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## The Testimony of Stephen

### Acts 6:9-15

**Intro:** Ch6 opens with yet another potentially debilitating problem arising from within the body of this growing church in Jerusalem. Though the congregation was rather large, it was also still spiritually immature in certain areas and a situation developed that threatened the unity of the church and the advancement of the Gospel in their community. The Apostle's solution was to have the congregation nominate some candidates to take over the task of overseeing the daily distribution of funds for the care of the widows in the church. They weren't encouraged to pick just anyone for this ministry but only those individuals that had a good reputation and were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

As we saw in our last study, 7 candidates were offered up and the Apostles ordained them to this ministry by the laying on of their hands. This situation was handled with wisdom and compassion as each party showed sensitivity to the those who were offended and sought a suitable remedy through love and obedience to the Holy Spirit's leading. The result of this compassionate, Spirit-led decision was that the blessing of God on this church not only continued – it increased! Once again, the church was unified, positive response to the Gospel was multiplied and the name of Jesus was magnified in the city. This is the usual result of searching for and submitting to the filling of the Holy Spirit. Again, to be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by the Spirit. What kind of impact would the modern church have in its own community if they each had 7 individuals who were willingly and obediently controlled by the Spirit?

I believe that is a valid question although I am not suggesting that we should expect an exact replication of what we see in the first 6 chapters of Acts. This was a unique time in the history of the church that was marked by a unique set of circumstances, shaped by a unique perspective. But having said that, we still serve the same God as they did, we still carry the same message as they did and we are still empowered by the same Spirit was they were, or at least we should be. That's what is so exciting about serving the Lord in this day and age: we have access to all the same divine power and biblical truth the first church had and we have the additional benefit of

2000 years of thoughtful, godly research into understanding and applying the Scriptures correctly. Plus, we have technological advances the early church could never have dreamed of and financial resources that would have even impressed most Romans.

With all of these benefits readily at our disposal, why do we consistently look at all of the “disadvantages” of being a Christian in a post-Christian society? Our culture is completely secular without even the barest acknowledgment of any Christian heritage in our nation’s history. In fact, most people today are embarrassed by it, or worse, offended. But as secular and sinful as our modern society is, it’s still no where near the degradation of Roman/Greek society the 1<sup>st</sup> century church faced and yet, they didn’t hesitate to face it. They also refused to allow the culture of their world to define them. They didn’t try to fit in, didn’t try to be relevant; didn’t try to woo the pagans with a softer version of the Gospel. No, when they accepted Jesus Christ, they not only received His salvation, they also received His nature, His compassion for the lost, His insistence on upholding and declaring the truth no matter what the cost.

That may very well be the distinguishing mark between the 1<sup>st</sup> century church and the modern church. Sure, they were a novelty in their day and, let’s face it – Christianity is “old hat” in our time. The truth that the Apostles taught was new and exciting where today, sad to say, the Gospel and been used and abused by so many people in so many ways, its no wonder that so many of the lost are skeptical of it. But, I think the greatest difference between the modern church and the first church is that we have all the advantages and they had all the courage.

Don’t get me wrong, this is not an indictment on the entire modern church. There are still plenty of believers around the world who are forced to walk in complete trust and submission to the Spirit and even though they do, they don’t see the same results. Reality is – results are secondary to relationship. Our relationship with Jesus is of the utmost importance and the far-reaching results of that may never be known on this side of glory. But, If we refuse to be satisfied with a superficial relationship; if we faithfully and consistently press into a deep, intimate relationship that seeks His will and desires to learn His Word, there will be positive results in the lives of believers and in the life of churches across this country. We have no better example of this truth than the life of Stephen, 1 of the first deacons.

Luke listed 7 names in this first group of deacons but we really only learn more about 2 of them: Stephen and Philip. What's so significant about the Apostles appointment of these deacons is that it reflects a sea-change in the life and focus of the Jerusalem church. In fact, **vs7** describes the climax or zenith of the ministry of the church in Jerusalem. That's not to say that it's all downhill from here but, after the events of **ch6-7** play out, the focus of the Gospel message will pivot from Israel and the Jews to the Gentile world and that change will be brought about in part by these 2 Greek-speaking deacons. Stephen will deliver a speech in **ch7** that's really a transitional speech which paves the way for presenting the Gospel to the Gentiles while in the very next chapter; Philip will actually be the first person to carry the Gospel outside of the boundaries of Judea.

This was not because the power of the Spirit was lost. On the contrary, this was all done by design. In truth, it was all part of the original plan. Jesus had told His disciples on the day that He ascended back into heaven that they would be witnesses for Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth. The Gospel had been presented effectively to the city of Jerusalem and to the surrounding areas of Judea but that message was about to hit a brick wall of solid resistance. But the message will not be defeated, it'll now just be offered to a more receptive audience. The Apostles weren't just appointing servants for the church; they were ordaining their eventual replacements.

**8** – The rest of **ch6** and all of **ch7** deals with the testimony of Stephen. Stephen's testimony is 2-fold: Luke describes what he did (**6:8-15**) and what he said (**7:2-53**). Both parts of Stephen's testimony were impactful and both stemmed from his willingness to be controlled by the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that His indwelling brings. As we can see in **vs8**, this Spirit-filled man didn't limit his ministry to serving tables. He did that, but he also found time to reach out to the lost with the Gospel and even do miracles. Up to this point, it was the Apostles who performed miracles but now we see God granting this same power to Stephen also. Of course, God didn't do this because Stephen was so much better than everyone else. No, God did this because Stephen was part of His plan to bear witness of Jesus Christ - one more time - to the religious leaders of Israel. Their response to Stephen's message in **ch7** would be a critical point in the history of God's dealings with Israel from here on out; in fact, it will be the defining factor.

**9-10** – Stephen’s ministry of witnessing apparently carried him into the different synagogues of the city. In that day, Jews from many other nations were living in Jerusalem in their own “quarters” and some of these ethnic groups even had their own synagogues. The Freedmen were the descendents of Jews who had previously been in bondage but had won their freedom from Rome. Luke mentions that one of the regions these men were from was Cilicia which is only significant when you realize that one of the cities in that region was Tarsus, the home town of the future Apostle Paul. We know from **Acts 22:3** that Paul grew up in Jerusalem and was schooled there so it is entirely possible that he could have heard Stephen in the synagogue and may have even debated with him.

But, despite all their religious training and zealous fervor for the Law, not one of them was able to match or resist the wisdom and power of Stephen. Now, there’s no reason to believe that Stephen was smarter or more educated or just a better debater than these other Jews. We must attribute his upper hand in these heated debates to the Spirit by which he spoke. Being filled with or controlled by the Holy Spirit means you are also empowered by the Holy Spirit and that’s why Stephen was able to show greater wisdom than his opponents. So, since the Jews weren’t able to overpower his divine wisdom and biblical logic, their only alternative was to destroy him.

**11-14** – Their treatment of Stephen is similar to the way the religious leaders had treated Jesus. His opponents couldn’t win in a fair fight so they resorted to using lies and secret strategies to turn popular opinion against him. 1<sup>st</sup>) They hired false witnesses to testify against Stephen. It’s interesting that Luke specifies this as a secret inducement and yet, some 20-30 years later, this secret is shared with him as he is writing this account. How did he get this information? It had to come from an eyewitness who was privy to the secret at the time. Is this another indication of Paul’s presence in this scene?

2<sup>nd</sup>) They stirred up the people by accusing him of attacking the Law of Moses and the temple. It appears that his enemies couldn’t move against any of the followers of Jesus until they got popular opinion on their side. In previous chapters we saw that persecution against the Apostles was limited because popular opinion was on their side. This just goes to show how

easily popular opinion can be shaped or turned. The same crowds that praised Jesus on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem were soon calling out for His crucifixion. The same crowds that loved the Apostles would soon cry out for Stephen's death. This is why we should never allow popular opinion to shape the vision or focus of the church. Our vision and focus should always and only focus on the eternal Word of God!

3<sup>rd</sup>) Just like Jesus, after listening to his witness, they would execute Stephen.

Now, the accusations they leveled against him are very specific and blatant. Was it possible that Stephen spoke against Moses or his Law of the temple in any of his debates? I think the answer to that question is a most confident "Yes" and "No." No, I don't believe Stephen would have ever said anything unscriptural or even untoward about any of these things. On the other hand, since he was presenting the Gospel accurately, his opponents would be able to effectively twist his words into blasphemy. Not because Stephen was speaking against them but because he wasn't revering them as idols like they were.

They could accuse him of these things because Stephen would have clearly taught that Jesus is greater than Moses - that Jesus is God. He would have taught that Jesus is greater than the temple and greater even than the Law because He was the fulfillment of the Law. Stephen would have also taught that Jesus was greater than all of their customs and traditions. Each one of these biblical truths would have been an offense, a blasphemy, to an orthodox Jew. The Jews were jealous for their Law and couldn't understand how Jesus had come to fulfill the Law and usher in a new age of personal relationship with God. They were proud of their temple and refused to believe that God would permit it to be destroyed.

Stephen faced the same spiritual blindness that Jeremiah faced in his day ([Jer 7:1-11](#)). The Jews of Jeremiah's day had been given so many blessings by God but instead of honoring their blessing God, they somehow twisted His favor into a license to pursue any kind of evil they could devise. The Jews of Stephen's day were no different. "Hey, as long as we show up and do our religious duty, we can do whatever pleases us. It doesn't matter if it honors God or not - we've already served Him - we're on our time now!" What a shallow view of service and a dishonorable view of God! Sadly, the church faced the staunch opposition of Jewish tradition for many years to

come, both from within its own ranks and from false teachers coming in from outside.

It appears that Stephen's enemies came upon him suddenly, while he was ministering, and they dragged him before the same council that had stood in judgment of both Jesus and the Apostles. So, if you are keeping score, this will be the 3<sup>rd</sup> official presentation of the Gospel this council will have been exposed to, not because the Christians bullied their way into the chamber and held them hostage but because they dragged the Christians in, made spurious accusations and then gave them a chance to speak in their own defense. Oddly enough, in each instance, whether it be Jesus Himself or His faithful followers; they never seem interested in offering up a defense for themselves – they use the time they are given to present a compelling and indisputable argument for the Gospel. That's exactly what Stephen is about to do in the next chapter.

**15** – Let's grasp the irony of this picture. Stephen is on trial for his life before the highest religious court he could face in Israel. He is about to be examined and interrogated by respected, educated and very powerful men. He has been falsely accused but the accusations were severe enough that he seems to have lost whatever popular support he may have had. In the face of all these difficult circumstances, we don't see Stephen in anguish, biting his lip, chewing his fingernails and sweating buckshot in the hot seat. Stephen wasn't squirming at all. Luke tells us that his face was like the face of an angel.

What does that mean? Did he have that mild, spaced-out angelic look you see in so many paintings? Did his face have a look of stern judgment and wrath? Not likely on either count. Instead, his face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of someone who knows and trusts his God. It's even quite possible that Stephen's face shone with the reflected glory that Moses had as he beheld God intimately. The description is of a person who is close to God and reflects some of His glory as a result of being in His presence.

Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or twisted with terror. He knew his life was in God's hands and that Jesus never forsakes His people. He knew that the events of his life had brought him to this very moment and he didn't want to miss this opportunity to preach to the greatest, most powerful body in Israel. Of course it wasn't even necessary

for Stephen to speak to give a witness; the very look of his face told everyone that he was a servant of God.

Stephen's testimony was a combination of what he did and what he said but as a servant of God, his ministry for God was actually 4-fold. We have seen that Stephen was a servant to the church (deacon) but he was also a witness to the lost, and apparently an effective one at that. In [ch7](#) we'll see him ministering in the role of a judge over the Sanhedrin, exposing their own consistent sin and blasphemy against those things they claim to hold in reverence. He is going to show this august body of leaders exactly where they stand before God and give them one last opportunity to remedy their fatal position. Finally, Stephen's last ministerial role will be that of the first Christian martyr; the first follower of Jesus Christ to die for their witness.

It's interesting that in the NT there are 2 Greek words used for crown: 1) diadema – a royal crown (diadem) and 2) stephanos – the victor's crown. The difference between the two is that you can inherit a diadema, all you have to do is be born...in a king's family. But, the only way to get a stephanos is to earn it. Stephen certainly earned his but what are we doing for ours? Stephen was faithful to his Lord both in life and in death and he is an excellent example for all believers.

Now, I'm not trying to imply that God has called all of us to die for Him, to offer ourselves up to martyrdom for the cause of Christ as Stephen did but in one sense, that's exactly what He is calling us to do. Paul tells us in [Rom 12:1](#) that we are to present ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. This is not so much about dying for God but dying to ourselves, laying our preferences, our selfish desires and opinions on the altar and then leaving them there surrendered to Jesus. As the Psalmist says, "Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar" ([118:27](#)). God has not called us to die for Him but He does expect each one of us to prepare ourselves and then present ourselves to live for Him. Are you? 😊