

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #16

Acts 6:8-15

Last time we were together, the apostles requested that the congregation choose seven godly men to take care of the physical matters of the church. Two of those seven are further discussed in the Book of Acts and the first of them is discussed right here.

It is obvious that when we come to verse 8, the main data from this verse to the end of chapter 7 concerns the chosen man named “Stephen.” Stephen was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian. He had come to faith in Jesus Christ while in Jerusalem. He has a Greek name (Στεφανος) which means “victors crown” and he came from a Greek background.

Dr. Luke is very careful to mention eight character traits about Stephen:

(Character Trait #1) - He was a man chosen by the congregation to be a leader . Acts 6:3, 5

Stephen was one of only seven men chosen by a congregation of thousands. Not only did they choose him, but he also was approved by the apostles. He was a very faithful man of God.

(Character Trait #2) - He was a man with a good reputation . Acts 6:3a

Stephen had earned for himself a good name as a believer. The witness or testimony of every one who knew him was he is a faithful man of God.

(Character Trait #3) - He was a man who was full of the Spirit . Acts 6:3b

Stephen was full of the Spirit, not full of himself. He was controlled by the Spirit and not by his flesh. One thing a man full of the Spirit always does is boldly declare the truth of God.

(Character Trait #4) - He was a man who was full of wisdom . Acts 6:3c

Stephen was very skilled at a very high level in his knowledge of God and God’s Word. He had a sound mind not an emotional or irrational mind. He was a very wise man from a biblical perspective.

(Character Trait #5) - He was a man who was full of faith . Acts 6:5

It is specifically brought out that he was a man who was at a very unusual level of faith. He was at the fullest possible level in his faith. He believed God at a very unusual level.

(Character Trait #6) - He was a man who was full of grace . **6:8a**

He was at a very unusual filled level in his grasp of grace. He completely embraced the Grace of God as opposed to works and law, which will become evident in his message. This is ultimately the reason Satan wants Stephen stopped. He had a grasp of grace in a religious world of works.

When a man is full of the Spirit, full of wisdom, and full of faith, he will grasp grace and communicate the grace message.

(Character Trait #7) - He was a man who was full of power. **6:8b**

Stephen was a powerful man of God and that was creating real problems with the religious leaders. His power was provoking great opposition. God gave Stephen a very unusual level of His power. He enabled him to perform apostolic signs and wonders miracles among the people. Here is the first time we learn of someone other than the apostles being able to do this. This obviously was in harmony with the apostle's work and the religious leaders in Jerusalem did not like that. **As near as I can determine, the reason why God let Stephen perform these apostolic miracles is because God was validating Stephen's message of grace as opposed to law. This is a transition time when God's program has changed from law to grace and these apostolic signs authenticated Stephen's doctrine and theology.**

There is a very important principle to glean here and that is if you are faithful in little ministries, God will entrust you with larger ministries. If you will be faithful in small things, God will use you for big things.

(Observation #8) - He was a man who was a serious student of God's written Word.
Acts 7:2-53

It is very obvious from what we will see next time that Stephen had a tremendous grasp of the written Word of God. He was able to expound God's Word starting in Genesis developing the Word through Moses to David to Solomon and connect it all to Jesus Christ. He came to understand the value of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He saw the difference between law and grace. He saw the difference between worship in the Temple and worship in the church. He was a tremendous Grace Age Bible scholar and he will be killed because of it.

In the infant days of the early church, Stephen was one of the most powerful men of God alive. As one writer said he is "The Paul before Paul." S. Lewis Johnson observed that the things Stephen talks about in chapter seven "are the things that the Apostle Paul later will develop in his epistles" (*Acts* 6:1-15, p. 3). It is interesting that we will learn in the next chapter that Paul was actually involved in this and he listened to everything (7:58; 8:1). **Paul's early concept of the Grace of God was formed by Stephen's theology.**

Stephen was a great man of God and he is about to die because of it. What we learn here is:

WHEN YOU ARE A FAITHFUL AND POWERFUL PERSON OF GOD WHO ACCURATELY COMMUNICATES GOD'S TRUTH CONCERNING GOD'S GRACE, SOME RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WILL BE JEALOUS OF YOU AND HATE YOU AND MAY SEEK TO DESTROY YOU.

Now Satan of course is in this attack. He wants to stop the communication of the Grace of God.

He thinks if he can silence Stephen, he can cause others to shy away from proclaiming the same doctrine. But his plan will not work. The Grace Age is moving forward in full force and it is about to reach out to the entire world.

What Stephen did not know when this story began is this would be the last day of his life on this earth. He was hours away from being executed . Why? Because he was proclaiming the truth about the Grace of God and it was affecting the religious world of law and works.

Now in verses 8-15 there are two godly actions of Stephen and three ungodly reactions to Stephen:

GODLY ACTION #1 - Stephen is full of grace . **6:8a**

Now this is critical because Stephen had a full grasp of grace in a religious world that was full of works and law.

GODLY ACTION #2 - Stephen is full of power . **6:8b**

What this means is that he had the same kind of apostolic power that enabled him to perform great signs and wonders among the people. What this did was validate his grace message.

Ungodly Reaction #1 - Certain jealous educated men rise up to argue with Stephen. **6:9**

I love something Dr. Chuck Swindoll said, “Dynamic people rarely evoke neutral responses. They are either loved or hated” (*Acts*, Vol. 1, p. 58).

There was big trouble in the formal religious world. What Stephen was preaching and teaching was causing a theological war. God’s Grace was changing people’s hearts and minds. In fact, we learn from verse seven that many priests were embracing grace. Many priests were beginning to realize we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works or keeping the O.T. Law. This was causing a real problem with the religious world.

Now there was a synagogue in Jerusalem known as the “Synagogue of the Freedmen”, or literally as it reads in Greek “the Synagogue of the Libertines” (Λιβερτινων). This was a synagogue formed by Jews who had at one time been slaves, but were able to purchase their freedom from Rome. When Pompey overran Judea about ninety years before this event, he took many Jews into slavery. Many of them and their children were later freed and those who were freed formed their own synagogues.

As I understand the Greek language there were different Libertine synagogues. There was a synagogue of Jewish people from Cyrene, one from Alexandria, one from Cilicia and one from Asia. They all had synagogues. According to Ivor Powell who cites Olshausen, there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem and they were all in an uproar against Stephen, who was preaching the pure Grace of God (*The Amazing Acts*, p. 102).

Stephen's grace message went against their religious traditions and rituals. **The common denominator of all false religion is that it hates a pure Grace Gospel. False religion will unite to try to stop God's grace message.**

This grace message was affecting their synagogue congregations. These leaders were losing some of their membership, which would mean they would also lose their funding. The Grace Gospel about the name of Jesus Christ was putting a real dent in the synagogue membership, so they needed to try to stop it.

They came to where Stephen was and they came to argue with him. That word "argue" (συνζητεω) means that these key religious leaders came against Stephen in order to examine him and get him into a discussion so they could dispute his doctrine (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 429).

These men would go to hear Stephen for the sole purpose of trapping him and refuting what he is teaching. They want to destroy his impacting teaching about the Grace of God.

Ungodly Reaction #2 - The educated men are not able to cope with Stephen's wisdom. **6:10**

The word "cope" (ανθιστημι) means they did not have the strength to be able to withstand, oppose, or resist his teaching (*Ibid*, p. 37). The word "unable" (ισχυω) is rare and it means that these religious leaders were not strong enough or powerful enough to prevail in being able to overtake Stephen's doctrine. Stephen was speaking and presenting grace doctrine and these key religious leaders could not outsmart him, outthink him or stop him.

I love what is revealed here. When the Word of God is faithfully communicated it is so powerful that people cannot refute anything. God's Spirit takes that living truth right into minds and hearts and even enemies are left defenseless.

Ungodly Reaction #3 - The educated men secretly try to discredit and destroy Stephen. **6:11-7:1**

What they did was to take specific steps against Stephen to try to stop him.

Step #1 - They secretly get people to verbally lie. **6:11**

People who are out to destroy a minister do a lot of secret stuff. They have secret meetings, secret petitions, and secret discussions. They form secret committees. They do not have the integrity to do things truthfully and forthrightly, they work behind the scenes. They secretly induced men to speak against Stephen. The words "secretly induced" (υποβαλλω) means that they instigated things by whispering (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 460).

What this means is that they discussed how they were going to attack Stephen. They planned the lies and they secretly carried out the plan. The plan was to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. What a joke this is. These are the very people who killed Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior, the

Messiah, and they are accusing Stephen of blasphemy. Now we will examine this more next week, but it is clear that Stephen was teaching the Grace of God had replaced the O.T. law of Moses. Stephen was teaching that Jesus Christ had nailed that law to His cross and as a result, he is accused of using blasphemous words against Moses and against God.

Step #2 - They stir up the people emotionally with their lies. **6:12a**

The tactic is one we often see in our political world; run a “smear campaign” against Stephen. It gets people all emotionally stirred up. The verb “stir up” (συνκινεω) means these frauds moved together to excite and stir up the people. Liars are used by Satan in the church to stir things up. It amazes me that people will listen to liars and never ever search out the facts of what actually happened. **Satan gets victory by playing with people’s emotions, especially in regard to distortions.**

Step #3 - They get the religious leaders to physically drag him before the council . **6:12b**

This is similar to what happened to Peter and John. But the difference is Stephen will not be released, he will be executed.

Step #4 - They put forward false witnesses who lie. **6:13-14**

When you see what just happened in the Casey Anthony trial, nothing has changed since the days of Jesus. Court systems often feature liars. The defense brings in a bunch of truth twisters who try to keep people from understanding and seeing truth. William Larkin said these lying tactics are still found today. He said “sadly, this path is followed by opponents of the truth within as well as outside the church.” (*Acts*, p. 104) The fact is there are people who will twist the precious doctrines that are taught by Stephen. They turn things completely around.

The doctrine of the Gospel of the Grace of God does supercede Judaism. The doctrine of the Gospel of the Grace of God does supercede traditions of men. The doctrine of the Grace of God does change the dispensation from law to grace. It presents a complete justification of a sinner by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the Law. Stephen understood these doctrines and he was presenting them and the false witnesses attacked him on those doctrines.

Two key areas of satanic lies against Stephen were designed to get people to believe that he disregarded their sacred places and their sacred law.

(False Allegation #1) - They claim that Stephen speaks against the Temple . **6:13a**

They charge Stephen with teaching that Jesus said the Temple would be destroyed. We will discuss this in just a moment.

(False Allegation #2) - They claim that Stephen speaks against the O.T. Law . **6:13b**

Now when these leaders accuse Stephen of speaking against the Law, there was much more to their thinking than just the first five books of the O.T. (the Torah). They also considered the

traditions of men and the scribal interpretations to have the same inspired authority as the O.T. Law. Stephen did teach that the Law of Moses would not save and that one could only be saved by faith in Jesus Christ. He did grasp the fact that Christ nailed the Law to His cross.

(False Allegation #3) - They claim that Stephen teaches that Jesus Christ will destroy things .
6:14

Now we may observe that Stephen was connecting his teaching about the Temple and the Law to Jesus Christ. In other words, Stephen is connecting the dots between law and grace, between Jesus Christ and condemnation.

Jesus Christ is not a destroyer, He is the only Savior. Satan is the destroyer. His salvific work on the cross opens up access to God for every sinner who will believe on Him. Stephen understood grace.

The thing that makes these allegations so diabolical is that they misrepresent the truth. They twist things. Their testimony is designed to influence people by a deadly misrepresentation of facts. That is what liars do, they take some truth and twist it.

Lie #1 - Jesus Christ will destroy the Temple . **6:14a**

This was a lie that was propagated about Christ before He was killed (Matt.26:61; 27:40). Jesus never said He would destroy the Temple. He said that if He was killed, He would rise from the dead in three days (John 2:19-21). We also know that the moment Jesus died, the veil of the Temple was torn in two, thus opening the door for sinners to have direct access to God, which temple worship could never give (Matt.27:50-51). Furthermore, Jesus did predict that the Temple would come down and it would be Rome that would tear it down in A.D. 70 (Matt.24:2).

Lie #2 - Jesus Christ will destroy Mosaic customs . **6:14b**

Jesus specifically said that He did not come to destroy the Mosaic Law but to fulfill it (Matt.5:17-19). Christ nailed the Law to the cross making it possible for law-breaking transgressors to be saved from their sin.

Now according to **verse fifteen**, having made all of these false charges, they looked at Stephen and what they saw was a human face that looked angelic. In the face of all of the lies of Satan was one face of an angel, and it was on Stephen. H.A. Ironside said I would love to have a photograph of this. Here were these devils filled with rage and there was Stephen with a heavenly countenance (*Acts*, p. 161).

When you are living your life close to Jesus Christ and defending the Word of God and the Grace of God in this world, there will be people who will resent you, will not support you and will attack you.