

Full of Grace and Power

- Acts 6:8-15
- It's been at least a month since I told you a story from the book, *Love Does*, so it's way past time for another one. A few years ago, Bob Goff was driving his Jeep home from church. A car blew through an intersection and caught Bob's Jeep right at the driver's side front tire. Bob said the Jeep started to roll and he flew out of it like he was shot out of a cannon. He wrote, "I'd like to say I was wearing my seatbelt but I wasn't (I know, Mom)." He landed about thirty feet from the Jeep, sitting upright on the asphalt, with his arms propped up behind him like he was watching a ballgame on a summer day. The Jeep landed upside down, accelerator racing, gas and oil flowing out. Since he's a guy, Bob said his first thought, when he was able to clear his head and think was, "Cool! There's going to be an explosion!" But there wasn't. "Maybe next time," Bob said. When he felt around and all of his limbs were still attached, Bob ran over to the car that had just plowed into him, and the driver was sitting, transfixed, staring blankly. She was a small, frail woman whom Bob said couldn't have weighed more than 85 lbs, and he found out later she was 87 years old. He asked her if she was OK, and told her his name was Bob, and she said her name was Lynn. Still staring straight ahead, she said, "I guess I forgot to stop." He thought, "That is indeed correct." Finally she looked at him for the first time and said, "Young man, do you know you went through the roof of your car?" He told her that's how he gets out of his Jeep in a hurry, saves time, and all. He saw she was distraught, so he said, "Lynn, I can't lie...that was the coolest thing that has ever happened to me." She looked up and smiled for the first time. He said, "If there was ever a ride at Disneyland like that, the line would be a mile long. Can we do it again next week? We'll meet right here at this intersection." The rest of the story is about Bob helping Lynn deal with her guilt. She would call every few days and say, "I am so sorry." Until finally Bob sent her a HUGE arrangement of flowers, one that was bigger than she was, and the note said, "Dear Lynn, it was great running into you...now stop calling me! -Bob" He said he thinks Lynn finally got the message. He was fine and he wanted her to be fine, too.
- I love that story about a man who I believe is full of the Spirit and wisdom. Like Stephen. Jeremy preached about the first seven deacons last week, and Stephen was the first of the first seven deacons. We already know that he was chosen because he was full of the Spirit and wisdom, just like the other six men chosen with him. And that begs the question, at least for me. Can you be full of one without the other? Oh, yes. I believe that it is possible and very likely that believers, young and old, can be full of the Holy Spirit and lacking in wisdom. Wisdom is the prize that comes when people yield to the Spirit and walk in the Spirit over time. Stephen was full of the spirit and wisdom.
- Stephen was also full of grace and power. God, make that true of us! G. Campbell Morgan said this was "sweetness and strength...merged in one personality." Grace is Christ-like character, someone who is filled with mercy and love. Power is...power! The word is *dunamis*, same word used in Acts 1:8, when Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Stephen was a picture of that promise in action. He was filled with the Spirit and was a witness to the Lord Jesus. Notice also in verse 8, he "was doing great wonders and signs among the people." The verb tense there leads you to believe that Stephen didn't start doing great wonders after he was named a deacon. "Hey, make me a deacon, and I will get busy helping hurting people and obeying the leading of the Holy Spirit." No, that would be the last thing we could accuse Stephen of. He was filled with grace and power, and his love for God and for God's people was what moved the congregation to nominate him as a deacon. He must have been greatly loved by the church, and even by the community, even I think by those outside the church who knew him and saw the things he did

to heal and to help. But he was also the most hated man of his day. We see this in the story. Let's look at two points. The first point is divided into the three ways we see the Hellenists attack Stephen. The second point is how we know God approved of Stephen. So, the Hellenists' attack. Then, God's approval.

- **The Hellenists' attack**
- Understand that these who are attacking Stephen are Hellenist Jews. Just as Stephen was. They were Greek-speaking Jews who were from other countries, probably because their ancestors had been exiled during one of the many times Israel was conquered. Some grew up in N. Africa, places like Egypt or Libya. Other grew up in Asia Minor or Europe, but now they had come back to Israel and were living here, in Jerusalem. It is ironic that Stephen was chosen along with six other godly men, to make sure that there was no racial prejudice in the church, and that the Hellenist widows were not being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. But they were offended at Stephen and hated him enough to plot to kill him. Why? It was NOT because Stephen was serving the widows. Listen! You can go lock arms with Muslims and Hindus and atheists and Jews and serve tables at Allied Churches, and no one will be offended by you. They had no problem with Stephen serving people. Neither were they offended by his miracles. Listen! You can go pray for people who are sick or dying, and if God heals someone you are praying for, NOBODY will be offended by that! What were they offended at in Stephen's life? We are not told precisely, but I think the answer is obvious. It was obvious then. And it is obvious now, in our time. They were offended by the same thing the Sanhedrin were offended by in Peter's life: his preaching. We see the clue that this was the issue in verse 9. All of these different groups of Hellenists had one thing in common: they hated Stephen and "rose up and disputed with Stephen." They didn't rise up and tell him to stop serving their widows. That wouldn't have made any sense. They didn't rise up and tell him to stop healing their sick loved ones. That would have made even less sense. They rose up and disputed with him.
- Let me ask you something. Should it be our goal to avoid putting ourselves in a situation where someone in the world disputes with us the matters of faith? Not at all. In fact, Jesus issued a stern warning about this in Luke 6:26, "Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." If we don't have someone in our life who is trying to prove us wrong about our faith and our lifestyle of loving God and His Word and His church, we're probably not being filled with the Spirit and growing in wisdom. Because that combination makes us bold and opens our mouth to speak. I was listening on the plane when we were flying from Portland to Chicago last week to three different conversations. Cindy and I were separated by the aisle, and so were Mark and Hope. I had Mark behind me and Cindy had Hope behind her. All three of them were engaged for part or all of the 4-hour flight in conversation with people about the Lord and the church.
- Look at the three ways the Hellenists tried to stop Stephen from speaking in Jesus name.
- **First, they disputed with him.** What does that mean? They argued with him. They engaged him in debate. Listen! It is good to have an honest debate with someone who really wants to know what you believe and why you believe it. We are engaged in a debate every Saturday on the religion page of the newspaper. Our position on who Christ is and His exclusive claims is being disputed by those who believe that spirituality is more important than doctrine, that how we feel is more important than what we believe, and that our truth is little 't' truth and we cannot possibly make universal claims about God and heaven and sin and salvation. I think that's what we see here. The Jews from all around the world were confronting Stephen, calling him parochial and narrow. They were saying, "This one man from Nazareth, NAZARETH, a Podunk town in the Podunk region of Galilee: this man cannot possibly be the Messiah. We have been in Africa and this is what we have learned about God and about faith and spirituality. We have been in Asia Minor and this is what we have learned by listening to the people there and respecting their own faith journeys. Open your eyes, man! And your mind!"

- How did their arguments work out for them? “But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” (10) Oh, God, make us like that! And He will. This is exactly what Jesus promised in Luke 21:15, when we are dragged before authorities for His name’s sake: ***for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.*** (Vs. 16-19: very important truths!)
- **Second, they began to attack him with lies.** When their arguments were found to be impotent, they attacked his character. (verse 11) They went behind his back to find men who would say that Stephen had committed blasphemy. You know the quote: “A lie can travel around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes.” If you look hard enough, and it’s not hard, you can find people in any community who are willing to undermine a Christian if they can. Two words of exhortation: One, be careful. Make sure your actions and your words line up. They did with Stephen, but it still didn’t protect him. Second, be ready. Ready to suffer. Ready to be accused. Ready to be misunderstood. Even ready to die.
- **Third, they resorted to violence and conspiracy.** (verses 12-13) They seized him and dragged him before their kangaroo court, with trumped up charges and men ready to lie under oath. And they were able to prevail because God allowed them to. But what was the end result? Oh, we haven’t seen that yet. But it was Stephen’s death that propelled the disciples from Jerusalem into all the world. It was also at Stephen’s death that we are introduced to the most powerful evangelist and missionary the world has ever seen. And who knows but that Stephen’s sermon and stoning was the seed of the Gospel planted in the heart of a young Pharisee that germinated and brought forth life and faith in Jesus Christ when Jesus later appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus.
- By the way, it’s worth a few minutes to consider the accusations against Stephen and Jesus: did Jesus say He would destroy the temple? What was the truth? Look at John 2:18-22, which is in the context of Jesus just having cleansed the temple, running out the money-changers. So, did Jesus say He would destroy the physical temple, the place of worship? No. But what happened to the temple as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection? The temple, the place of worship, was effectively destroyed. Though the Jews kept using it, and the sacrificial system continued, Jesus’ death and resurrection cut it off at the roots, and it would just take the Roman army led by Titus to finish the job in AD 70. But when the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom at the moment Jesus died, that symbolized the destruction of the temple. It meant that the real was here to replace the shadow. This is no longer the place where we meet God. Jesus is the place. And then we read in verse 7 that a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. They recognized that they were out of a job! That Jesus was the mediator between God and man. Maybe many of them continued in the ministry, but now with a whole new message.
- One thing Gregg Harris said last week in Portland during his Sunday morning message resonated with me, and I know it will with you. He said, “Our goal is not just to keep our children safe. It’s to make them dangerous.” Amen! That’s the goal of the leaders of this church for each of you as well. We want to be used by God to make you dangerous as ambassadors of Christ.
- When they finished yelling about Stephen, they looked at him and his face looked like that of an angel. This man who was full of the Spirit and wisdom, this picture of grace and strength...looked perhaps like Moses did when he had come down from Mt. Sinai. Exodus 34:29 says, “When Moses came down...(he) did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” Do you think these men thought about Moses who had been given a radiance from God as he brought the law to the people and now God had given a radiance to the man whom the religious leaders were accusing of speaking against the law?
- O God, make us more like Stephen.