

Stephen

Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-60

Despite the fact that I generally use my middle name, I have always liked my first name as well, Stephen. From early childhood, my parents and family called me by my middle name, as did my elementary school teachers and all the friends I met during those years. If my dad ever called me Stephen, it was because I was in some sort of trouble! So despite the difficulties of going through high school and college known to different people by two different names, in adulthood my name settled upon Scott, and lately I seldom even use my first initial as I usually did in year's past. But I have always appreciated my first name, especially after I became a Christian and came to understand the important role Stephen played in the early church. I wasn't named after Stephen in the Bible, but I am told that I was baptized on St. Stephen's Day, a day recognized in his honor by the Episcopal church to which my mother belonged, the day after Christmas.

So today our focus will be upon Stephen, one of the seven deacons whom we identified last week,

v.2 "Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business."

Stephen is mentioned first among those seven men of good reputation! His ordination to the office which would later be identified as a Deacon, with the other six, is described by the words of,

v.6 "...whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them."

And what we see specifically in Stephen in our text this morning is that he is a man of God!

If you note my outline, I will be skipping a large number of verses today, the first 53 verses of chapter 7, in order to focus upon them in the weeks to come, at least two sermons, as the content of those verses is an exposition of the long history of God's people Israel in the Old Testament. It is a glorious and profound review not simply of Old Testament history, but of the revelation of the work of God in redemption through the experiences of that history. It is the study of theology revealed in that outworking of history. So we will study those verses in some detail, and I will emphasize why that is so important next week. But for today, before and after that great historical exposition of God's redemptive work, we see the reaction to Stephen's ministry among the Jews—accusations made against him and the opposition to him that resulted in his death. He was the first martyr of the Christian church, to first to die as a consequence of his faith. We begin, however, with his life. And he is presented to us as a man of God.

I. STEPHEN: A MAN OF GOD.

v.8 "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people."

Remember the qualifications of those first deacons we studied last week, "men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." Thus we now read that Stephen is a man,

A. Full of grace.

If you listened carefully or have a King James or New King James Bible, you note that I read "full of faith and power," rather than "full of grace and power." This is a good example of the kind

of differences that exist in the extensive collection of Greek texts that are available. There is no single, complete Greek Bible that remains in existence to which we can turn. Instead, there are hundreds, thousands, of manuscripts which are compiled by godly scholars. And there are minor differences between two major groups or categories of those manuscripts. To be accurate but not overly technical, there are the older manuscripts, dated earlier and, therefore, closer to the actual writing of the New Testament in the first century. And there are the later, or newer, manuscripts, which are more numerous, often referred to as the majority text. So the theological question to answer is, “Which manuscripts are more reliably accurate—the older texts or the later, majority of texts? The King James and New King James versions are translated from those later manuscripts. The other reliable English translations are based upon the earlier manuscripts. Thus the difference. In our text this morning, the later manuscripts have the Greek work for “faith” in verse 8, “full of faith and power.” The older manuscripts, which many biblical scholars believe are the most accurate, because they are the oldest, have the Greek word for for grace. “Full of grace and power.” Personally, I believe that is the correct manuscript, thinking that the older manuscripts would naturally be the most accurate with reference to the original text as it was written.

But notice the difference, and I emphasize that because it is typical of the differences you might find in other texts. It is not a significant difference. Why would later manuscripts use the word “faith” in verse 8? I believe the answer is that that verse would have been joined together, or conflated, with...

Acts 6:5 “And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit...”

So Stephen was a man “full of faith.” Likely, as the manuscripts were copied by hand, that reference to being “full of

faith” was carried over to verse 8 using the same word. And indeed, he was a man full of faith! But according to verse 8, in what I believe are the most reliable Greek manuscripts, he was also “full of grace.”

So no contradiction there at all. No errors in the Bible. Just a meaningful scientific and theological study of the ancient Greek manuscripts of the word of God. He was full of faith, verse 5. And he was full of grace. More importantly, what does it mean to be full of grace? I think that is a very full description of a man greatly affected by the grace of God. So to be full of grace is to be full of the awareness and consciousness of God’s grace, to be fully aware of what it means to be a recipient of grace! To be full of grace is to be able to say, sincerely, with the Apostle Paul, “by the grace of God I am what I am.” There is great humility in that, with no room for pride to take root. But also confidence, confidence in the work of God! I’ll read that whole passage from,

1 Cor. 15:9 “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

Similarly, speaks of the gospel,

Eph. 3:7 “...of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. 8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

To be full of grace is to full of the work of God’s grace, knowing that it is only by the work of God’s grace that accomplish anything. “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” Those are the words of a man of God, a man who understands what John

the Baptist meant when he said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” That’s full of grace! Full of the awareness of the graciousness of God by which we are included in the number of his sons and daughter! To be full of grace is to fully own the familiar words of the Paul,

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

I think the words mean something else, as well. Full of grace would refer not only to the awareness of being a recipient of God’s grace, it also would refer to the person who would demonstrate that grace to others! So if Stephen would be a man who showed grace to others, he was gracious with them and toward them, and there are so many good things related to that. The Greek word is sometimes translated kind or kindness. Or gentleness. It can be translated simply good or goodness, or “easy,” when Jesus says,

Mat. 11:29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

My yoke is easy. My yoke is gracious! That is the kind of man Stephen was—kind, good, gentle and gracious. He was full of grace! Such a man was well suited to be ordained as a deacon, as we studied last week. And we read that he was...

B. Full of power.

In the age of the apostles, with the apostolic foundation of the church being laid with the demonstration of power that attested to the truth and power of Jesus himself, Stephen is noted personally, as were many of the apostles themselves, identified with the supernatural power of signs, wonders and miracles that God accomplished through the apostles.

v.8 “And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.”

We also then see that he was,

C. Full of wisdom.

His wisdom is demonstrated by the inability of those who opposed him to make any credible accusations against him. They couldn’t answer him. They couldn’t deny or discredit what he said and taught.

v.9-10

Jesus had given his disciples this great promise before he died,

Luke 21:10 “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. 13 But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. 14 Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; 15 for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.”

Stephen shared in that wisdom. We will study his address in chapter 7 next time, and I expect at least two sermons to cover all that he spoke, but before I move on this morning to the opposition and persecution that came to Stephen, let me note one more thing about him as a man of God. We read in,

v.15 “And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.”

I don't think we should infer from that some sort of physical description of what an angel would look like, since angels are spirits, without physical bodies. But they do appear at times in the Bible in visible forms. And what must stand out here is that Stephen's appearance would somehow be seen as a reflection of heaven, a reflection of the presence of God himself. Perhaps the expression is a hyperbole, speaking sincerely of the serenity and inner joy observed in a godly man, such as you might observe when you meet someone and, because of what you see, think to yourself, "he must be a Christian." Or it could have been something visual, something similar to the shining of the face of Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai, an actual appearance that reflected the reality that he had been in the presence of God. Either way, Stephen's appearance reflected his fellowship with God in a way that was evident and obvious even to his enemies. The word I use to summarize that is that he was...

D. Full of innocence.

v.15 "And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."

But they certainly didn't treat him appropriately, did they? Instead, as you likely are familiar with this account, they killed him. They stoned him. And Stephen thus became the first martyr, the first Christian to die for the sake of his faith in Jesus.

II. STEPHEN: THE FIRST MARTYR.

That begins with,

v.11 "Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.

Skipping over the long address that Stephen delivered, which

we will study next time, we read in

Acts 7:58 "...and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."

That is first introduction in the Bible to Saul, later to be the Apostle Paul, and he never lost consciousness of the sin from which God saved him. Much more of that, obviously, as we go through the book of Acts, but for our focus today, let me emphasize the,

A. Unjust opposition.

Not just opposition. But injustice, of the worst order. I just read,

v.11 "Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council."

It continues,

v.13 "They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

All of that untrue, or, I should say, a perversion of what Stephen taught. There was a change in God's covenant relationship with his people now that Jesus had come, and Stephen taught about Jesus, Jesus the fulfillment of everything that had gone before in the Old Testament history of God's people. As I have said, we will study all that Stephen said in more detail in the coming weeks. But here the point is that they twisted what Stephen said, such that when talked about Jesus he was

accused of blasphemy, ““This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law.”

So rather than listen and learn, rather than believing in Jesus the Messiah whom God sent to live as a man upon the earth, and to die for the sins of his people, rather than believing in God’s great work of redemption which Jesus accomplished, rather than trusting in Jesus for their own salvation and for the forgiveness of their own sins, they made up the accusations of blasphemy and then sought to have him killed, showing forth their...

B. Murderous rage.

Again, for now, skip over what Stephen actually said and look at the response,

Acts 7:54 “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.”

The ESV puts it, “they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.” The idea is pretty clear, isn’t it? They were infuriated with him. People today would call it a derangement syndrome. They were going crazy, gnashing their teeth in their unquenchable anger. And murderous rage!

Acts 7:57 “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

They threw stones at him until he died. But that anger, that death, of course, isn’t the focus of these verses. The focus is upon how he died. And if I can express it well, let me use these gentle words, he died well.

III. STEPHEN: DYING WELL.

I mean that as a very praiseworthy and godly expression. He died well because he died in faith, with the fullness of his faith on

display. And all these words ought to be of great encouragement to all of us, since, until Jesus himself returns at the end of this age, we, too will all die. So what does it mean to die well? With Stephen, I can identify four ways to die well, to die in faith. First,

A. Faith to see the reality of heaven.

Notice the contrast between the murderous rage of verse 54 and the disposition of Stephen in,

v.55 “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

His life was obviously in danger at this point. The crowd was enraged, gnashing their teeth. And Stephen “gazed into heaven”! And he saw the glory of God! The implication is that he did actually see something real, not merely with what we might call the eyes of faith. The implication is that he was granted an actual vision of the true reality of heaven, something still available to us now by faith. It wasn’t a figment of his imagination, nor anything related to what would call today a hallucination.

v.55 “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed 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, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

God was still giving appearances of himself during this age of the apostles, and Stephen had such an experience, so great was his faith. It was more than just words. He saw “the heavens opened.” He saw the reality of heaven. And he had such...

B. Faith to see the reality of Jesus.

He saw “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Remember how Jesus himself had a similar vision of heaven, in his own human flesh?

Mat. 3:16 “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.”

Jesus is at the right hand of God, the place of authority and power, though here pictured as standing rather than sitting, as prophesied in many places, such as,

Ps. 110:16 “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.”

Perhaps the emphasis upon standing rather than sitting is because Jesus stands as witness, to counter those false witness who had stood against Stephen upon the earth. Now, in the heavenly courtroom of God, Stephen beholds Jesus standing to bear a true witness for him. He dies with such faith, the faith to see Jesus where he has now ascended, in the place of all authority and power at the right hand of God. He dies with his eyes fixed upon Jesus,

Heb. 12:2 “...the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

With such faith to see Jesus in heaven, Stephen then dies with the...

C. Faith to exercise grace.

Remember, he was a man full of grace. And here he demonstrates that grace! His

Acts 7:60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice,

“Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”

He is, of course, reflecting the grace of Jesus shown to those who put him to death.

Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

Stephen’s last words, his last thoughts, were those of grace, an expression of graciousness, reflecting the same grace he himself had received. “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.”

Then, he died. And how Luke records that death is that “he fell asleep, verse 60, words that reflect the temporary nature of physical death. For we will awake, our bodies will be raised from the dead in the resurrection. Death is not the final end nor the final state of man. So death is portrayed as sleep. And in that context we read,

1 Cor. 15:50 “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Thus Stephen, this man of God full of grace and power, died with the...

D. Faith to preserve a certain hope of life.

He died knowing that he would continue to live. And so we read,

v.59 “And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

Again, the reference to Jesus’ own experience of death is obvious. And Stephen died as he live, with the full faith and confidence that though his body would return to the dust of the ground as a corpse, his soul would not die. His heart would live on, his spirit remained alive. And so death was but the entrance into glory, the glorious presence of God. That faith was so real, so personal, that the words he expressed were recorded for our encouragement in the word of God. They are words that give strength and comfort to all of God’s children, no matter what the circumstances of death might be, even if it is a death brought about by injustice and murderous rage.

He died well, in the fullness of faith. He died, calling upon the God who had saved him. He died, crying out to his savior, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

May such faith be your strength throughout this earthly life, and your great hope in your own confrontation with death.