

Stephen – The First Christian Martyr Part I

In Defense of His Character

(Acts 6:8-15)

Introduction:

1. We are going to examine the life and ministry of Stephen in 3 parts
 - In this lesson we will look at his **character** (Acts 6:8-15)
 - In the next lesson we will look at his **cause** (Acts 7:1-53)
 - In the third lesson we will look at his **compassion** (Acts 7:54-60)
2. You will notice some striking parallels to the arrest and trial of Stephen to that of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. This chapter (Acts 6) marks a bit of a transition in that up to this point Peter has been the dominant figure and spokesperson that Luke focused on.
 - Peter's primary focus has been on the "lost sheep of Israel" and in many ways we can conclude that his task was completed by the time his ministry comes to a close.
 - In just one chapter we will see the introduction of a man by the name of Saul (we know him better as Paul) who will convert to Christ and follow Him wholeheartedly. Most of Acts from chapter nine forward will be connected to the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions.

- There are two men who step up and help to bridge the gap and begin to shift the transition of the Gospel to Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world.
 - 1) The first one we will look at is Stephen; whose ministry was to Jews from Gentile lands.....thus the area of Judea and Samaria. In many ways we can conclude that it was Stephen's ministry and martyrdom that catapulted the church out of Jerusalem into the rest of the world. (Acts 8:1)
 - 2) The other person we will look at (after this series on the First Christian Martyr) is Philip who will take the Gospel to Samaria and eventually to the Ethiopian eunuch.

4. Here is a little background on Stephen

- Some consider him a forerunner to the Apostle Paul in that he too ministered in the Synagogues (primarily to foreign Jews) and based on what we read in Acts 6-7, he would debate them. These are similar methods that Paul used in his travels – he would often enter the local synagogue first. (Acts 17:2)
 - 1) In similar manner to the Apostle Paul, Stephen's words were met with fierce and violent opposition.
 - 2) It is possible that Paul (a Hellenistic Jew) was first exposed to the Gospel under the ministry of Stephen (Acts 7:58, 8:1) and thus his death may well have made a huge impact on him.
- Stephens impact on the early church was enormous
 - 1) He plays a significant historical role in getting the Gospel out beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem.
 - 2) He lived a life of unquestionable character

- 3) His ministry did not span a long period of time which shows that **quality is just as good as quantity!** In other words the impact of a life; be it a man or woman, child or adult is not necessarily how long they impact this world but how much!
 - 4) John MacArthur says this about Stephen; “He showed that the efforts of one courageous person, though of short duration, can have far reaching effects.” (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts, page 188)
- Although his persecution and eventual martyrdom cut his life short we don’t want to conclude it was a wasted life for:
 - 1) He was well _____ (Acts 8:2)
 - 2) He accomplished his mission (Acts 8:1)
 - His ministry was no less significant than any of the rest of the Apostles or followers of Christ (I Corinthians 3:6):
 - 1) Some _____
 - 2) Some _____
 - 3) Some _____
5. Although Stephen was judged a blasphemer by the “Jewish religious leaders” and subsequently killed; we can label him as one of the most noblest and noteworthy servants of Christ. His life is a life that we should all seek to imitate.

Examining His Character (Acts 6:8, see also Acts 6:5)

1. One of Stephen's often overlooked character traits was that he actually believed that God _____ history (See Acts 7:1-51 – imagine that?)
 - He actually understood that Jesus was the promised Messiah
 - His primary mission was to get others to see that as well which is why he was as passionate about it as Paul was.
 - It is probably this sincere faith and trust in Jesus that allowed him to die so calmly (Acts 7:59-60)
 - When a person, such as Stephen recognizes that God is in control and thus concentrates on doing what God wants them to do then it is easier to leave the consequences in God's hands. (Romans 8:28)

2. His primary character traits are listed for us in Acts 6:5 and in Acts 6:8:
 - He was full of _____ which means his life was governed by it.
 - He was full of the _____ and some of the byproducts (Acts 1:8) of that are:
 - 1) _____
 - 2) _____

3. It is highly probable that his faith found favor with God for he was one of the rare people outside of the circle of Apostles that had the ability to perform "great wonders and signs".
 - The other two miracle workers listed in Acts were; _____ (Acts 8:6-7) and _____ (Acts 15:12)
 - Faithfulness has both _____ as well as _____

Exposing His Courage (Acts 6:9-14)

1. It seems pretty obvious by reading Stephen's words in Acts 7 that he was **well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures** which allowed him to **debate** with the other members in the Jewish Synagogues.
 - We are told that various ones rose up to **argue** with Stephen
 - We are also told that Stephen was able to hold his own and those whom he debated; **"were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking"**.
 - You can see (I think) some striking parallels to the Apostle Paul
2. Just who were these rebel rousers that opposed Stephen?
 - John MacArthur concludes that there were three different synagogues in mind here:
 - 1) **The Synagogue of the Freedman**
 - 2) Another Synagogue that was made up of Jews from **Cyrene** and **Alexandria** which were two leading cities in the region of **North Africa**.
 - 3) The third Synagogue which was made up of Jews from **Asia** (the western part of modern day Turkey) and **Cilicia** (which would have included the province of **Tarsus** of which Paul was from).
 - Others commentators conclude that it was just one Synagogue comprised of people from these regions.
 - What was a Synagogue, and when did the Jews start meeting in them?

- Luke does not provide us with the specifics of the debate (Acts 6:9-10) between himself and these various Hellenistic Jews from these different regions listed. He only tells us that they were incapable of presenting any compelling argument against whatever Stephen was claiming.
 - 1) Most draw the conclusion that the argument centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus (The Gospel), as well as the declaration that Jesus was the Messiah. I would support this conclusion.
 - 2) The fact that these Hellenistic Jews could not win the argument fairly helps to support the fact that Stephen must have been right!
 - 3) Can you think of another situation where something like this occurred?
 - 4) All of this shows the fallacy of human reasoning that leaves out the wisdom of God. Error is no match for truth!

- 3. When a person cannot win a debate or argument what is a typical tactic that is used to show their ignorance? (Acts 6:11)
 - In the debating world this is called an _____; which is attacking the character of the individual or as Webster puts it; “**appealing to personal dislikes**”.
 - This is most often done with evil intentions (Matthew 26:59-61)
 - One of the typical charges brought against the followers of Jesus was the charge of blasphemy but the charge never sticks!

4. The trumped up (false) charges are built around the argument that Stephen was claiming things that violated the Law (the words of Moses) and blasphemed or spoke against God.
- If such charges could be proven then they had the authority to put the one speaking these words to death. (Leviticus 24:16)
 - We have to draw a few conclusions here that are based on the continued teaching of the Apostles that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.
 - 1) **To claim this does not put the person in opposition to the Law.** How do we know this? (Matthew 5:17, Luke 24:44-49, Romans 2:17-29, 3:19-20, 3:21-31, 4:1-25)
 - 2) The act of blasphemy was actually being fulfilled through the actions of the accusers. Their rejection of Jesus was a complete violation of the Law and showed in their continued disobedience to it.
 - Stephen probably said the things that they accused him of but they more than likely misrepresented what he said in order to plead their case.
 - 1) Misrepresentation is very typical of a false witness – that is why it is called false!
 - 2) The charge seemed to center around the claim by Stephen; “we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place (the temple) and altar the customs which Moses handed down”.
 - 3) Jesus never said that He would destroy the Jerusalem temple.....He was clearly speaking of the temple of His body. (John 2:19-21)

6. Stephens courage was shown in the fact that he did not back down, nor did he compromise his position as we will see in the words recorded in Acts 7.
 - Stephen will declare these words; “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep.” (Acts 7:51-53)
 - This courage clearly shows a mark of greatness on this man

Observing His Countenance (Acts 6:15)

1. It is not unusual for a persons’ countenance (outward demeanor) to display what they are on the inside (their character).
2. Stephen is no exception to this and in fact his description goes well beyond what anyone would expect. We are told that the Sanhedrin; **“saw his face like the face of an angel”**.
 - This is sort of ironic as they had just accused him of being an evil blasphemer.
 - I like how John MacArthur states it; “God Himself answered their false charges by putting His glory on Stephen’s face – something experienced by no other person in history except Moses” - Exodus 34:27-35. This is a clear declaration by God of His approval of this New Covenant and of Stephen himself”. (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts, page 196.
3. A good concluding remark by my favorite preacher/commentator; “God singled Stephen out as one of the greatest men who ever lived. And his life and testimony profoundly affected an even greater man – Saul of Tarsus.” (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts, page 196)