

"The Trial of Stephen"

Part 2

Acts 6:8-7:60

Introduction: Last week in our study of Acts we started to look at Stephen's trial in Acts 6. Stephen is given much attention in Acts 6 and 7 because his trial and his martyrdom is a major changing point for the church. From chapters 1-7 the Gospel is preached in Jerusalem, but the death of Stephen will send the Gospel into the rest of the world.

I. The Danger of Popular Opinion

Acts 8:1-2

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

² *And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.*

The death of Stephen will be the event that brings about the fulfillment of the Words of Jesus.

Acts 1:6-9

⁶ *When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*

⁷ *And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.*

⁸ *But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

⁹ *And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.*

In the last Words Jesus spoke on earth, He told His disciples that they would be witnesses in the uttermost parts of the earth. It would be the death of Stephen that would launch the Gospel out beyond Jerusalem.

Application:

Here was an event that looked like a terrible tragedy, but the end result would be that many more lost souls would hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and get saved. There are a few verses that come to mind in the midst of this thought.

Isaiah 55:7-11

⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

¹¹ So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

There are several Bible characters that come to my mind here. I think of Joseph. Hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused by his master's wife, thrown in jail, forgotten in jail and then brought out to be the savior of his people. This all transpired over thirteen years. To Joseph it would have all seemed to be unfair and it would have felt as though he was abandoned by God, but God had a plan, and His thoughts were far above Joseph's thoughts and ours.

If we were a part of the early church, we would have certainly wondered what was happening when Stephen was stoned, and the persecution broke out. Let us notice how quick it all changed.

Notice Acts 6:8-12

In verse 12 we are told "they stirred up the people". This was the first sign of storm clouds on the horizon. Prior to this the people were amazed with the apostles.

Acts 5:12-16

12 And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch.

13 And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.

14 And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)

15 Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them.

16 There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one.

This was just prior to Stephen's trial and now we can see the winds of change beginning to blow.

Let us back up a little further to see what is recorded in Acts 2.

Acts 2:46-47

46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Application:

There is something in all of this that we need to see. The enemies of Stephen could do nothing against the followers of Jesus until they got the popular opinion on their side. Up until this point popular opinion was with the disciples and therefore persecution was limited. Let us understand that popular opinion can be easily shaped, and it can change with the wind. The very same people that praised Jesus turned around and called for Him to be crucified.

Luke 19:35-38

35 And they brought him to Jesus: and they cast their garments upon the colt, and they set Jesus thereon.

36 And as he went, they spread their clothes in the way.

37 And when he was come nigh, even now at the descent of the mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen;

38 Saying, Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest.

Luke 23:18-23

18 And they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas:

19 (Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.)

20 Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them.

21 But they cried, saying, Crucify him, crucify him.

22 And he said unto them the third time, Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go.

23 And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed.

In our world today popular opinion is often shaped by the media. The media has the power to persuade the masses to go in just about any direction. As believers we must be very careful about getting caught up in popular opinion. We are to be controlled by the Word of God and not by words and opinions of a group of worldly reporters.

II. The Accusations

Notice Acts 6:11-13

Stephen was accused of:

- 1. Blasphemy against Moses.**
- 2. Blasphemy against God.**
- 3. Blasphemy against the temple.**
- 4. Blasphemy against the Law.**

Those who brought these charges were looking to get Stephen put to death.

Leviticus 24:16

16 And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the Lord, shall be put to death.

Stephen was not guilty of any of these charges. These charges were trumped up and Stephen's words were twisted by the false witnesses. We will look closely at Stephen's sermon in the next chapter and there we shall see how he was clear of each of these accusations.

Notice Acts 6:14

Here in this verse we can get a better understanding of what Stephen preached in the synagogue of the Libertines. These accusers twisted Stephen's Words and from this verse as well as the verses prior we can see that Stephen shared with his audience the New Covenant. Keep in mind his listeners were people who prided themselves in keeping the Law. But Stephen knew that the Law was not given for salvation but to reveal the sinfulness of man and the holiness of God. It was given to show people their need of forgiveness and to bring them to the Savior.

Galatians 3:22-26

22 But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

23 But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.

24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

25 But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

26 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

Stephen's words concerning the Law and his words concerning their inability to keep the Law were very offensive to his listeners. We can be sure that he preached Jesus Christ crucified, buried, and risen from the dead which gave to his listeners a hope. Stephen preached GRACE to these people which strips a man of his pride because GRACE tells us we cannot please God with our good works, but God has made a Way through His Son for us to be forgiven and accepted by Him. Stephen's message was very offensive because it stripped his readers of their self-righteousness. This was exactly what they need to hear because they were lost in their sin.

Notice Acts 6:15

This is a very interesting verse. This tells of a powerful testimony before the most powerful court in Jerusalem.

Notice the words of Whitcomb on this verse.

"Historically, we remember that the face of Moses shone as he came down from Mt. Sinai, and he had to wear a veil (2 Cor. 3:13). It was as if God were saying, "This man is not against Moses; on the contrary, I was with Stephen and caused his face to glow even as the face of Moses once glowed." On the Mount of Transfiguration, our Lord's face did shine as the sun (Matt. 17:2). The Lord Jesus prepared His disciples for the persecution they would receive, and He promised to show them what to say when brought before their enemies: "For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist." (Luke 21:15). Stephen's tranquil and trusting heart was reflected in his face. We have never seen the face of an angel and have no idea what that would look like, but the men in the Sanhedrin caught an unforgettable glimpse of something that could only be attributed to God. God did something special in that man's heart and on that man's face. How did Luke know about these things, including the transformation of Stephen's face? He probably received this information from Saul of Tarsus."

Conclusion/Application:

You and I are not going to have the faces of angels but what is in our hearts should be reflected on our faces.

1 Peter 3:14-15

14 But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled;

15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:

Notice the story from the Daily Bread.

"The late G. Campbell Morgan once told of a factory girl who, after she was saved, simply radiated Christian joy. One day while waiting for a train at York station she slowly walked up and down the platform to pass the time. A highly cultured lady, sitting nearby, observed her closely. Finally, impressed by her sweet face, she called to her, "Excuse me, Miss, but what makes you so happy?" The girl replied, "Was I looking happy? I didn't know it showed,

but I certainly am. I'll be glad to tell you why!" She then witnessed to the woman concerning the wonders of salvation and the joy it brings to the heart, and eventually led her to a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ."

This girl wasn't trying to look happy. Her face just naturally reflected the joy of her soul. Moses also did not know his skin was shining with a celestial glow when he came down from the Mount. It glistened because he had been in close touch with God. The same was true of Stephen the day he laid down his life to become the first martyr of the Christian church (Acts 6:15). His face lit up with angelic glory because of his close relationship to Jesus Christ."