

## STEPHEN, TRUE WITNESS, TRUE FELLOWSHIP

By Pastor Rene Lussier

Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 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. 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 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. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly \* speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

- Chapters 6 and 7 describe a key figure in Acts.
- Stephen is suddenly introduced in Acts 6. His Christian life was like a SHOOTING STAR: it was brief (probably less than one year).
- In the same way that he was introduced; he was suddenly gone. His impact is still lasting today .

Acts 6:5 (NKJV) And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip ...

- From his name, Stephen, we assume that he was a Grecian Jew.
- His name means CROWN, but his crown became one of martyr.

**Stephen is known as "The first martyr."**

- The meaning of the word MARTYR has changed with time: "Those who seal their testimony with blood."

*Anne Askew was one of many Protestant women to die for their faith in the 16th century. At the age of 25 Anne Askew was tortured trying to get her to abandon her faith in Christ. When she was offered pardon if only she would deny her faith, her reply was, "I came not thus far to deny my Lord and Master." With that the fire was lit and Anne Askew became listed among the martyrs.*

- In fact, people are not made martyr by their death. In the true meaning of the word, they die because they were already martyrs. Their death only revealed them.
- **Stephen was a martyr before the crowd stoned him.**

**What kind of "witness-martyr" was Stephen?**

- OBSERVE what is said of him...

V. 3 "From among you, [He was known and had been tested and proven], of Honest report [martureo], Full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,

V. 5 Full of Faith and the Holy Spirit,

V. 8 Full of Grace (or faith) and Power,

Chap 7:55 Being full of the Holy Spirit

These words give us a picture of what kind of witness was Stephen—a type that is very attractive...

- The expression "FULL OF" serves very well to describe Stephen.

**FULL OF:** 4134 pleres—EMPTY vessels being FILLED UP

*When the soul is totally permeated with—complete, lacking nothing. (maturity)*

**Why is it important to be "FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT"?**

- Because you need to give all your attention to your inner life...

3 TIMES Luke mentioned him as "FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT" 6:3, 5; 7:55, and In 6:10 "...the Spirit with which he was speaking".

*Luke 4:14 (NKJV) Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee...*

*Luke 4:18 (NKJV) "The Spirit of the Lord [is] upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to [the] poor;*

- In Acts 4:31 when the church gathered to pray "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."
- This helps us to see that being filled with the Spirit is a necessary part of spiritual growth, development, and continuing service for Christ.
- Being a Christian is not simply a "decision" we make at some point in time, then go on with life as usual. The Christian life is meant to be lived.
- Being filled with the Spirit is not something you do, but something that God does within you.

*Eph 3:16 (NKJV) that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man,*

## Why is it important to be “FULL OF FAITH”?

*What kind of faith do you have? A speaker said that most of us probably have the faith that comes with familiarity, tradition, and happiness. We've grown up in the church, perhaps, and the faith we have is what we've always had. It's the faith of those around us. It's what we're used to. It's easy faith.*

So what kind of faith does God really want? Take a look at the life of Stephen:

6:3,5 He was elected on the criteria of being full of Faith and wisdom

When a need arose to help feed the widows of that early church, Stephen was willing to step in as a servant.

Acts 6:8 (NKJV) And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Acts 6:8 (NAS) And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

- Stephen also witnessed his faith and he performed miracles.
- When the situation turned against him, He didn't look for a way out. He spoke in faith knowing it could cost him his life.

### Full of Faith and Power (Association)

Stephen is the first, (outside of the apostles), to work miracles. *Philip, also...*

Wonders and signs are not an exclusive characteristic of apostolic ministry. Stephen was not an apostle but he was “Full of Faith and Power”.

- **Peter** in his 1<sup>st</sup> sermon said of Jesus:

Acts 2:22 (NIV) "... Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

- **If you desire to end your Christian life in faithfulness to the Lord, you must begin right.**

*ILLUSTRATION—The way you begin your garden will determine the kind of crop you will reap.*

- Many people made some profession of faith but have never "started right."
- They are like the PARABLES in Matt 13 of the *shallow soil* and the *soil infested with thorns and weeds*.
- They have moments of interest or even excitement about the Christian faith, but it does not last.

Faith must have a foundation.

Being full of faith is not only intellectual. FAITH is experienced (LIVED OUT)! It should be a growing faith.

### Full of Wisdom

- Last week we looked at the importance of the fullness of the HS and of wisdom in dealing with church problems, problem solving, structuring and organizing the church to be faithfully fulfilling the great commission.

Luke also spoke of the wisdom and the Spirit by which Stephen spoke.

Acts 6:9 ...argued with Stephen. 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

The same words “WISDOM AND POWER” describe Jesus’ work and teaching...

Matt 13:54 (NIV) Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked.

- Jesus found in Stephen an instrument to continue both his work and words...

- Testifying your faith is not just a matter of saying the right things. Witnessing is a spiritual battle that requires the wisdom and the power of the Spirit working...

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

11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God". It was a misinterpretation of his words.

13 They put forward **false witnesses** who said, "This man ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place and the law". 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

### Stephen also shared a Fellowship of Sufferings with his master

Read 6:8-14. Note the progression:

It started with a theological debate (v 9) When they could not stand up to his wisdom (V10), they lied about Stephen, (v 11) causing him to be arrested (v 12), then they brought “false witnesses” (v13) to accuse him

- The accusations against him were the same that they had accused Jesus with...

Matt 26:59 (NIV) The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"

Read 7:1. Stephen began his defense.

- **Stephen was not against the temple but against the lifeless TRADITIONS and empty religion**
  - The Jews viewed the Temple as God's exclusive dwelling place, and it wasn't possible for people to be saved unless they became Jewish and were circumcised.

Stephen reminded them that: **God never restricted himself to a building.**

About the tent in the wilderness and the temple built by Solomon, God spoke clearly through Isaiah (vs 48-50). Acts 7:48 (NIV) "However, **the Most High does not live in houses made by men**. As the prophet says: 49 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?" {[50] Isaiah 66:1,2}

**6:15.** As they accused him of speaking against Moses, they saw **Stephen's face shining supernaturally.** This was probably one way God bore witness to Stephen, giving him a similar experience as he gave Moses—*Moses' face shone in the same way when he returned from Mount Sinai with the Law (Exodus 34:29ff.)*

- **Stephen's sermon is the longest recorded sermon in the NT** (It shows its importance)

Stephen was man **"Full of the Word"**. You can tell by how he quotes OT scriptures and how he **led them over their own history**. He showed them how they constantly rejected God's message and his prophets until he charged them with the murder of God's ultimate Servant "the Righteous One".

V. 8 God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. Although they had circumcision, their hearts were far from God. They always disobeyed God.

- They also had a history of rejecting God's deliverers (leaders) and their message. (Joseph, Moses)
- They had the temple, but they still offered sacrifices to idols
- They had the law, they disobeyed it

#### **Stephen's conclusion**

Acts 7:51 "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. <sup>52</sup> "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; <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as ordained by angels, and *yet did not keep it.*"

- Stephen could face opposition and to face death without fear. He did not get to that point overnight!
- Here was a man who gave himself to the study of God's Word and His FAITH was firmly established on it.
- When the occasions came, Stephen was ready with the Word of God.
- We must adm it that Stephen's understanding of God's Word is a loud rebuke to our generation of Christians! One of the great tragedies of our century is our neglect of knowing and understanding the Word of God.

**What kind of sound did they hear?** Did he hear the sound of weeping as they repented? of rejoicing as they believed in Christ? No, he heard the sound of grinding teeth . . .

7:54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

- But this didn't stop Stephen (read vs 55-56).

55 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; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." **BLASPHEMY**

When they heard him refer to Jesus as the **"Son of Man"** (a Messianic title), they lost it (read vs 57-60).

They condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy when he spoke these words, and now they reacted against Stephen in the same way, Matt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69;

57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 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

## Stephen shared the Fellowship of Jesus' victory (over death)

The end of Stephen's life is perhaps one of the most glorious scenes in the New Testament.

Standing in the middle of an angry mob, Stephen *"saw the glory of God!"*

This was a supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit: 7:55 *"But being full of the Holy Spirit..."*

- In His final hour, God granted him a GIFT of help and Grace— an **unveiling** [revelation] of the spiritual certainty (of his destination) (Going to be with Jesus)...

In the last few verses of Acts 7, we find Stephen facing an incredibly violent death. The mob rushed upon him and they began to throw stones at him until he was literally crushed to death.

When the stones rained over him, and he was dying, he approached death in total victory. (Full of faith)

- The same Lord he trusted in life was the same Lord he trusted in death.

59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"*

His cry was similar to our Lord's cry on the cross, *"Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit!"* Here Stephen has no hesitation to approach Jesus Christ as the Eternal God, Co-equal with the Father.

**This was the victory of perfect fellowship with Christ.**

60 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.

Stephen prayed like Jesus on the cross *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (Lk 23:34)

Such a forgiving response comes only through being Full of the HS.

We find no trace of revenge, no regrets at the end of his life.

- Stephen ended his life with that same love for the souls of men, which characterized his faithful witness.
- Stephen is the NT character who resembled most the Lord—both through his life and through his death.

The point we must see is that Stephen's focus was on the Lord God alone.

He had no longing for fame and reputation. He did not desire the treasures of this world.

- His strength depended upon his intimate fellowship with the Lord.

V. 58 briefly introduced *"a young man named Saul"*

- The scene which Saul then witnessed and the words he heard appear to have made a deep and lasting impression on his mind ( Acts 22:20).

Acts 22:20 (NIV) *And when the blood of your martyr {[20] Or witness }Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'*

- Stephen's witness had an impact on him, and he later became the apostle Paul, who became the greatest missionary to Gentiles ever, the author of half the New Testament books
- If you asked Stephen today he had any regrets about his premature death, how do you think he would respond?

### Assessing your life

- What's your goal for your life?
- To have the longest, safest, most secure and comfortable life you can have, or to have a life full of the Holy Spirit's insight and power and lasting spiritual impact on others for Jesus Christ (quote Mark 8:35)? Which will you choose??
- We can *all* have lives just as meaningful and powerful as Stephen's.
- Each of us has a unique opportunity to display God's power and goodness through our lives—including our sufferings.
- *Here was a man who reflected the nature and character of His Lord... (a man serving tables just as his master came to serve and who gave his life in an almost identical manner as his master did... ). You can imagine the impression he made around him. In his character, in words, in deeds, there was grace, wisdom, boldness, strength and purpose mixed with a mature spirituality expressed by faith and supernatural manifestations of power.*