

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Acts 6:3-5, 8-15; 7:54-60 (read 6:8-15)

“The Man with the Face of an Angel”

Intro. In the history of the church, Stephen was a very important man. As you know, he is best known as the first martyr of the Christian church. But he was important for other reasons, for Luke devotes much space to this one man. His service for the Lord was comparatively quite short. Like a meteor, his ministry was brief, but bright.

Two things impress me about Stephen. First, he was so Christ-like. In life and death there are many similarities. That is the way it ought to be. God’s goal for your life is to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). God wants you to be Christ-like, and Stephen fulfilled that purpose of God in his life. Likewise, Paul said, “Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

The second thing that impresses me is that Stephen was most likely a layman. He certainly was not one of the apostles. As far as we know he was not an ordained preacher. He was one of the first deacons of the church according to Ignatius, an early church writer.¹ He was perhaps a foreign Jew who was saved on the day of Pentecost. After his conversion he devoted himself to learning from the apostles, to the fellowship of God’s people, to worship, and to prayer (Acts 2:42). In the months and years that followed, Stephen grew to equal the apostles in many ways, though he was a layman (cf. 6:8). He became the premiere example of what a Christian layman ought to be.

This morning we will do a character study. Stephen is a great example for us to follow. So I will not focus much on the sermon of Stephen, but rather on the life and ministry of Stephen. I want us to see why Stephen was such a great Christian, and I hope that you will compare yourself with Stephen, and then commit yourself to becoming a more Christ-like Christian.

And so let’s look at this text together. Now the first thing I want you to see is:

I. THE CHARACTER OF STEPHEN

Luke surely must have intended us to take special note of the character of Stephen, for he gives us so many glimpses of his character. Chapter 6 tells us a few things about the character of Stephen, his nature, his moral strength. God is more interested in who you are than what you do, because who you are will determine what you do. God works from the inside out. And so Stephen was such a great Christian because he had a fine Christian character. Stephen had some important inward qualities about his life that made him the great man that he was. In fact, the apostles asked the people to choose from among themselves seven men who were filled with the Spirit and wisdom, to be in charge of distributing food and other items to those in need. And so out of thousands of Christians in Jerusalem, the first on the list was Stephen. Stephen was probably the first person everybody thought of when it came time to select men to become the first deacons of the Christian church. He was obviously highly esteemed by the church.

I want to share with you 2 things about Stephen’s character that stands out. First, note:

¹ Chapter 7. He said that Stephen especially ministered to James.

A. The Fullness of Stephen's Character - Notice how often the word "full" is used in the following verses. In v.3 we read, "...seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." The in v.5 we read, "And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit..." Finally in v.8 we read, "And Stephen, full of faith [or grace] and power..." There is a great difference between just having something and being filled with something. These character qualities fully manifested themselves in the life of Stephen. This reminds me of what Jesus said in Jn. 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." A real Christian should be one whose life just overflows with positive character qualities.

And so it is not enough for us to simply have some grace, some faith, and some of the Holy Spirit. We should be filled with these qualities.

But as we honestly evaluate our lives, we would probably have to admit something like this: I have some faith in the Lord, but my faith is lacking. I have some wisdom, but not fullness of wisdom. I have some strength but I am not very strong. I have some love, but not as much as I should have. So let's be challenged to grow to manifest the kind of fullness that we read of Stephen.

B. Specific Character Qualities – Let's look at the character qualities that Stephen had. We should have many of these same qualities about us.

1. Spirit-filled – This is indicated both in vs. 3 & 5, and 7:55. This is a characteristic that should be true of every Christian. Eph. 5:18 says, "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit." Now what does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? It means more than simply being indwelt by the Spirit. All believers are indwelt by the Spirit (Rom. 8:9). To be filled with the Spirit means to yield yourself to the control of the Spirit. Then He can permeate your being. Stephen was Spirit-filled because he trusted himself to the control of the Spirit.

Have you been filled with the Spirit? Is that the norm of your life or the exception?

2. Wisdom – Based on v.3, we know that Stephen must have been a man of wisdom. He must have had some practical wisdom to enable him to help solve the problem mentioned in v.1. He also had a profound wisdom in regard to the teachings of Christ and Word of God in general. His mind was saturated with the Scriptures and with the ability to apply God's Word to contemporary situations. V.10 says, "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke." Here we see that he had a Spirit inspired wisdom. Every speaker needs to know what he is talking about, and the wisdom to use that knowledge. Stephen not only knew the facts; but he had the wisdom to apply the facts. Stephen experienced the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus in Lk. 21:15, "I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute."

Are you filled with wisdom? Well let me tell you how you can be filled with wisdom. First, true wisdom for daily living comes from the Word of God. That is one way to get wisdom. Spend your life reading and studying the Bible. Another way is through prayer. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Then Stephen shows that we must be full of the Spirit in order to be full of wisdom.

Another character quality of Stephen was:

3. Faith - V.5 says that Stephen was a man of faith. In fact, he was full of faith. He did not have any doubts but fully believed in God and His Son Jesus Christ. He believed the Word

of God. His sermon in chapter 7 was full of the Word of God, and he certainly believed it. He believed the promises of God. He believed in Jesus Christ for salvation, but his faith went far beyond that. In Stephen's sermon and in his actions, we see what he believed and his faith at work. This was a man who had complete confidence in the Word of God.

Stephen also believed God in everyday life. In his sermon we see that Stephen believed that God ruled history. He believed that God was still in control. In his mind he had no need to worry, for God is in control of things. Stephen rested in his belief. Instead of being nervous, despondent, fearful, and trembling before his accusers, Stephen was calm, confident, and completely free of fear and anxiety. He had so much faith that he was willing to risk his life for Jesus.

4. Grace - According to our best Greek texts, v.8 says that Stephen was full of grace. He was gracious, winsome, and full of loving kindness toward others. That is part of the reason they chose him to be responsible for helping the widows. Another time he showed fullness of grace was at his death. Note his final words in 7:60, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Grace is bestowing favor and kindness even to those who do not deserve it. Those who were hateful, and who were stoning him certainly did not deserve any favor and kindness from Stephen, but he gave it.

Are you full of grace? When people rub you the wrong way, do you respond with grace? Are you always ready to forgive, like Stephen? Since God has been gracious to us, we should be gracious to others.

5. Power - V.8 says that Stephen was full of power. That is because the Holy Spirit gives power. Jesus Himself had said in Acts 1:8, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me...." Stephen became a sudden whirlwind of power in the very realm of Peter and John and the rest. And through that power he was able to do what the apostles were doing, that is perform miracles. V.8 also says that Stephen, "did great wonders and signs among the people." This is one of the few places in the New Testament someone besides an apostle wrought a miracle. I have wondered why Stephen was one of the few so privileged. I concluded this: because God gave miracles to confirm a new message. Stephen may have even gone beyond the apostles in understanding and sharing the full implications of the death of Christ, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. So any time God gave new truth, he would authenticate it with miracles.

Are you full of power? Are you a strong believer? I believe that God intends for every Christian to be filled with His power. He wants us to have power for service, power over temptation and sin, power to do what is right, etc. In Eph. 1:18-20 Paul prayed "that you may know... what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places." Cf. Col. 1:11. God wants you to be strong in service. Yet too often we are too weak as Christians.

Another character quality of Stephen that we should have is:

6. Courage - Because Stephen had power, he had courage. Stephen had the courage to never stop preaching and teaching the truth about Jesus Christ and what God has done through Christ (v.13). He had the courage to preach an unpopular message. He knew the conflict that this message might create, and yet he preached it and never flinched. What courage! Finally, at the end of his defense, Stephen confronted the real issue head on and accused the council of being the betrayers and the murders of the Just One (7:51-52).

Are these character qualities true in your own life? Are you full of the Spirit, of wisdom, faith, of grace, of power, and of courage? May we be challenged by the life of Stephen.

We should not only be challenged by the character of Stephen but also:

II. THE DEEDS OF STEPHEN

Because Stephen was a man of character, he did great things for the Lord. I will mention 2 things in particular.

A. He Was A Compassionate Servant – In the last of v.3 we read that the apostles wanted to church to select seven men “whom we may appoint over this business” to serve food to needy widows. Stephen was elected, and he must have done this job well. Such men were later called “deacons” because that Greek word means “servant.” Jesus taught that if you want to become great, you must learn to be a servant. God wants us to be like Stephen. He was Christlike in that he had a servant spirit.

But the thing that stands out most about Stephen is this:

B. He Was A Mighty Witness - Stephen understood that the main business of the church is not meeting the physical needs of people, though that has a place, but rather the main business of the church is sharing Christ and meeting the *spiritual* needs of people. He was not one who said, “Well, we should let the apostles do that.” Stephen was no doubt faithful in the lesser important task, and God entrusted him to do a greater task. And so Stephen became a mighty witness for the Lord. His transformed life was a great witness. But he was also great in his verbal witness. Now notice with me:

1. The Recipients of His Witness – Luke says in v.9, “Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.” In Jerusalem the foreign Jews maintained their own synagogues, so that when they came to Jerusalem for feasts and pilgrimages, they would have a place to meet. There may have been as many as 480 of these synagogues in Jerusalem at this time. Since Stephen was a Greek-speaking foreign Jew, he went to the synagogues where they knew Greek, and he preached and witnessed to them. He tried to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. He was the suffering servant that Isa. 53 foretold would come. It seems that most from this synagogue resisted Stephen’s attempts to win them to the Lord. Instead, they just argued and disputed with him.

Luke mentioned some in particular who resisted the witness of Stephen. The “Synagogue of the Freeman” was one, as we saw in v.9. They were descendants of those taken captive in 63 B.C. by Pompey. He took them off to Rome as slaves but later they were released. The Cyrenians and the Alexandrians were from North Africa. The Cilicians and the Asians were from Asia Minor. The principle city of Cilicia was Tarsus. It is very likely that Saul of Tarsus was one of the many arguing with Stephen!

We see in chapter 7 that Stephen also witnessed to the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews. He gave a powerful sermon to them, ultimately saying that the prophets pointed to Jesus the Messiah (v.52). He was not intimidated by their power and prestige.

Now notice with me:

2. The Effectiveness of His Witness – In v.10 it says they were not able (imperfect tense) to withstand his wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Since Stephen was filled with the Spirit, he was filled with wisdom, knowledge, and passion. These are qualities of a good speaker. And so Stephen knocked them down in debate, Saul included, as fast as they got up.

We know that Stephen was effective because of the tactics that his opponents resorted to. First, they had to gang up on him. These foreign Jews pooled all their brains together into a fair debate against Stephen. But the Jews from these synagogues couldn't handle Stephen. Then, in desperation, they resorted to slander and false accusations, as we see in v.11. When most people cannot win an argument, they resort to defaming their opponent's character. This is so common in the political world. So they hired false witnesses. That's what the word "secretly induced" can mean. And they did bring some serious charges against him. Notice that they accused him of speaking against Moses and God in v.11, against the temple in vv. 13 & 14, and against the law in v.13. Stephen had probably said something which banged right into the legalism of Israel like, "The Law of Moses can't save you," or, "The Old Covenant has passed by and there's a new one here in Christ" or "Temple sacrifices and rituals are no longer needed, because of the ultimate sacrifice in Jesus Christ." To their ears, that sounded like blasphemy. They probably accused him of blasphemy against God because he had in some way presented the deity of Christ. Stephen probably expounded the implications of Christ's Messiahship more radically than his fellow believers had expounded it up to this point. He introduced an entirely new order which would strike at the very heart of Pharisaic Judaism, and even make the temple ultimately obsolete. And so it is fairly easy to understand how, for the first time, the common people would be stirred up. The charges brought against Stephen were effective in stirring up the prejudices of the people in the matter of Jewish rights, privileges, and traditions.

What then was false about the testimony of the witnesses? It was not so much wholesale fabrication but subtle and deadly misrepresentation of words actually spoken. Viewing his message negatively, the witnesses claimed that Stephen was out to destroy Judaism. They said nothing of the positive message and truth that he had proclaimed.

Stephen was a great witness for the Lord. We should be challenged by his life. Are you a good witness for the Lord? Do you seek to win others to the Lord?

III. THE VICTORY OF STEPHEN

Because Stephen was such a bold witness, he was mobbed and brought before the Sanhedrin (6:12). Since they could not silence him through debate they would use the power of government to do so. Stephen didn't have much of a chance before that crowd. It was like putting a cat on trial before a jury of dogs! It was the same group that condemned Jesus to death and that had beaten the apostles. They probably enjoyed most of his sermon as he recited God's dealings with the people of Israel. But notice what he said in 7:51-52, "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...." He was really in trouble after he turned the tables and put *them* on trial! He accused them of being just like their rebellious forefathers. He accused them of betraying and murdering their own Messiah. He did not back down one bit. He was so courageous. Many would say that Stephen was a fool. "Stephen, you should have been more tactful. You should not have preached such a radical message."

Was Stephen a fool? No, he was just being obedient to God. And when you are obedient to God, you are always victorious, for God will be with you, especially when you suffer for Him. So we are going to see the ways in which Stephen was a victorious Christian.

A. He Was Vindicated by God – We read in 6:15, “And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.” Though his enemies claimed that they were standing for God and for His servant Moses, it was Stephen that God affirmed. Luke tells us that when Stephen stood before the Council, it appeared as though he had the face of an angel. I believe there was a glow on his face. What a rebuke that was to his adversaries. Who else in the Bible had the face of an angel? It was Moses. So here were these people, accusing Stephen of blaspheming Moses. And so God vindicated Stephen by giving him the same kind of glory that Moses had on his face (Ex. 34:29-30; cf. Deut. 34:10; 2 Cor. 3:12-18). How blind were these people!

My friend, when you stand for God, God will vindicate you in due time. 1 Peter 5:6 says, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.”

B. He Saw the Glory of Christ – Look over to 7:55-56, “But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” When you face a difficulty like Stephen was facing, the best thing to do is to look up! And when he did, he saw the glory of God and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God.

The fact that he saw the “Son of Man” that the right hand of God certainly confirmed his faith in Jesus, who thereby fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 110:1-2. His presence at the right hand of God also shows we have an Advocate, and we are assured of access to God through Him.

Usually we read that Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of God. So why is Jesus standing at this point? Two possible reasons: 1) He was standing as a witness to vindicate Stephen. In that day witnesses always stood to testify. As Stephen was being faithful unto death, Jesus stood to bear witness that Stephen was right. Jesus said in Luke 12:8, “... whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God.” Friend, if you stand up for Jesus Christ, He will stand up for you! 2) He stood to welcome His servant home to heaven.

When we would go home to visit my parents, they would always stand to greet us at the door. Even so, Jesus stood to welcome Stephen home to heaven. Oh, what victory Stephen had even as he faced death.

C. He Was Victorious in His Death

1. In His Dying Words - When the prophet Zechariah was stoned to death, he said, “The LORD look on it, and repay!” (2 Chron. 24:20-22). But Stephen surpassed the Old Testament prophet. It says in 7:60 that he spoke with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” He was imitating the Savior, who said as He was being crucified, “Father, forgive them.” Jesus had taught us to love our enemies, and Stephen was exhibiting that love.

When someone sins against you, do you respond in like manner? The apostle Paul said in Romans 12:21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Furthermore, when you face opposition, do you respond as ferociously as Stephen did?

2. In the Manner of His Death – In the last of v.60 we read, “And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” Luke is not writing literally but theologically. Death to Stephen was like falling asleep. He demonstrated the truth that Christ has taken away the sting of death. The fear of death is gone. One lesson is this: as you live, so shall you die. If you live without Christ, you will die without Christ. Is that how you want to face death? But if you live faithfully to Christ, you will face death with the same kind of peace and assurance that Stephen demonstrated here. For the Christian death is just falling asleep and waking up in heaven.

3. His Death Dispersed the Church into the World – In 8:1 we read, “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” By this time Jerusalem and the surrounding area had been largely evangelized. But the church had failed to go further with the gospel. I believe Stephen wanted to take the gospel even to the Gentiles. He did not live to see the day that the gospel went out to Gentiles. But beginning with Stephen’s death, the church was scattered by persecution to many other countries. When that happened, the gospel not only reached Jews in other countries, but also Gentiles.

Stephen did not live to see the results of his faithfulness to Christ. But the results were so great. Not only did his death disperse the church, but it also had an impact upon Saul of Tarsus. In 8:1 we read, “Now Saul was consenting to his death.” He heard Stephen’s sermon. He saw how Stephen’s face glowed like an angel. He witnessed his forgiving grace. And in time that same Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle and missionary. Through Paul Stephen had a part in the gospel going out to Greek speaking people all over the Roman Empire. Oh, the impact of a life lived in faithfulness to Christ!

D. He Was Victorious in His Reward - Do you know what the name “Stephen” means? It is from *stephanos*, a Greek word that means victor’s crown. As athletes competed in the games, they were all hoping to win the victor’s crown at the end. It was a leafy crown that was placed upon the head of the winner of the event. Stephen was victorious, and I believe he received a heavenly victor’s crown. After all, Jesus had said in Mt. 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven...."

Conc. Don’t you want to be like Stephen? Wouldn’t you like to have the kind of impact he had? Wouldn’t you like to have such a victorious life? Then seek to have the same character as Stephen, and be a servant and witness like Stephen.

Sources: Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *Stephen, A Profile in Courage: Acts 6:3-8:1* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984), on 6:3-5, 8-15 only; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). McGee read, but nothing added.

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