verse 8,

... performing great wonders and signs ...

Stephen is given the unique position, along with that apostolic body, to confirm the gospel as being from God with miraculous signs.

This was a man who had all of this happen to him in less than a year. Can you imagine that? It would take a man dominated by the Holy Spirit to not be overwhelmed by it or enamored with himself because of it.

Full of wisdom

2. Secondly, we are told, in verse 3, that Stephen was controlled by or dominated by wisdom.

Now, that is a study, or several studies, in of itself. It is the study of the question, “What is wisdom?”

I like the way one person worded the answer to that question. He said, “Wisdom is that intelligence that keeps you out of situations that require wisdom.” That is good!

I like the wise example of an elderly gentleman who, with his wife, had just celebrated his fiftieth wedding anniversary. Someone asked the gentlemen, “What do you attribute your marital bliss to?”

He answered, “Well, when my wife and I first got married, we had this agreement that went kind of like this. When she was mad at me and bothered with me, she would tell me everything, just get it off her mind, and would lay it all out. And, when I was mad at her and bothered with something about her, I just took a long walk. I guess you could attribute our happy marriage to the fact that, for the most part, I’ve led an outdoor life!”

That is wisdom!

Now, understand that when you turn to the Bible to define “wisdom,” you find that the word is *never* used to refer to how much a person knows. Wisdom is *always* used to refer to how quickly a person obeys. Wisdom is not what you know or what you have learned, it is how you live and what that says about what you have learned.

To say you know something and not do it, is really not to know it at all, according to the Bible. A wise person is that person who obeys the truth, in spite of outward pressure. You may be living one way and the entire world around you is saying, “You really ought to be living this way.” You may be saying, “This is right,” and everyone else is saying, “No, that’s wrong, this is right.” You are the wise

person when you are guided by the domination of godly wisdom through the maze of pressure and opinions in order to arrive at what God would consider the truth to be.

I found, in my encyclopedia, something interesting that you may not have known about Galileo. Let me relate this fascinating account to you.

For centuries, people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all times, and no one thought he could be wrong. All it would have taken is for one brave person to take two objects, one heavier than the other, and drop them from a great height to see whether the heavier object landed first. No one stepped forward however, until nearly two thousand years after Aristotle’s death.

In 1589, Galileo, who was a professor of mathematics at the University of Pisa, summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He went to the top and pushed off a ten pound weight and a one pound weight at the same time. Both weights landed at the same time. However, the power of belief in the conventional wisdom was so strong that the professors denied what they had seen with their own eyes. They continued to say that Aristotle was right. Galileo’s contract with the university was not renewed the following year.

Galileo also preferred the Copernican theory that the earth revolves around the sun, to the theory of Aristotle that the planets circle a fixed earth. In 1609, he built a telescope of twenty times magnification and was able to discover the mountains and craters on the moon. He also saw that the Milky Way was composed of stars. He published these findings in March, 1610. His new fame gained him an appointment as court mathematician in Florence. As a result, he had the time and resources for research and writing.

In 1613, Galileo published a work on sunspots and predicted victory for the Copernican theory over the theory of Aristotle. His troubles began again. In 1614, a priest denounced Galileo from the pulpit. Then a Jesuit cardinal instructed Galileo that he must no longer hold to or defend the concept that the earth moves. Galileo would remain silent on the subject for ten years.

In 1624, Galileo began a book on the tides. He was summoned to Rome by the Inquisition to stand trial for, “grave suspicion of heresy”. Galileo was

found guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment, which was commuted to permanent house arrest. The sentence against him was to be read publicly in every university and his works were ordered to be burned.

Galileo did write another book, entitled, *Discourses Concerning New Sciences*, which would later be published. It would be that book that would open a road that would, years later, lead Newton to the Law of Universal Gravitation. Galileo would die before that book would be published. He died near Florence, on January 8, 1642, before the world would discover that his views were not heresy, but the truth. In October of 1992, a papal commission acknowledged the Vatican's error.

Can you imagine going up against the organized religion of your day; the organized church of your country; the public opinion of all of the scientists that you worked around? Well understand, as you come to this passage, that Stephen, who was filled with the wisdom of God's Word, that is far different at times, than the wisdom of the world, is about to go up against the establishment.

Stephen is going to take on Judaism. He is going to say, in effect, that Judaism is to be set aside for something new, called "Christianity". And, he will say that Christianity follows a person, not a ritual, and that person's name is the One the Jews had killed, Jesus Christ. That is going against the grain; that is going against the current of public opinion and of the thinking of that day. And Stephen, who was dominated by wisdom, would be able to carry through with his conviction that Christ was the truth.

Full of faith

3. Thirdly, we are told, in verse 5, that Stephen was a man full of faith.

Now, write into the margin of your text the word "conviction," as "full of faith" could be rendered that way. It could also be translated "faithfulness".

Faithfulness is being filled with conviction about the truth of Jesus Christ. And it will take, by the way, conviction to live the life of wisdom, as the truth in the Bible is not easily lived out. It will take faithfulness for you to be able to say to the world, "You're wrong, this book is right."

What are some of the public opinions of today that are acceptable? It is the public opinion of today that abortion is all right; that an unborn baby is not a living child. It is the public opinion of today that

divorcing your spouse is acceptable. In the Bible, however, there is a different message. It will take conviction in you to be able to go against certain things that the world says is all right, but the Word of God would never condone.

I think it is interesting that in the fourth century, a leader in the church, by the name of Athanasius, would be exiled five times for his preaching. On one occasion, the Roman emperor exiled him because he found Athanasius' teaching distasteful. As he was about to embark on his journey by sea, his congregation came to the dock to bid him farewell, and they were weeping. Athanasius turned to them, and said, "Weep not for me, weep for the emperor, for he is but a passing cloud."

Imagine having that kind of courage!

During one of his imprisonments, people came to him and said, "Athanasius, everybody is following Aryanism."

Aryanism was basically the view that Jesus was not fully God. It would be this one man, Athanasius, at that juncture of history, who would defend the deity of Jesus Christ.

Athanasius was also the first man to defend, in writing, the inspiration of the twenty-seven books that are now in our New Testament. The ways in which God used him are most interesting.

People came to him in prison on another occasion, and said, "Athanasius, it's no use. Give up and live."

Athanasius replied, "I cannot."

One of his followers was reported to have said, "But Athanasius, the whole world is against you."

To which he replied the immortal words, "Then Athanasius is against the whole world."

That is rare courage for today, isn't it?

I was listening to the radio, some time ago, to a teenager who was being interviewed on *Focus on the Family*. He was being questioned about a movement he had started in his school that was spreading. During the conversation, Dr. James Dobson said, "You're a teenager and you're involved in a place where, we all agree, is an area where there is a lot of peer pressure. How do you handle the peer pressure on your campus?"

I will never forget the teenager's response over the radio. He said, "Dr. Dobson, you need to understand, on my campus, I am the peer pressure."

Isn't that great! At your place of business, *you* be the peer pressure. On your campus, *you* be the peer pressure. In the shop, *you* be the peer pressure.

I was talking to a gentleman in our church recently, who said, "They moved me to a new floor at work. It's interesting how, over the course of a few days, some of the language is changing and some apologies are being made. And, when I arrive, some of the jokes are stopped in mid-air. I imagine they've noticed that I read my New Testament during my lunch break. They are now coming and asking me certain questions."

I say, "Hallelujah!" That is taking wisdom; learning from the Bible, and having the conviction to live it out in the world. And may his tribe increase.

Stephen was filled with conviction, and it would cost him his life, by the way. Conviction would not make his life easier. I think our problem is we believe that if we have conviction, God will make things easier; God will smooth things out. That may not be the case.

Full of grace

4. Fourthly, in verse 8, another ingredient in Stephen's life that I found to be unusual, was that he was full of grace.

Grace is more a characteristic of Stephen's personality than it is a theological description of the grace of God that had been put to work in his life. He was dominated by this characteristic of "charis," or "gentleness, winsomeness, grace".

People would say of Stephen, "He is a gracious man," which is a little surprising to me. In fact, F. F. Bruce makes the statement that, if the Bible were translated in today's vernacular, the word "grace" could easily be translated as "charming".

The reason I found that surprising is that we have just discussed the fact that Stephen was a man who had great conviction and faith. With Stephen, it was "me against the world". That is not the kind of guy you would expect to have a lot of fun in life. You would not expect to see an Athanasius, for example, slapping his knee in laughter, would you? People who are deeply committed, deeply convicted about biblical truth are expected to be kind of different. You do not picture them having a good "belly laugh," or at least, not in public. Perhaps you would give them the Mona Lisa smile and say, "That's funny, but I'm spiritual."

The thinking that "the more spiritual you are, the less you laugh," is a misconception of our day. So, I thought it interesting that this man, who was so deeply moved with conviction that he will say some astounding things to the establishment of his day, would be characterized as, "winsome, one who smiles a lot, gracious".

On one occasion, Dr. John Walvoord was a guest preacher at our church. Dr. Walvoord was the chancellor of Dallas Seminary, when I attended, and was in leadership for over sixty years. His visit to our church was my first opportunity to be close with him. Before that time, I had only seen him in a classroom where he was in the front. You do not go up to guys like that and talk about the weather, but kind of, leave them alone. One thing that really struck me about him, when he came to our home, was that he laughed a lot; he joked a lot. In fact, I was kind of shocked at times. Dr. Walvoord told a joke! I made sure I laughed too, by the way!

We had a Christian artist perform in our church and, before he sang in concert, he asked to have time alone in my office. I thought, "That's great, he wants to go in there and pray and be alone. That's good." I would expect that.

Later, I went in to get him and discovered that he had rolled my office! There was toilet paper everywhere – around my chair, the lamp, the curtains, from bookshelf to bookshelf! I thought he was praying! I was ready to cut his honorarium in half! I thought however, that was a great lesson to learn.

I remember, as a college student, mopping floors in a florist shop for a few hours each night to earn money for tuition. When I was there, I turned their radio on to find something that I could listen to while I worked. I happened to dial to a guy who was preaching in a way that fascinated me, so I tuned in each night at the same time. One thing that really surprised me, not having come from a similar world, was the fact that he laughed in the pulpit, of all places. I would learn later, that his name was Charles Swindoll.

I think we need to re-write, in our minds, this attitude that the deeper you go with God, the gloomier you look. That was not the case, at least, with this man that we are to emulate. Stephen was filled with courage; filled with the Holy Spirit; filled with conviction; filled with faith. And yet, people liked to be around him because of the way he laughed and talked.

Full of power

5. Fifthly, verse 8 tells us that Stephen was full of power.

The word “power” is “dunamis,” or “dynamic”. Stephen was filled with a dynamic and, as verse 8 tells us,

... was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

It is interesting that he was given that special apostolic power to confirm his message with signs and wonders. Prior to the completion of this Word, we know the apostolic community was able to verify what they said with wonderful signs and miracles. Stephen evidently, was able to do the same.

The Courage of Stephen

As a result of this power, Stephen would become the next target of the Sanhedrin. They had been focusing on Peter and John; they were having trouble with the church, but now, this new man, “What’s his name? We’ve never heard of him. Who is he?”

“Well, his name is Stephen.”

The Sanhedrin would go after him. Look at verse 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.

At this time, there were about four hundred eighty synagogues in Jerusalem. Evidently, this Synagogue of the Freedmen was made up of children of freed Jewish slaves. Since it was filled with Greek Jews, as it were, Stephen, being a Greek Jew, apparently had found his way to this particular synagogue. There, he was declaring the truth of Christ, which started a debate.

There were a number of men from other areas in the synagogue as well. Some were from Cilicia and Asia. It is interesting to consider that one of the men from Cilicia, that will eventually begin persecuting the church, is a man who may have debated Stephen on that day. His name was Saul.

Continue to verse 10.

But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Stephen’s trial

Well, if you cannot win publicly, try something nasty in private. Verses 11 through 14 tell us that is what these men did.

Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 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 alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

These men are saying that there are two problems. First, they are basically saying that Stephen is teaching something that is different than Judaism, the Mosaic tradition. That is a theological problem. Then, they toss in a highly explosive emotional problem. They say, “He’s going to alter our customs. He’s going to change the way we live.”

They did not like change any more than we like change. They had an explosion with this argument.

Continue to verse 15.

And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

This is grace under fire and this struck me. Look back to verse 12a, which says,

And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him . . .

The Greek verb in this verse, means “to come suddenly and with violence”. Stephen is in the midst of a debate where he is, with great wisdom and composure, declaring the truth, and they burst through the doors of the synagogue and sweep him away. Before he knows it, he is standing before the Sanhedrin. This is without a doubt, the moment of greatest pressure in his life; the most trying time for him. It will end with the signaled verdict, “Guilty! Execute him!”

Was Stephen married or single? Did he have children? We do not know, but he is not given any time to say, “Goodbye.”

He was ripped from the synagogue, tried, and, in a matter of moments, stoned to death. He undoubtedly knew he was in trouble, since Peter and John had been here before him. And, in the least, he would get a severe beating, but,

. . . his face [shone] like the face of an angel.

God did something unusual for him, by the way. We cannot repeat the performance, but it is important to understand what is happening. Stephen was dominated by the Holy Spirit and God did for Stephen’s face the same as He did for Moses’ face. Stephen is accused of blaspheming Moses and he becomes like Moses. It was another sign that he was telling the truth from God, and yet, they would not listen.

Turn in your Bible to chapter 7. As the mob is stoning Stephen, you see Stephen modeling grace

under fire again; modeling the grace of Christ, Himself. Look at verse 59.

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

Where did he learn that? From the Lord Himself. Continue to verse 60.

Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” . . .

Where did he learn that?

. . . Having said this, he fell asleep.

He fell asleep without time to say, “Goodbye,” to anyone; without time to set his affairs in order; without time, one would think, to prepare his heart. Yet, we discover that, at that moment, he was ready. Why? Because in his life, he was dominated by; controlled by; submissive to the Holy Spirit. That produced, in him, that which we pursue – conviction, wisdom, dynamic, and grace. May it be.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/12/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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