

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Stephen: The First Martyr

Scripture: Acts 6:315

Code: 44-24

Open your Bible to Acts chapter 6, chapter 6. A few weeks ago we looked at the first part of this chapter down through verse 7 and examined a little bit about the original organization of the early church. We're going to pick up the story in chapter 6 at verse 8.

You will remember that the chapter opened with a problem in the early church. A problem because some of the Hellenistic widows - that is, widows from outside Jerusalem, Jewish widows who had come to faith in Jesus Christ and were now a part of the church but were from Greek countries rather than the land of Israel - were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. There seemed to be great care given to the Jerusalem widows, those that were well-known to everybody. But some of the others were forgotten because they were from outside the normal circle.

In order to make sure their needs were met, somebody had to oversee the distribution of food and serve the tables. So they decided to select seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom to put in charge of this task. Those men are identified in verse 5. The first men in the list and the only one about whom it says anything is a man named Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. That's where we meet Stephen. He becomes the main character in the narrative through the rest of this chapter and chapter 7. So let's at least read from the eighth verse on to the end of this chapter and then a couple of others from chapter 7 and even a place in chapter 8 so we get the picture.

More about Stephen. According to verse 5, he was a man in the early church who was a part of the Hellenists. He was a Greek-speaking believer in Jesus Christ who had belonged to a Jewish synagogue, as all the Jews did, but in a foreign land. He along with all the rest were chosen to care for the widows who would be nearest and dearest to their hearts.

Stephen is then the subject of verse 8. "Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedman, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 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.' And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council

saw his face like the face of an angel. The high priest said, 'Are these things so?'" And Stephen gave a very long answer all the way through chapter 7.

In response to his great answer sweeping through the Old Testament, verse 54 says, "When they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul."

"They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' Having said this, he fell asleep. Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

"Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word."

What an amazing man was Stephen. He was not a deacon. They didn't come until later, but he was put in charge of serving tables. He was not an apostle, but he did signs and wonders. The miraculous power granted to the apostles was extended to him and also to another leader by the name of Philip. He was not a prophet, but he was a great preacher. Not a deacon, but a servant. Not an apostle, but a miracle worker. Not a prophet, but a great preacher. He is a very unique man. He stands between the apostles and the structure of the early church uniquely. The only parallel to him we will meet in chapter 8, and it is Philip who is also named in chapter 6 along with him.

He is a largely overlooked individual. From what we can tell, he had a very short career. The church is very new and very young, and that means he is a very new believer, but the vast grasp that he had of the Old Testament is enough to be laid out in an entire chapter because of its accuracy and its richness. One whom everybody deemed to be a servant, and yet a miracle worker and a preacher and the first Christian martyr. We need to know this man. This is a man who is great by every divine measure. He's full of everything that every believer should be full of.

He is a transitional personality. The testimony being given to the Jews led by Peter and the apostles is soon to be closed. The testimony to the gentile world begun by Paul is soon to be opened. Between Peter and Paul, Stephen is like a bridge. He's chosen by Peter and the apostles. He's martyred at the hands of Paul. He is a transitional man, a bridge. He didn't minister to the Israeli

Jews. He didn't minister to the foreign gentiles. He ministered to the foreign Jews. Again, an indication of his unique transition. He is the catalyst for the dispersion of the church. It was because of his martyrdom and the persecution that was launched at the point of his martyrdom that the believers scattered. And that was the purpose of God in his martyrdom because Jesus had said, "When the Holy Spirit comes, you will be witnesses unto Me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the world." What was going to send them into Judea? What was going to send them into Samaria? What was going to send them into the world? Not a missionary mission, but persecution, martyrdom, the threat of death.

As we read in chapter 8. It is the very death of Stephen that becomes the catalyst to fulfill the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:8 before His ascension. He is the forerunner of the very man who stood and watched him crushed under the bloody stone: Saul of Tarsus. He is the forerunner of Paul. He is the one who carried the message to Hellenists, who carried the message to the people who lived outside Jerusalem and Judea, confronting congregations in Jewish synagogues, but those who were foreigners. He takes the first step beyond the Jews in the direction of the gentiles.

The mantle of Stephen falls strangely on Saul, one of Stephen's most bitter enemies. In fact, it may be that the apostle Paul owes much of his exposure to the gospel to the sermon that Stephen preached. Stephen was a noble personality. He was essential to God's plan for world evangelization. It was his martyrdom, as I said, that launched the church into the world. He is also a graphic testimony that it's not the length of a man's life that establishes his importance and his influence. In fact, the length of a man's life has sometimes very little to do with its impact. His ministry was extremely short. They were all new believers, brand new believers. Months, weeks, that's all.

He doesn't seem to have had a very long career. This is the only sermon that we have recorded that he ever preached, and there were no positive results. As far as we can tell, there's no record that anybody was saved or anybody believed, and yet it was the catalyst that caused the church to move in the next step of the Great Commission. Again, it may have been his death that began the career of Saul who became Paul.

The nobility of this man is bound up in his courage with the truth. What we know about him is all in this text of Scripture. We know nothing beyond this, but we do know that what reigns supreme in his life is this amazing courage, amazing courage. Because of that courage, he put himself in a position to lose his life, but that was the plan. He is the first Christian martyr, but the threats of imprisonment and even the threats of death had no effect on him because he was so totally committed to being faithful. He paid the ultimate price for his commitment.

I want you to see if you can't get to know Stephen a little bit. There is a lot that can be said here, even though it's a brief text. I would encourage you to read this section on your own and draw out of it what you can. Let me just give you a little background. The church had been basically promised by our Lord. It has been given its commission in chapter 1, verse 8 to take the gospel into the world

to be witnesses of Christ to the ends of the earth. The church then began on the Day of Pentecost. We saw that in chapter 2. It came into existence as an evangelistic agency. It came into existence to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. That's what the church does. That's its mission.

Believers come together to be instructed and empowered and energized for the task of evangelism. The Lord gave to them all the necessary components for effective evangelism. The first thing we saw early in the book of Acts was the unity of the church. Unity of love, one heart, one mind, loving one another, sacrificing for one another. Powerful, concentrated, united single testimony. We saw the courage of the church early on. They boldly proclaimed the gospel, boldly confronted the Jews, relentlessly accepting persecution and using it as an opportunity for further proclamation of the gospel.

We also saw the total involvement of the church. Everybody was on board. Everybody was involved. All who believed were all baptized, and they were all together as one, and they were all engaged in the apostle's doctrine and prayer and the breaking of bread and fellowship. There was a power in that unity. There was a fearlessness in that unity, and they all knew the message. They knew the message was Christ and Him crucified, risen, reigning and returning. They never were sidetracked. They didn't deviate onto social issues and temporary earthly concerns. It was always the preaching of the Word of God. It was always the explaining of the only Bible in existence at the time, the Old Testament in light of the arrival of the promised Messiah. Their chief business was the ministry of the gospel, the ministry of reconciliation.

The church was purified. The church, by being preoccupied with the Spirit of God and the Word of God was purified by that, but further purified by the Lord Himself. He actually killed a couple of people who lied to the Holy Spirit and sent fear through the church. The price of belonging was high. Only the pure came. Only those who wanted their sin dealt with and who wanted to walk in righteousness participated. They got organized. They brought together, as I've said, these godly men mentioned in chapter 6, verse 5, to provide ministry for them. Then there were the apostles who were doing all the teaching early on, but you can see the responsibility to teach begins even to transition to those men who were chosen there in chapter 6. Stephen becomes a preacher and Philip becomes a preacher.

All the keys to evangelism are there, and that's why the church exists. It exists in the world for the evangelism of the world. There was unity and courage and total involvement. There was clear understanding of the content and there was purity and there was discipline, and there was spiritual organization. All of that was in good order. That leads us up to our text in verse 8 where we see the very short career of this amazing man named Stephen.

What the Lord used Stephen to do was to launch the church into the world in a most amazing way. He was the trigger that fired the church out. As I said, we don't have any record that anybody responded to his message positively or anybody was saved. But the church was scattered and because the church was scattered, the gospel was taken to the world and many were saved. Now,

as we look at Stephen here, let me just kind of break this text up into four thoughts, okay? His choosing, his character, his courage, and his countenance. All right?

His choosing, his choosing. Go back to chapter 6, verse 3. They're looking for, "men of good reputation who are full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Stephen was one of those men. So we know this, he was full of the Spirit, full of wisdom, and verse 5 says he was full of faith and it's implied, full of the Holy Spirit. When they look for the best of men, and they want seven of them out of the thousands of Christians now – the church has exploded, right? Three thousand at Pentecost. Five thousand more men in chapter four. Thousands are coming into the church. They're looking for just seven men. Stephen was one of the seven.

What that tell us is the church did hold him in high reputation. If you're looking among thousands and maybe in the twenty thousands of people for seven, that's pretty high criteria when you identify those seven. His name, *Stephanos* means "victor's crown" and he actually won that in his martyrdom. He was a Jew from outside the land of Israel. The early church would have been careful in its choosing, selecting those only of the highest spiritual quality, and those qualifications would have been defined for them by the apostles.

This is something the people actually do. The people actually do this. The congregation is involved in this. They're actually told to find these men. Verse 3, "Select from among you seven men, brethren." So they raised up these seven. The highest spiritual character, the highest level of devotion to Christ, of courage to proclaim the gospel. This sets in motion what we learn later from Paul as those qualifications which are introduced here are delineated more specifically with regard to elders and deacons.

So the very choosing of Stephen establishes at the beginning his uniqueness and his greatness. The people choose the seven. They present them to the apostles for validation and verification. This is enough for me to know about Stephen. Out of all the thousands of men, thousands and thousands and thousands of men, he's the first one in the list of seven.

The second reason that we know he plays a very important role not only because of his choosing and the perception of the church, but his character is delineated here. Let's go back to verse 5 for a minute. We can assume from verse 3, he like the rest, was of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, but specifically it says about him in verse 5, "He is a man full of faith," full of faith. *Pleres*, meaning full. He is filled up. That is to say his life is dominated by faith. He walks by faith. He is controlled by faith. The idea of full is total control.

When you say, for example, "Someone is filled with rage or filled with anger or filled with madness or filled with joy or filled with love," you mean that is a dominating emotion. That is a dominating force at that point in the person's life. That is a consuming thing. It is unmixed. It is unmitigated. Things

which control are the things that would be contained in the notion of being filled. He is filled with faith. What do we know about his faith? What did he believe? If he is full of faith, what did he believe? Well, I can tell you what he believed. Go to chapter 7, and let's pick it up at verse 2. Here's what he said as he begins his sermons, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.'" Of course, he is quoting Genesis 12. "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him."

Again, he's quoting Genesis 12 and Genesis 13. The first thing you know what he believed, he believed in the Old Testament. He believed in the authenticity and validity of the Old Testament. He believed also that God determined and God ruled history. The common idea in the world is that kings and governors and statesmen and politicians make history. Stephen believed that God wrote history, God wrote history. History was all a revelation of God's character and God's purpose and God's plan. He believed in the Old Testament. He believed in the God revealed in the Old Testament, and he unfolds that all the way through the sermon.

When you come down to verse 52 toward the end, you find out something else he believed. In verse 52, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One." He believed Jesus was the Messiah. He believed in Jesus as the righteous one of God, and he believed that His death was the pivotal point in which history turned. They killed the righteous one. He also believed that Jesus was risen. How do we know that he believed that? Because, "Being full of the Holy Spirit – " in verse 55 " - he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, 'I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" Verse 59, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

He believed in the Messiah. He believed the Messiah had risen and ascended. He believed the Messiah was in heaven. He believed the Messiah cared for him. He believed the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, was waiting to receive him. He believed in the Holy Spirit, verse 51. He says, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit." This is what he believed. He was full of faith, and he believed in all these great spiritual realities that he delineates in this great sermon.

He believed so strongly in the God of the Old Testament and the Old Testament, he believed so strongly in the Lord Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, and his own hope of eternal life and welcome into heaven that he bet his life on it. He put his life on the line, so much that he believed that he was willing to be stoned to death. He knew the price that could be paid for being as bold as he was willing to be.

Obviously, faith has different dimensions. It has different levels. It has different kinds of demonstrations and commitments. Stephen's was full faith. He was totally controlled by what he believed, completely controlled in his life, his thought, his ministry, his responses, his emotions. He had given his life completely over to the truth of God, which he believed and was willing to die for it. We see also that he was full of the Spirit, full of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Clearly, that comes out as he is stoned, chapter 7, verse 55.

They're gnashing their teeth at him ready to stone him. Verse 55, "Being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven." He is totally controlled by his yieldedness to the Holy Spirit. This is a man who believes in the truth so passionately that he will die for it. This is a man who is so confident in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to care for him, to comfort him, to strengthen him, to bring him to a glorious end, that he has complete confidence in the Holy Spirit.

This is a man, back in verse 3, who is also full of wisdom. In fact, his wisdom is so profound, it is so beyond argument that when he speaks, his enemies cannot withstand what he says. And in fury and anger they kill him because they can't answer his arguments.

Furthermore, verse 8 says, he is full of grace, full of grace. What is that? Well, it could be the grace of salvation, but we all have that fully. It could be the grace that comes in persecution, but I think it's something else. I think it's not the grace that he received. It's the grace that he gave. What came out of him was grace, was grace. Another way to say it, he was full of what the Old Testament calls "lovingkindness." The Old Testament word was *chesed*, lovingkindness. Why do I say that? Go to the end of chapter 7. While they're stoning him, he's falling on his knees. He cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" What kind of tenderheartedness is this? No anger, no vengeance, no violence, no retaliation. This is grace.

The congregation must have known him as a gracious person, a kind person, a loving person. Even toward those who are killing him in a fury of rage he could be gracious because he was full of the Holy Spirit. He could be gracious because he was full of faith. He could be gracious because he was full of wisdom. He could commit everything to God. Verse 59 of chapter 7, "Receive my spirit and please forgive them." What an amazing man. This kind of grace comes out of full faith. This kind of grace is a product of the Holy Spirit.

Then it tells us in verse 8 that he was full of power. This is the result of being full of the Spirit. He is full of Holy Spirit power to an apostolic degree. He is performing great wonders and signs among the people. He is actually doing miracles and, of course, that is to validate him as one who when he speaks, speaks for God. This is before there was a New Testament. How did you know if anybody was a speaker for God? If he had miraculous power.

Again, the second man in the list in chapter 6, Philip, had the same power. Chapter 8, verse 6,

“Philip also in Samaria is performing signs, wonders.” So I say, he’s not a deacon, but he serves the widows. He’s not an apostle, but he was able to do miracles to validate the truth. He’s not a prophet, but he is a great preacher of Scripture. What an amazing, amazing man. So we see his choosing and we see his character, and we aren’t even out of verse 8.

Let’s look at his courage. This is not going to surprise us knowing what we’ve just seen. His courage. This man, full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, full of wisdom, full of power, this man, this remarkable man full of grace longing from the depths of his heart out of love to reach people with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, met the hostile world head on. He went into the teeth of the battle. He preached Jesus as Messiah to the Hellenistic Jews. He confronted them. It took tremendous courage to do this. Verse 9, “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.”

This is his mission field. The apostles are going to the Jerusalem Jews. Paul later will go to the gentiles. Stephen will go to the Jews in gentile lands. He starts in Jerusalem where synagogues for these pilgrims existed. There were communities of Grecian Jews who had resettled in the land of Israel. When there were feasts and festivals and when people came on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, they would find their way to these synagogues. These synagogues functioned perhaps in the language of the country of the people who made them. So that’s his mission field. Why? Because he’s one of them. He is introduced earlier in the chapter as one of them. All those names in verse 5 are Greek names. These Greek Jews were chosen to meet the needs of the Grecian Hellenistic widows.

So he goes to the place where he can reach his people. The place is the synagogue. The meeting place is where the Jews gathered. These meetings places existed all the way back to the Babylonian captivity. During apostolic times, even Jewish communities from outside Jerusalem managed to establish their own synagogues where foreign Jews could come and meet and unite. Historians tell us, for example, that there were nearly 500 synagogues in Jerusalem. Many of these synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of our Lord, at the time of the book of Acts were for those who were pilgrims from other parts of the world and needed to interact with people who spoke their own language.

Now, this particular group is identified for us. First, the synagogue of the Freedman, the Freedmen. What is that? Pompeii, the Roman general, had carried off large numbers of Jews as prisoners to Rome. He had hauled them away in 63 B.C. He hauled these Jews away and sold them as slaves. Most of them eventually found their freedom, some of them very soon, and they came back to their land. Very likely, the synagogue of the Freedmen is a synagogue that basically was developed - and it only took ten men to start a synagogue - by freed Roman slaves who had returned to their own city to worship.

There also are mentioned Cyrenians, a city in Africa in the Libyan area. They had a large Jewish

colony there. They also participated in a synagogue in Jerusalem. Then Alexandrians, the capital of Egypt, founded by Alexander the Great. A huge Jewish community there and a great library of many Jewish scholars there.

Cilicia is mentioned, a district in the settlement known as Asia Minor near Syria, large Jewish colony. By the way, the principal city of Cilicia and that Jewish colony was Tarsus. Saul was from Tarsus. You know that was the most prominent member of that synagogue. Here's where Saul probably functioned in the synagogue of the people from Cilicia.

Then there were some from Asia, meaning the western part of Asia Minor. The chief city was Ephesus. So you have five groups. Maybe there were five different synagogues. Some think so. Maybe there were three synagogues mixed and maybe there was only one synagogue, and they were all in the same one, and they all spoke some Greek well enough to interact. We don't know, but to them, Stephen went. And what did he do? He rose up. I don't think he was an invited speaker. I don't think they lined him up for a weekend conference.

He rose up and argued with them and they argued back with him. He took his place there and spoke, and it created no small stir, but verse 10, they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Of course they were unable to cope. It may have been, not a stretch, that the one leading the argument against him was – fill in the blank. Saul, who would certainly have been great at arguing and making his case. Two brilliant minds, Stephen and Saul, battling over divine truth and Stephen won. Why? Was he a greater debater than Saul? No, but he had the truth on his side.

The argument there, when it says argued or disputing, it doesn't necessarily indicate anger. But a kind of fair debate in which there was actual argument presented; not just harangue, but actual argument. I can't imagine anything more exciting to watch than a debate between Stephen and Saul. The exact subject of the debate we don't know, but we can guess. It was a debate between the old covenant and the new covenant, right? It was a debate over the identity of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It was a debate over the role of the law. It was a debate about salvation by grace, and Stephen won the debate because of his unparalleled wisdom and because the Spirit was upon him.

The reaction, verse 11. "Then they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him blaspheme words against Moses and against God.'" So that tells us he was arguing against the old covenant. He was arguing against the Judaistic misinterpretation of the Law of Moses. He was also arguing, no doubt, for the deity of Christ. By dismissing the saving power of the Law of Moses, he was seen as blaspheming Moses. By identifying Jesus as God, he was blaspheming God in their minds. Now, this is a man who has taken the message to the people. He has walked right into the fire and declared to them that the Law of Moses cannot save. It can only condemn. Maybe this is where Paul for the first time heard that, "By the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified."

Maybe this is where the apostle Paul heard for the first time that all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily in Jesus Christ. To these Jews, these were blasphemous words, blasphemy against Moses, treading on very sacred soil, blasphemy against God by saying Jesus is equal to God. So they stirred the people, the elders, the scribes. These agitated Hellenistic Jews left their synagogues and started stirring up the rabble that Stephen was a blasphemer, Stephen was a blasphemer. Does that sound familiar? It's exactly what happened to our Lord Jesus.

The people for the most part had just looked at the church as it grew and developed, and they were impressed. In fact, we learned back in chapter 2 that the apostles in the early church had favor with all the people, didn't they? They respected them even in chapter 5 when Ananias and Sapphira were killed in the church, the people admired them. The crowd is indifferent, but impressed until now. Now, the stirring of the people along the lines that this Stephen who is part of this church is a blasphemer against Moses and a blasphemer against God; agitates the people, agitates the elders, agitates the scribes. They make up the Sanhedrin. The agitation reaches a level where they came up to Stephen and dragged him away, and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

This is where the false witnesses show up. Verse 13, "They put forward the false witnesses who said, 'This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law.'" Well, that tells us something about what the debate was on. Perhaps he was repeated the wretchedness of the temple. Certainly, he was telling them the true purpose of the law, to define sin, not provide salvation. They accused him also of saying that, "This Nazarene –" that's a scornful epithet, "– this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place –" the temple "– and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

So now we understand the picture. He's preaching on the failing exit, the old covenant, the entrance of the new covenant with Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Just think about it. We have a synagogue on our block. This would be like going down there at Shabbat, standing up and starting a debate denouncing the Law of Moses and exalting the deity of Jesus Christ. Now, they may be nicer folks down there. From time to time, they sneak in here. So if you're from there and you're here, you're welcome. You really are. But this is great boldness and Stephen knows what they've done to the Lord. He also knows that they have already imprisoned and beaten the apostles. He knows what's at stake, and he knows that it is the Jews who will perpetrate these persecutions.

But his courage is undiminished. I don't know how they found this guy out of the thousands of men in the church, but what a remarkable man he is. So courageous. In fact, this is what he says to them in chapter 7, verse 51. "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? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become." You killers of the Righteous One! Wow. This not friendship evangelism. This is a noble man. This man is heroic. We see it in his choosing out of all that could have been chosen, and he heads the list of those who

are full of all the necessary spiritual realities. We see it in his character. We see it in his courage. Finally, it shows up in his countenance. This is just remarkable.

In chapter 6, verse 15, the final verse of the chapter, "And fixing their gaze on him," that is, the infuriated synagogue people, the rulers, the elders, the scribes, the people, whoever it is that's gathered in the crowd that's dragged him away, including the false witnesses. They all are gazing at him, all of them now in the Council. The witnesses probably came to the Council. That would include the people who are making the accusations from the synagogue, the Sanhedrin members; they're all there, whoever is there in that large gathering. There would be over 70 gathered just in the Sanhedrin alone and all the rest. They fixed their gaze on him, "All who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel." Wow.

They are accusing him of blasphemy. They're calling him evil. They're saying he is denouncing God and Moses, and he is standing there looking angelic. His appearance is as the pure holiness of an angel. What a rebuke. What a rebuke. What does this mean? Did he have a halo over his head? No. Don't angels reflect the glory of God? Yes, they do. Yes, they do. Angels reflect the glory of God in light. Chapter 12, verse 7, "An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell where Peter was." When an actual angel appeared, light appeared. But this isn't an actual angel, so this isn't an actual angel and shining glorious light of an angel. What is this? I don't know. I don't know.

But in their minds, he looked like he has transcended above all of it, all of it. He looked as if he were pure and holy and virtuous. All of his power in the Holy Spirit, all of his wisdom in the Holy Spirit, all of his grace in the Holy Spirit, all of his faith, all of it came out on his face. He looked angelic. Only once in all the revelatory history has God ever put His glory on the face of a man, only once. That's in Exodus 33, and He put it on the face of Moses, didn't He? After Moses saw the glory of God in Exodus 33 and 34 and came down, his face was shining. He was reflecting somehow the glory of God. For a moment, God allowed Moses to reflect His glory. That's the only time that's happened in the whole Old Testament.

Here in the New Testament, while the Jews are accusing Stephen of being a blasphemer, God puts a glow on his face. He stands, as Moses did before his people in shining purity with the mark of divine favor on his face. And at the end of his life, he saw the glory of God, verse 55, chapter 7. He saw the heavens open. He saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand. He called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

This is unparalleled experience. I don't know all that this was, but I do know it came across as divine presence, divine approval, transcendent reality. They were damning him as a blasphemer and he had the face of an angel. What a man. May I suggest to you that God is still looking for men and women like this who can serve Him in His church, who can be chosen out of the thousands, who have manifestly demonstrated the character of a Stephen, full of faith, full of grace, full of the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom. God is still looking for people who have courage, boldness that has no limit.

And God will demonstrate His glory on the face of those people; not visibly, but in the calm, peaceful, tranquil, almost transcendent trust that comes through in the most hateful, violent circumstances.

I imagine, and maybe it's not an unimaginable thing, but I imagine that Saul, if he was there, never forgot the face of Stephen – never. Maybe when he was on the Damascus Road in chapter 9 and he fell down and the Lord blinded him and said, "It's hard for you to kick against the goads. Why are you persecuting Me?" He may have thought of the face of Stephen.

Father, we thank you for giving us an opportunity to meet this man, the man with the face of an angel. The beauty in that is just striking, unforgettable. You're still looking for men and women like that who can be chosen because of their character and courage to represent you in the world, to confront the world with the truth, and to receive all that the world throws back of hatred and rejection and persecution and violence and stand in the transcendent calm and peace of full confidence that all is well.

May we be such people who even when rejected and even when persecuted rise above it. And may Christ be seen through us as we give glory to Him. Thank you for a wonderful day together, and we give you praise. In Christ's name, amen.

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