

STEPHEN, A MAN FULL OF GOD'S GRACE AND POWER

Acts 6:8-7:16

Key Verse 6:8 *"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people."*

Last week, we learned that the apostles and disciples appointed seven deacons to serve fairly in the daily distribution of food. As a result, the conflicts in the church were resolved, the word of God spread, and the number of disciples increased rapidly. This was because God was pleased with the unity of the believers and blessed the church even more. Do you remember the qualifications to be chosen as a deacon? A man of good reputation and full of the Spirit and wisdom. Of the seven deacons who met these qualifications and were chosen, Stephen is the first one mentioned. And when the author Luke mentions Stephen's name, he adds the following description: "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (5). Today, we will learn about Stephen and the first part of his speech. Stephen's speech has been called a masterpiece among the sermons recorded in the book of Acts. Stephen's life of faith is amazing. As we reflect on Stephen's beautiful life full of the Spirit, wisdom, power and grace today and next week, may God give us a spiritual desire to grow as men and women of faith like Stephen.

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, after recording the election of the seven deacons, goes on to detail the story of two of them, Stephen and Philip, in chapters 6 through 8. Look at verse 8. *"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people."* Now, Stephen is described as a man full of God's grace and power. Taken together, the descriptions of Stephen in 6:3, 5, and 8 indicate that he was a man full of the Spirit and wisdom (3), faith and the Holy Spirit (5), and God's grace and power (8). No other character in the book of Acts is described as full of spirituality as Stephen. The statement in verse 8 is similar to Acts 4:33 *"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all."* God's grace and power are the most basic and essential qualities for serving God's ministry. Without God's grace, we cannot help people who need forgiveness and healing. Without God's power, we cannot win the spiritual warfare against Satan. With God's grace and power, Stephen performed great wonders and signs among the people. This means that through Stephen, God performed miraculous works of healing for the sick and restoration of the demon-possessed. The miracles that happened through Stephen were not one-time events but continuous. It is truly remarkable that Stephen, who performed such amazing miraculous works by the power of the Holy Spirit, was also full of God's grace. He dedicated and served in the daily distribution of food to help the poor, sick,

and hurt, especially orphans and widows. He was also full of the word of God. He was an excellent Bible teacher and a great preacher. His knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures was so deep that he could teach, debate, and preach powerfully using the word of God freely.

How old do you think Stephen would have been at that time? It seems that there are no historical sources for this. Looking at most of the art depicting Stephen's martyrdom, we'll see that he is described as a young man. Having been given the office of deacon to serve in the early Jerusalem church, Stephen was probably a young man of about 30 years of age. One book on Stephen's life records him as having been born in 5 A.D. and martyred between 34-36 A.D. If so, Stephen appears to have been martyred at about 30. He was truly martyred at a young age! This young deacon gave his life completely to God in service and dedication to those in need, teaching God's word and performing miracles to heal the sick. I guess that Stephen was not a full-time minister; he was not one of the apostles who served in the ministry of prayer and the word full-time. Perhaps Stephen worked to support himself. Nevertheless, he was not lazy in prayer and the word of God. He was a true man of God, full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, faith, grace, and power. We have wonderful young brothers and sisters, lay missionaries, and members who serve the Lord with devotion among us. I pray that we all will be Spirit-filled men and women of God like Stephen.

In verses 9-10, we see how excellent Stephen was at teaching and debating the gospel of Jesus. It is said that where the work of the Holy Spirit is powerful, the work of Satan is also strong because Satan is jealous that unbelievers, the slaves of sin, accept Jesus as their Savior, live holy lives, become the people of God's kingdom, and the kingdom of God expands. As Stephen powerfully witnessed the gospel, opposition arose from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia, began to argue with Stephen (9). Is the name 'the Synagogue of the Freedmen' not interesting? About 60 BC, the Roman general Pompey took many Jews to Rome as prisoners of war. When they were freed from captivity, they returned to Judea and built their own synagogue, which was named the Synagogue of the Freedmen. There, Jews from the northern cities of Africa, Cyrene and Alexandria, the province of Cilicia, which is now southern Türkiye, and the province of Asia Minor gathered to argue with Stephen. The capital of Cilicia was Tarsus, the hometown of the Apostle Paul. So when Stephen was stoned to death, a young man named Saul, who was later renamed Paul, was there.

They could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave to Stephen as he spoke (10). They were no match for Stephen in debate. So they began to frame him with falsehoods. First, they bribed some men to spread a false rumor among the Jews, saying, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God" (11). Speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God was an unacceptable matter that attacked Jewish identity and pride. So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish council in the first century. The

council had 71 members and was presided over by the high priest. Stephen's accusers produced false witnesses before the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin. Their false testimony was that Stephen had never stopped speaking against the temple and against the law. They said they had heard Stephen say that Jesus was going to destroy the holy place, the temple, and change the customs of Moses. We can see that their accusation is more specifically developed from the previous accusation that Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against Moses and against God. To summarize their false testimony, Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against God, Moses, the temple, and the law. The Jews stoned blasphemers to death. If their testimony was accepted and blasphemy was applied to Stephen, he was in danger of being stoned to death.

What was Stephen's reaction then? Look at verse 15. *“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”* The religious leaders stared at Stephen's face, waiting to see how he would react. Perhaps they expected him to be terrified, to burst into tears, to be contrite, to ask for forgiveness. But his face was like the face of an angel. Angels are in the realm of glory, in the presence of God, and everything in that realm reflects the glory of God. Stephen's face was not filled with fear, anxiety, and worry; on the contrary, his face was filled with peace and confidence. His face was radiant, like the face of an angel. In other words, God's glory was radiating from his face. This is because Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, and the glory of God was revealed through his face. When Moses encountered God and received the law on Mount Sinai, his face was radiant. Similarly, Stephen's face was shining with the radiance of God because he was filled with the glory of God. It seems that Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, was already prepared to die for the glory of God. He was not afraid of death at all because he was waiting for Jesus' return and the coming of the kingdom of God. He was filled with hope because of God's reward after death. His hope was not on this earth but in the eternal kingdom of God. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, all our worries and anxieties fade away, and we are filled with peace and confidence. Our faces will shine with the radiance of God's glory. This state of being filled with the Holy Spirit explains how Stephen was able to boldly deliver that great speech before the Sanhedrin.

The high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” Stephen did not hesitate but boldly preached the gospel of repentance and salvation. His speech was both an apologetic refutation of his opponents' false witnesses and an evangelistic message that pinpointed their sins and called them to repentance. The opponents' charges were that Stephen had never stopped speaking blasphemous words against God, Moses, the law, and the temple. In response, Stephen defends himself and the Christian faith. In vv. 7:2-7, Stephen speaks of the God of glory who appeared to Abraham, the father of the Jews, and promised him descendants and land. He then mentions Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs of Israel. He then tells the story of Jacob's 12 sons who formed the 12 tribes of Israel, especially Joseph (8-16). Stephen then goes on to mention that God raised up Moses as their leader, who carried out the Exodus of his people (17-36). God gave the Israelites the Law, the living words, through Moses at Mount Sinai (37-38). However, while in the wilderness, the Israelites disobeyed God

and committed the sin of idolatry by making a golden calf (39-43). Finally, regarding the temple, Stephen mentions that God commanded Moses to make the tabernacle of the covenant and dwelt in it. Solomon, a son of David, then built the temple, but Stephen makes it clear that the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands (48). He then reveals the sins of the Jews who resisted the Holy Spirit and killed Jesus, the Righteous One, and calls for repentance (51-53). That's where Stephen's speech ends. The Jews and religious leaders, furious with Stephen for pointing out their sins, dragged him out and stoned him to death. That's the outline of Stephen's speech. Today, we'll cover from Abraham to Joseph and the rest next week.

There is not enough time for me to interpret and explain Stephen's speech in detail. Here are some important points from 7:2-16. In verse 2, Stephen begins his speech by saying that the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham. Abraham is the ancestor of the nation of Israel, and the Jews in the Sanhedrin would have listened with interest when Stephen began the story of Abraham. By doing this, Stephen is saying that Christianity, the faith in Jesus, believes in the same God that the Jews believe in and shares the same ancestry and history. Therefore, he is refuting the testimony that Stephen or Christians blaspheme God. The promises God made to Abraham can be summarized as descendants and land. The faithful God gave Abraham Isaac and Isaac Jacob as children of promise (8). They received the covenant of circumcision as God had commanded. God sent them to Egypt to make them a great nation (14). He later used Moses to bring them into Canaan, the promised land. In this way, God was faithful to fulfill His promises. On the other hand, the Israelite ancestors repeatedly sinned against God. Jacob's sons were jealous of their brother Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt (9). Stephen clearly pointed out the sins of Israel's patriarchs. God was with Joseph, gracious to him, and made him ruler over Egypt. A famine came, and the children of Jacob would starve to death, but God used Joseph to preserve their lives. Joseph reminds us of Jesus, who was rejected and killed by his own people. The Jews and religious leaders were guilty of rejecting and killing Jesus, the righteous Savior, but God raised him from the dead so that he could forgive and save those who rejected and killed him.

From today's message, I hope we take away the following three lessons to remember and learn.

First, Stephen's spirituality. The secret to his powerful and fruitful life of faith was his spirituality. Spirituality comes from a deep communion with God. Spirituality is meeting with God through prayer, the word of God, and praise, cleansing ourselves of our sins through the blood of Jesus, and filling ourselves with the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, God's love, grace, and power are revealed through us. Stephen's spirituality was not theoretical but practical, as Christ's love and grace were revealed in his service to those in need, and Christ's power was revealed in his words and actions as he healed and preached the gospel. May we encounter God personally and deeply each day through prayer, the word of God, and praise. May our sins be cleansed by the blood of Jesus and each of us be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

May we love God, serve our neighbors, and spread the gospel for God's glory like Stephen.

Second, Stephen's exceptional knowledge of the Scriptures. He didn't have a manuscript prepared in advance, yet he delivered a powerful gospel message. This was possible because he was well-versed in the history, law, prophecy, and wisdom of the Hebrew Bible. He read, studied, and practiced God's Word consistently, even in the midst of his busy life. My prayer is that we will be a faith community that studies, learns, and practices the word of God together. For the past two weeks, we have been meeting on Friday evenings to study the Book of Acts. It has been such a blessing that many members gathered and enjoyed the word of God together. We are currently organizing new fellowship groups. I pray that our New York UBF members will grow as disciples of Jesus through Bible studies together with our fellowship members.

Third, Stephen's readiness and boldness in preaching the gospel. It's amazing that Stephen was not afraid, even when his life was in danger, but rather used the situation as an opportunity to boldly preach the gospel. He was ready to preach the gospel at any time. 2 Timothy 4:2 exhorts us to "***preach the word; be ready in season and out of season.***" Because of Jesus' sacrificial love for us, we have been forgiven of our sins, saved, and given a new life full of joy. It is a great blessing for us to share this grace we have received with those who do not yet know Jesus because it is the will of Jesus who saved us. May we be God's servants like Stephen, preaching the gospel in season and out of season. Amen.