

June 6, 2021
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Acts
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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CHRIST'S SERVANT ACCUSED
Acts 6:8-15

Many years ago, Pat and I worked to establish a church in Woodruff, a small town about twenty-five miles from Greenville. It was a quaint, typical southern town. For the most part it still is. Many Saturdays an older gentleman and I would spend the afternoon walking through the town, or driving out into the country, to visit people with the desire to introduce them to Christ and to the new church in town. Without exception, the response of the people was kind, considerate, and gracious – outwardly at least. It was rare that we had opportunity to share the gospel because, not only was everyone already born again, but most people were “active” members in various local churches. But at least they refused the gospel graciously.

I experienced quite a contrast to that attitude years earlier in the area where I was born. When Pat and I were first married, we joined an Independent Bible-preaching Baptist Church in Pennsylvania. We didn't hesitate to get involved right away. We joined the choir, taught Sunday School, Pat worked in AWANAs, and while she was doing that I often went with older gentlemen on door-to-door visitation. Most of the time the people simply said they were not interested and closed the door without fanfare. However, it was not unusual for a man or woman to get a bit agitated and tell us in unmistakable terms to mind our own business.

In either setting or in both settings, the one thing that is obvious is that there are a lot of folks who are not interested in hearing the good news of the gospel. Stephen found that out. Obviously, he had heard the good news about Jesus of Nazareth our Savior from sin.

That in itself is significant because his name indicates that he came from a Greek background though he probably was a Jew.

Having trusted Christ as Savior, Stephen was part of the wonderful work of Jesus building the Church like He promised. God gave him wisdom, a good reputation, and filled him with the Holy Spirit. His Christlikeness was noticeable and soon his peers in the Church recommended him to serve as a deacon.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit, and loving Christ, the first thing Stephen wanted to do was to tell others the good news. He quickly obeyed our Master's instruction to go into Jerusalem and preach the gospel. And just as quickly, Stephen learned that not everyone wants to hear the gospel.

We already know that the chief priests and members of the Sanhedrin tried to silence the truth by killing the Author of truth, who subsequently came back to life to affirm the truth. Jesus then sent His messengers throughout the world to keep telling the good news. So, the chief priests and Sanhedrin tried to silence the gospel by arresting the messengers, putting them in prison, beating them, and strictly warning them to stop that.

Now according to our text, they will resort to another method to silence the Word of God – lying and character assassination. Surely, God would not permit that to happen to His choice messenger Stephen! But He did. And that was not a rarity because God even allowed the same kind of treatment against His own Beloved Son. In fact, the two trials before the Sanhedrin, that of Jesus and that of Stephen, look eerily similar. And the conclusions of the trials were also the same – execution! The big difference is that Jesus walked out of the tomb in His glorified body and Stephen's body still waits to be glorified. And it will be.

What we learn from this text is that Satan's tactics against God's messengers actually reveal little creativity. Apparently, he assumes that if it worked once it will work again. What he apparently doesn't seem to understand is that he still hasn't silenced the gospel. Nor will he.

Christ's Servant Demonstrated Authority (vv.8-10).

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people (v.8). At the outset, we learn that Stephen did Christ's work with power. Indeed, he was full of grace and power. This is the second time we read that Stephen was full of something. The religious leaders were sure that Stephen was full of baloney or at the very least full of a false teaching that exposed their hypocrisy. Earlier in the context of the Church choosing the first Deacons, we read that Stephen was full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

First, we need to consider what it means to be full of these traits. In both references, the word for "full" is the very common Greek word *playrace*. Obvious from our text, the word means to be full, filled up to capacity. It speaks of a particular space being completely occupied by something. Interestingly the word also speaks of an infection that invades the whole body. But it wasn't Stephen's body that was slam full of three spiritual traits. It was Stephen's soul, heart, the real, everlasting being God created in a human named Stephen.

The messenger of Jesus was completely occupied with three spiritual traits and one divine Being. He was filled up completely with the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. We read that truth back in verse five. *And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit . . . (Acts 6:5a).* This is the result of the Holy Spirit Himself performing the miracle of regeneration on the sinner from Greek background.

Each one of us who, like Stephen, are born again, possess the full person of the Holy Spirit at the moment He saves us from sin. However, being in possession of, indwelt by the Holy Spirit is not the same as being completely occupied by Him. We are commanded to pay attention to the need to always be completely filled by Him (Ephesians 5:18). Very practically, being filled with the Holy Spirit is a matter of the Holy Spirit who is wholly in us having our whole submission and dedication.

And because of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in Stephen, he was also completely filled up with those three spiritual traits. The first one mentioned is faith (6:5a) – the gift of the Holy Spirit that

allowed Stephen (and us) to trust the finished work of Jesus Christ to be saved. The gift of the Holy Spirit that kept him (and us) trusting the Lord to do His will as he continued not to lean on his own understanding. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).* Stephen simply taught us how to live and act if we really trust Christ.

The second spiritual trait is grace. That truth is stated in our text, ". . . and Stephen, full of grace and power . . ." (6:8). The undeserved favor of God fills us up at the moment He draws us to Christ for salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). God continues to fill His messengers with this grace day by day so that we can serve Him.

The third trait which filled Stephen was power. This spiritual trait is a bit more unusual. Jesus promised that the apostles would receive this power in conjunction with the coming Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). Most of the time this word is translated in the Gospel to refer to mighty works, miracles. In the New Testament letters, this power is attributed to God but also is demonstrated in the lives of believers who are submissive instruments in God's hands.

Therefore, because God had given these traits to Stephen, he publicly demonstrated the grace and power. By them he *was doing great wonders and signs among the people (v.8b)*. The great wonders and signs mentioned here are miracles. Scripture does not tell us what miracles exactly. We know that God was using the apostles to perform acts of healing and exorcisms. In chapter five we learned, *They even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed (Acts 5:15-16).*

The purpose for the great wonders and signs was still to attract attention to the gospel message, the good news about salvation through Christ. It was a chief means Jesus used to build His Church in the first days.

Stephen was demonstrating the power of God and soon the critics realized they could not defeat Christ's power. The text lists the alliance of critics. *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the*

Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia (v.9a). These people were coming after Stephen. If he had been like most professing Christians (saved but little faith, little grace, and little power), no one ever would have noticed him. He could have moved in and out of society attracting little or no attention.

But because Stephen was completely occupied by the Holy Spirit, faith, grace, and power, God was using him and that attracted attention . . . not necessarily the good kind. The synagogues were very important features of Jewish society. In those places (much like our local churches), the people met to worship, sing, and learn more about God through Scripture. Or at least that is what they were doing ostensibly. It is estimated that at this time there were 450 of these local “Scripture Centers” in Jerusalem alone. Apparently, Jerusalem was a bit like Greenville with our plethora of Bible-preaching churches.

It appears that three different synagogues are represented in this text. There was the synagogue of the Freedmen. Freedmen were decedents of Jewish slaves who had been taken to Rome 63 B.C. by Pompey. Later in history the relatives of those people were set free and some of the Jews began a synagogue in Rome. Now some of the people had migrated to Jerusalem where they also established a synagogue.

Then there was the synagogue of the Cyrenians and the Alexandrians. Those were two major cities from northern Africa. Both had large Jewish populations so it is not surprising that they had established a synagogue.

There was the synagogue of Cilicia and Asia. Those are not additional cities but were important provinces in Asia Minor. Because Tarsus is in Cilicia, it is likely that Paul had attended the synagogue there. All of these synagogues had been established in the outlying areas, but now they had a presence in Jerusalem by their original names.

The leaders from those synagogues *rose up and disputed with Stephen (v.9b)*. They disputed but failed. Some men from these synagogues (apparently leaders) rose up to argue with Stephen. They had enough and decided it was time to silence this teacher of error, this teacher who taught against their self-righteousness. Contrary to how the English translation sounds here, Stephen did not get in an

argument with them. He debated them. In the debate, Stephen dumbfounded them (v.10). *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking (v.10)*. Picture the wisdom of God displayed through the Spirit of God attacking their sin and wrong conclusions. Stephen’s teaching of truth was pummeling them with conviction.

How will self-righteous religious people respond when the truth from Scripture pummels them with conviction? History is slam full of example after example from the Apostles to modern-day preachers in limited access countries who pay the ultimate price to preach the gospel. It might be good for us to once again read *Fox’s Book of Martyrs*.

Pawns of Satan displayed their authority (vv.11-14).

Once again, the Sanhedrin, the official council got involved (vv.11-12). But it was a process that came about because the synagogue leaders worked covertly. In other words, they were underhanded deceivers. *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God” (v.11)*.

The words translated, *they secretly instigated*, mean that these men introduced something underhandedly, or they put it forward by collusion. The synagogue leaders secretly enlisted men to tell a lie which was, *“We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God” (v.11b)*. Yes, that is what they claimed, but Stephen didn’t say that. Oh, but “they” said he did. Their claim is not the standard of reality. But it was the necessary first step.

Step two required the synagogue leaders to influence the council. *And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council (v.12)*. In order to attract attention to the lie about Stephen, the synagogue leaders then stirred up the people. They incited, stirred to hostility the people who were the innocent masses who probably didn’t even know who Stephen was or cared before this point.

This is a sad and painful reminder that an unbelievable number of people bring great harm and damage on themselves when they ignore Solomon’s warning not to take up another person’s offense.

He taught that, *whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears (Proverbs 26:17)*. The obvious result is going to be that the innocent dog is going to bite.

Now, with a number of people on their side, it was time to stir up, incite the elders and scribes. The elders were the honorable leaders among the people. They were people of influence. The scribes were the lawyers, the kind of folks who would know if the law of God was broken. Now with a large group of people on their side, and with the honorable men and the lawyers on their side, it was time to enlist the council. This is the Sanhedrin – the same council who condemned Jesus to death on the basis of lies. This is the same council who had just threatened and beaten the apostles after agreeing to wait and let the whole matter play out to see if it was from God.

Now here is the big and important question. Did any of those people hear Stephen *speak blasphemous words against Moses and God*? Well no, because he didn't. Did they think that Stephen might have said something blasphemous? Maybe. Did they twist Stephen's preaching about Jesus' love for sinners that caused Him to die for their sins, to say he opposed God and His law? That is exactly what people like this do. That is what they did with Jesus.

But Satan was not finished with his pawns yet because Stephen was still free to preach. Therefore, the lying rabble-rousers found some guys who would give testimony by making false witness (vv.13-14). The false witnesses accused Christ's servant of unacceptable words. *And they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law" (v.13)*.

Continuing their underhanded practice of setting forward "lying" witnesses, they were building a case against Stephen. The false witnesses said, *"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law" (v.13)*. Okay plenty of people would be able to testify to that truth if it was the common practice for Stephen to say such things. That is what the false witnesses claimed. They said that Christ's messenger was speaking unacceptable things against this holy place. This holy place was the temple. And everyone would agree, "Shame on the man who said something unacceptable about God's house." Right! But it was okay for the hypocrites to turn it into a den of robbers and benefit themselves greatly.

At this point, I would be a little curious to know exactly what Stephen said against the temple. Maybe he said something similar to Jesus' reference to destroying His human temple and rebuilding it in three days. Maybe indeed! Or maybe Stephen referred to Christians as the temple of Christ which would be to set up competition with the den of robbers' place.

The accusers also claimed that Stephen spoke unacceptable things about the law. The law was easy enough to identify. We know that God's law is holy and cannot be broken. That being true, would a man filled with the Holy Spirit, faith, grace, and power really teach something that was against the Law God gave Moses? That is pretty doubtful. However, more sacred than God's law was the law of the scribes and Pharisees. When Stephen preached the gospel, he preached against the sufficiency of man's law to win salvation. And Stephen did preach the gospel. That was the point of contention.

In the end, those false accusers rejected the truth from Jesus not just Stephen. *"For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us" (v.14)*. Oh yes! We have seen this before. This is exactly the argument they used against Jesus who taught how He would raise His body up in three days after the wicked men destroyed it. That statement about His physical body being a temple got Him crucified. Surely it will work again, won't it?

Surely Stephen preached salvation by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation just like Peter did. *"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12)*. That kind of eliminated any possibility of gaining salvation through keeping the laws of the scribes and Pharisees. Yes, we can see where the wicked peoples' arguments came from. We can also see that Satan is a bit repetitive.

Christ's Servant's Reaction (v.15).

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel (v.15). Notice that up to this point Stephen has not said a word in his defense. And so the whole council

just sat there and gazed at him. This was an august body of rulers. They were the official religious authorities. They were the experts about Scripture. Some of them believed in angels (Pharisees) and some did not (Sadducees). But all of these religious authorities saw the face of an angel.

Stephen's appearance didn't matter. They were unconvinced by unusual character. The council members had to be impressed like Pilate was with Jesus who did not open His mouth to defend Himself. And yet, like Pilate, they were unconvinced.

What exactly happened here? Christ's servant conveyed Christlikeness. Stephen looked like an angel. Okay, what does an angel's face look like? This was a miracle. By grace God put a face that reflected His divinity (like angels do) on Stephen. The only other time that happened (according to Scripture) was when God put the face of an angel on Moses (Exodus 34:30). Stephen didn't need to answer because his face said it all. It was proof he belonged to God.

Furthermore, that look conveyed the truth that Stephen had full confidence in his King Jesus. But wait! We know that the council was going to sentence Stephen to death. We know that they were going to kill him. Was Stephen's faith well placed? It was about as well placed as Job's who concluded about God, "*Though he slay me, I will hope in Him*" (Job 13:15a). It is never wrong for us to fix our faith on our Eternal King who endured precisely the same kind of mistreatment.

King Jesus trusted His Heavenly Father through the trial, through death, to walk out of the grave. And one day, Stephen will have a glorified body that will come out of the grave and be reunited with His eternal soul forever. And we who are born again have the same confidence which should put us in good stead when the Accuser of the Brothers levels accusations against us to our God and King.