

Bible Study 22 – Acts 6:8-15 – Stephen is seized

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak 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 will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

1. Stephen was fully equipped and energised for, and engaged in ministry and mission: And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

a) Stephen was member of the early church in Jerusalem. He was one of the first seven deacons called and chosen by the church and set apart by the apostles with prayer and the laying on of hands. He was strong in the faith and was known for his integrity and holiness. And here we have the key to understanding the man and his ministry. For we are expressly told he was ‘full of grace’. He relied upon the God of grace and the means of grace which equipped him for his ministry and mission.

b) Stephen was energised for service to Christ and his people. For we are not only told that he was full of grace, but we are told that he was full of grace AND power. God in the person of the Holy Spirit provided Stephen with strength and stamina for his ministry. But more than that it was the power of God in word and work that efficaciously or effectively produced positive results...

c) Stephen was therefore engaged in his ministry and mission and was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Remember, the wonders and signs were not an end in and of themselves but were primarily designed to point to God in Christ as the Giver of every good and perfect gift... The Helper and Healer, the One who makes whole and gives his people a hope and a future. The Way, the Truth, and the Life.

2. Stephen encountered vociferous opposition to his message and method: Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

a) Stephen encountered adversaries in the guise of former Jewish slaves and Hellenistic Jews who had possibly settled in Jerusalem and who had their own synagogues or places of worship in the capital. It is likely that they were not part of the ruling Council that had arrested and threatened Peter, John, and the other apostles.

These were men from the diaspora. They were descended from Jewish people who had settled outside of Israel in previous generations on account of war, famine, as well as commerce and education.

It is ironic that Stephen was called to the diaconate to alleviate any sense of injustice among Hellenistic Jewish Christians only to be attacked verbally and physically by Hellenistic Jews in their zeal to protect their traditions...

b) Stephen was engaged in argument. These particularly fervent individuals rose up and disputed with Stephen. They contested his theology, his mission, message, and method. They rejected the Good News that Stephen proclaimed and lived by... And had set themselves against it...

c) Stephen endured these men’s acrimony and animosity. And again the words of the Lord Jesus must have come to mind: Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not

greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (Jn.15:20).

3. Stephen enlightened by the Word and Spirit cogently, confidently, and courageously defended the Good News and his good works: But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking

a) Stephen responded intelligently from God's word, the sacred scriptures which is wisdom from God. It is the word in scripture that reveals the Word Incarnate who as the Apostle Paul tells us is our Wisdom from God...

b) Stephen responded indisputably from what he had witnessed and experienced of Jesus Christ and his gospel. And from the worship, work, and witness of the apostolic church. He had been enlightened and had seen God at work in and through his people. He had possibly witnessed the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and if not heard about from the apostles and had experienced and seen the power of the good news in the healing and salvation of souls...

c) Stephen responded intuitively and intently as the Spirit guided and guarded his words... Again, in fulfilment of Jesus' promise of the Helper, the Spirit of Truth.

4. Stephen is erroneously accused of blasphemy and sedition: Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak 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 will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

a) Stephen's accusers maliciously plotted against him... And they stirred up others among the people and the elders and the scribes. They spread misinformation. They organised a campaign to whip up religious and political fury against the deacon... They betrayed a malevolent spirit and sadly their type has plagued church, state, and society since the beginning....

b) Stephen's accusers malign his name and message... Unable to silence or defeat their opponent in debate, they turn to false accusations, ad hominem, and the like to cancel Stephen – to nullify and negate his witness. They were the Facebook and Twitter trolls and mobs of their day...

c) Stephen's accusers misuse and abuse his quotations of the word in scripture and the Word Incarnate to accuse him of blasphemy and sedition. They made him out to be an enemy of the Holy City and its Temple and therefore of its religious rites and rituals. And they also accused him of being against the law of God that governed all aspects of life.

In other words, just as those that wickedly condemned the Lord Jesus argued he was a threat to the religious and temporal orders – to Israel and to Rome, so likewise these misguided enemies of God and the good set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak 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 will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." Jesus had been referring to his body as the Temple that would rise again in three days after his death and burial. Moreover, he had expressly said that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfil. The Temple and the Law point us to Jesus but alas Stephen's accusers wilfully misconstrue and misapply the message. And lamentably, such arrogance and ignorance only fuel their animosity. These men were bereft of the spirit of Gamaliel whom we encountered in chapter 5.

5. Finally, Stephen's ethereal or enlightened appearance draws the attention of the council: And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

- a) Stephen looked like he resided with God. Like God's messenger or herald, Moses, when he came down from Mount Sinai and had to cover his face on account of the bright glow. So, Stephen has the appearance of being in the presence of God. In the Bible, the angels, those celestial spiritual beings, lived in proximity to God and maybe that is what is being conveyed to us here. Stephen like an angel is God's messenger and herald...
- b) Stephen gave the appearance of resting in God and in his grace. He appears to enjoy peace and serenity amid the furore whipped up by the enemies of Christ...
- c) Stephen appears resigned to his destiny. His faith, hope and love are firmly in God rather than the council of men.

Questions

1. How should we prepare ourselves for ministry?
2. How do we promote and defend the Faith?
3. How should we respond to misinformation and false accusations?
4. Why is Jesus central to the church's message, ministry, and mission?