

Stephen

Acts 6:1-15, Acts 7:1-60

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Stephen was an extraordinary person who started out waiting tables but before we get into Stephen's life, I want to give you some background on where we are in the Bible. Open your Bibles to Acts 6.

The book of Acts begins with the ascension of Jesus. But, before He ascended into heaven, He met with His disciples several times.

It was at one of those meetings that He instructed them not to leave Jerusalem but wait for a sign. God would send the Holy Spirit.

The disciples waited, and as Jesus said, the spirit of God came down upon the church. The church immediately experienced explosive growth: 3,000 people were baptized and converted on that same day.

But this was not a flash in the pan. At the end of Acts 2, we see the church growing. The people gathered together in fellowship, prayer, and worship listening to the teaching of the Apostles.

They even sold their stuff and made sure that everybody's needs were met. Yet, as we know, growth brings problems. The first internal problem encountered happened in chapter 5 with Ananias and Sapphira.

They were early believers who sold a large piece of property, and, for whatever reason, they decided to hold back some of the proceeds. They were guilty of lying to the Apostles and God.

But this wasn't the only issue, in chapter 6 we see another internal strife. A situation that, on the surface, doesn't seem that bad.

It basically involved a dispute about how certain widows were handled in the daily distribution of food and material items.

It was a problem that, if not dealt with in an efficient and timely manner, could have bogged down the growth of the church.

Now, the situation wasn't that complex. There were a large number of widows in the area, and it looked like some were being favored more than others.

Acts 6:1, "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."

We don't know why there were so many widows in that particular area at that time, but the suspicion is that, as the Apostles began to go out into the outlying areas of Jerusalem, many widows were converted.

Because they didn't have a family to take care of them, they made their way to Jerusalem believing that they would be cared for there, and they were.

On a daily basis, as their need was known, they would be given food, clothing, or money that would help them survive, but like today, there were limited resources.

And when you have limited resources to support a diverse group of people, problems naturally arise. What happened here was strife.

The Greek Jews and the Hebrew Jews didn't get along, which was compounded by the fact they were competing for a minimal amount of resources.

Then someone complained that the Hebrew widows were being shown favoritism. But the Apostles, rather than solving this situation themselves, put it back on the congregation.

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Acts 6:2-4, "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

What we see in this passage is the first evidence of church structure being formed. Prior to this you basically just had the Apostles.

Now a layer of servants has been created to take care of administrative tasks so the Apostles and other leaders of the church could focus on preaching, teaching, and discipleship.

Some believe that this was a picture of the first deacons. It had to do with the idea of waiting on tables. The underlying root word used for an individual who waited on tables was the Greek word for deacons.

They were beneficial because they cared for the administrative tasks so the leaders could continue to teach, preach, and proclaim the Gospel.

As a side note, when it talks about waiting on tables, it's not like a waiter today who serves us in a restaurant, it also implies manning some sort of a booth or a table.

A place where the widows would come and get their daily distribution of food, money, or clothing.

But getting back to this idea of structure, we have the first evidence of structure happening in the church. As the church continued to grow for the next 2,000 years, we see large denominational structures being created.

Obviously, Catholicism has the largest followed by some of the bigger Protestant denominations. Now, people have different views about whether or not a church can have too much or too little structure.

I know some of you come from churches that have a lot. The Catholic church, the Presbyterians, and the Methodists have a lot of organized structure. Non-mainline churches usually have a loose congregational structure.

Many people believe we don't need any kind of structure. In other words, let's just get together, hang out, and be kind to each other. Let's not worry about structure.

Here at Grace Fellowship, we take a middle-of-the-road approach. Our church has always been an advocate for structure but not too much. Just enough to support the growth of the church.

The idea is that you don't create structure to encourage growth. You have growth and then you follow that with structure. You don't want to get ahead of yourself by building a huge structure that must maintain.

Again, too much structure can be bad because it bogs things down, yet too little structure can also be bad.

With too little structure you have chaos. Nobody knows who's in charge or who's responsible. The idea is that structure is part of the church.

Along with structure, you have responsibilities, which means you need job descriptions. But here, in the early church, there were only two requirements for the position of deacon.

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Acts 6:3, *“Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.”*

The two requirements for this position were *“to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”* They’re not saying, *“Since it involves food, maybe somebody with a hospitality and food service background would be a good deacon.”*

Or, *“Since it may involve money at some point, maybe we need somebody who has a finance background.”* That’s wasn’t the priority.

The priority was that they *“be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”* How did they know if someone was full of the Spirit? Well, I believe it was quite evident at that time.

Today, there are different views about what it means to be full of the spirit. As Baptists, we generally take the stance that at conversion you receive the spirit of God inside of you.

There are other denominations that say you receive a second filling of the spirit that manifests itself in “sign gifts.”

Things like speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, healings, words of knowledge, and others.

Some say that’s the filling of the Spirit Stephen had because, as we will see later, he was doing some amazing things.

Regardless, my point is that these men, who are selected to serve, must have displayed a close walk with God.

This means not just coming to church on Sunday, reading your Bible during the service or Sunday School, then leaving it on the shelf and come back the next week and picking up from the same spot.

It means you have an ongoing walk with God. You're constantly talking to God. You're constantly praying to God. You're experiencing the worship of God, not just on Sunday morning but all through your week.

As you do that, what happens is you have this ongoing connection with God. You receive a constant filling of the Spirit, but you can't do it outside of that continued walk with God.

So, they were required to be filled with the Spirit, but they were also required to have wisdom. Wisdom is just knowledge applied.

A skillset of knowledge and life experiences that you can apply to a unique situation or possibly a complex situation, as it sometimes is in the church, and come up with a wise answer.

You learn to give wise suggestions and wise feedback. We often associate wisdom with age, which in many cases is the case, but a lot of times it isn't.

I know some older people who aren't wise. They never learned the lessons they should've been learning so they're not living a life of wisdom. On the other hand, I know some young people who are very wise for their age.

We're not talking about an issue of age. We're talking about whether or not somebody can take the knowledge they've learned from their life experiences and apply it to complex situations.

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Acts 6:5-6, "This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."

Basically, they began to assign people to the position of deacon. Verse 6 is a picture of the first deacon ordination service. They were being set aside for a special purpose.

What I want to point out is we're learning that Stephen was an extraordinary person. Not only was he a man full of the spirit and full of wisdom, but he was full of faith.

Remember Hebrews 11 talks about faith being sure of what you hope for and certain of the things you don't see. Sure and certain.

So sure, and certain that those heavenly, invisible realities out there become a concrete reality within your life.

That's the degree of faith about which we're talking. I guarantee Stephen believed everything that he preached.

Acts 6:7, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

We see that, with that simple act of delegation, the Word was able to spread. Things didn't get bogged down. Even Jewish priests were being converted.

At that time, there was estimated to be 8,000 priests within the city of Jerusalem, and the conversion of some of these priests began to get the attention of all sorts of people.

Also, we see that Stephen, although he had been waiting tables for a while, was suddenly getting released to do some other things.

In other words, God was satisfied in his willingness to wait tables, now He had bigger plans for him.

Obviously, Stephen was a gifted man. Acts 6:8, *“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.”*

Here we’re given a few more of Stephen’s attributes. He’s not only a man of faith and a man of the Holy Spirit, now we see that he’s a man full of grace and power.

Grace is a word that speaks of God’s favor. In my first message in this series, I talked about how Enoch pleased God, well Stephen pleased God, so God’s favor was upon him.

Think about God’s power, His omnipotence. God’s so powerful He was able to raise Jesus from the grave. This is the kind of power that’s inside of Stephen, a phenomenal power.

So, what happens when Stephen is unleashed? Great wonders and miraculous signs begin to happen. Wonders generally refer to miracles. Signs are miracles that point to something.

Stephen was pointing the people away from their old religious traditions that had become corrupt and to the resurrected Christ; the message and the kingdom that Jesus was bringing.

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There were some who didn’t like what Stephen was doing so opposition arose, but opposition from whom?

Acts 6:9, “Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.”

The Synagogue of the Freedmen was believed to be a Jewish church made up of former slaves. Slaves in Rome, who were freed, became converts to Judaism and came into the Jewish Synagogue.

All these people were suddenly coming against Stephen. Now, at first, they didn't come at him too hard. They just argued with him.

But verse 10 tells us, *“But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”*

In other words, they didn't realize it, but they were arguing, not against Stephen, but against the Holy Spirit.

So, what did they do? When somebody knows they're losing, often what they do is deny it and resort to deceitful methods.

Acts 6:11, “Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

The Jews hired people to go around and begin to basically lie and say that this man Stephen was spreading blasphemous thoughts about God and the prophet Moses. Immediately they seized him and brought him into the Sanhedrin.

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The Sanhedrin was basically a Jewish court that could be made up of as many as 70 individuals: priests, elders, and some regular people.

So, Stephen was pulled into this courtroom setting and what happened next was more lies and accusations made against him.

Acts 6:13-14, "They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

If you know your Old Testament, you know that basically the all the Jewish customs and laws got its start when Moses climbed Mount Sinai and God handed him the commands.

The commands that would ultimately become the customs and the rituals for the Jewish people including a blueprint for the temple they would build; a temple which they believed contained God.

They accused Stephen of messing with their religion and customs. They think he's spreading lies. But Stephen, like Jesus, wasn't trying to overthrow 3,000 years of Jewish history; he was saying something was had to change.

He told them, currently you have the law that was given by Moses which resulted in a long list of dos and don'ts that you couldn't keep. Now that law is being replaced by grace that comes through Jesus Christ.

He told them that the good news is that God doesn't reside in a temple built by man. God resides in a temple of the heart.

Stephen wasn't discounting everything that came before, but he's said things were about to change, so you better pay attention. By that time, the people became enraged. On one side you have the Sanhedrin and on the other side you have Stephen.

Now, from a spiritual angle, more is happening than we realize. You have the law versus grace. You have a spiritual battle that's heating up and enraging everybody in the room except Stephen.

Then, in the midst of this bickering, the Sanhedrin and everyone else in that room, began to look at him.

Acts 6:15, "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

I don't know about you, but I don't hear many people refer to someone as having a face of an angel other than an occasional reference to a child. What does the face of an angel look like?

Some people say he was glowing, but we don't know what was going on or what it looked like. At a minimum, we know that God was making His presence known.

What was inside of Stephen was now coming out. He was so full of grace and the fullness of God that it was beginning to manifest itself in his outward appearance.

Then, in the middle of this scene, *"The high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"* Which I believe Stephen was the opening for which Stephen was waiting.

Because, at that point, Stephen stood up and gave the speech of a lifetime. In fact, it's the only speech he ever gave, but it's still the longest recorded speech, sermon, or whatever you want to call it, in the entire Bible.

In chapter 7, he spoke for 52 verses. To summarize it, basically what Stephen did was to give the Jewish people a history lesson.

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Starting with Abraham, he told them their history. From Joseph to Moses delivering the people through the Red Sea and receiving the commands. He spoke about the desert years and finally Joshua taking the Promised Land.

If you don't like the Old Testament because you think it's hard to read, read this speech of Stephen.

Most Bibles have many cross references in those verses to the Old Testament that supports every word that Stephen's said. He summarized almost the entire history of Israel in those 52 verses.

If we were to read through it, we'd see throughout that speech he weaves some subtle insults, too. Basically, he was implying that even though they had the law, they had rejected the law.

Not only did they reject the law by not keeping the commandments and going after idols, they went after the prophets that told them they'd better straighten up or they would feel God's wrath. In his last couple verses, he unleashed a string of accusations.

Acts 7:51-52, "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him."

He's insulted them big time because when you see the Jews being referred to as *stiff-necked people* that's coming straight from God in the Old Testament.

Stiff-necked is not a compliment. It basically means you're obstinate. You're resistant to change. You're stubborn, obtuse. Then he goes on to say, "*Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised.*"

He's saying, *"You pride yourself as people who practiced circumcision as a sign of the covenant, a relationship between man and God. But you did it on a physical level, God was looking at something on a heart level. You failed to circumcise your heart. You failed to demonstrate your true commitment to God through your hearts."*

Not only that, but he also went on to say, *"You killed all of those prophets that came and tried to let you know that things weren't going right. Not only did you kill those prophets, you killed the prophets that predicted Jesus was going to come, including John the Baptist, one of the greatest prophets. Then you crucified the greatest prophet of all; the Righteous One, the Messiah."*

He was laying into them. He was letting them have it all at once and this enraged the Jews.

Acts 7:54-56, *"When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

Again, the image is an embattled courtroom scene. The idea of gnashing the teeth is a phrase that means rage.

In the midst of this Stephen says, *"Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."* He's oblivious to all else because his mind has gone to heavenly things.

This again is evidence that he was an extraordinary person. Not just because he saw the heavens open but because he saw Jesus standing.

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Now if you know your Bible, there's nowhere else that talks about Jesus standing in heaven.

We know in Mark, where Jesus was talking to the disciples, he tells us that *"After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God."*

So why is Jesus standing? That's the million-dollar question. The best answer I've heard and the one I like is that He was standing to recognize Stephen as a man of honor.

We've all been to weddings. When the bride comes down the aisle, we stand as a gesture of honor. When you're someplace important and a dignitary comes into the room; you stand.

Jesus was paying an honor to Stephen. He opened the heavens and stood up, and Stephen's eyes were watching it all happen. This drove them over the edge.

Acts 7:57-58a, "At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him."

In Biblical times, stoning was an approved form of execution. In many countries today it's still an approved form of execution.

What it often involved, at least in the Jewish tradition, was they would take the accused outside the city because they didn't want it to happen within Jerusalem boundaries since it violated all sorts of cleansing laws.

After they got outside the city, they would proceed up a hill and then push them over the edge, ideally so he would fall on his back.

If the fall didn't kill him when he fell on the rocks, they would take the largest rock they could find and drop it on him, possibly hitting his chest and crushing his heart.

If that didn't kill him, then they would start throwing stones at him until he was dead. That's what Stephen went through.

In the midst of that stoning, we find an interesting tidbit of information at the end of verse 58. It says, *"Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."*

Saul's also known as Paul. Paul's probably the most quoted person in the New Testament next to Jesus. Yet, the first introduction of Saul is him standing at the execution of someone who Jesus saw fit to stand for.

The story basically ends there except it goes on to say in verses 59-60, *"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep."*

This is one more indication that Stephen was an extraordinary individual because while he was being stoned, he didn't say, *"Jesus save me or God save me."* He said, *"Receive my spirit. I'm coming home."*

Not only that he said, *"Forgive these people, they don't know what they're doing."* If you know the gospels, you know this sounds familiar because it's basically a picture of what Christ went through.

Christ was a miracle worker. Christ had a message. The message wasn't received well because He was talking about destroying the customs of Moses. He was talking about destroying the law and the temple, or at least He was in their minds.

They dragged Him before the court. They produced false witnesses. They dragged him outside of the city not to be stoned but to be executed on the cross.

Right before He died, He looked up and said, *“Lord receive my spirit and please forgive the ones who participated in this because they do not know what they have done.”*

Stephen is a picture of Jesus. He’s the first martyr of the book. He is an extraordinary person.

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Conclusion

What are some lessons we learned today? The first being that organization in a church is okay.

There are some practical things we can gain from it. Besides understanding what a deacon is, there are some spiritual things here, too.

The first and foremost is that we’re all called to be witnesses. The word martyr is just another term for witness. It comes from the same root word. A witness does what? A witness provides evidence for something.

Just as Stephen was providing evidence for his faith, we’re to be witnesses. We’re supposed to provide evidence for our faith.

If you’re afraid of being too vocal, or afraid you may someday be a martyr, then simply let your witness be your life. In other words, have a behavior that matches your belief.

If you're not going to proudly wear the name Christian and display it in a witnessing way, take it off. Don't even come to church. We don't need more hypocrites walking around.

You're witnessed by your behavior based on the belief based on your faith. That's the first thing. Be a witness.

The second thing is to be filled with the Spirit. We're told in Ephesians to be filled with the Spirit, but we don't talk much about the filling of the Spirit.

I think many are afraid of what it means to be filled with the Spirit because we're afraid if we get too filled with the Spirit we won't know what's going to happen.

God may actually give us a gift whether it's healing, prayer, speaking in tongues, or whatever, so we avoid that part of it.

There's no way that you can be filled with the Spirit without spending time with God; without cracking your Bible open; without getting in prayer; without engaging in ongoing conversational fellowship and worship with God.

Thirdly, I think all of us need to be willing to wait tables. Stephen didn't start out as an extraordinary person. He started out as someone who said, *"There's a need, I can do it. I'm available, so I'll wait tables."*

We don't know how much he knew about himself at that time or how gifted he was. The problem we have in the church is oftentimes we have people come with all these gifts that they feel they have to impart, and they don't want to do the menial tasks.

They don't want to serve because in their mind it's a menial task, but their feelings get hurt if their giftedness is not recognized.

What happens is people leave because they want their gifts to be recognized. Stephen on the other hand didn't want to do that. He was willing to wait tables.

If we want our gifts to be recognized, start by waiting tables and allow God to tell you when it's time to rise up and begin to utilize your giftedness in a real way.

This is the story of Stephen. A man that was willing to wait tables. A man that was full of the spirit. Full of wisdom. Full of power. Full of faith. A man who ultimately was a witness for Christ. A man who looked like Christ.

He was an extraordinary person. I don't want you to be thinking that these extraordinary people like Stephen and Enoch are somehow superstars and you can never be like that. These were just ordinary people.

Ordinary people who God chose to use in extraordinary ways as long as they opened themselves up to His spirit.

These were just people who were willing to submit themselves to God's commands, His calling, allowing Him to begin to manifest His Spirit through them so they might use their gifts in amazing ways; inside or outside the church.