

The Character that Stands! Acts 6:8-15

Well, we come to a major turning point in this book, and that is where the persecution of the Church of Jesus will increase, and we will see a scattering of the believers to the four winds, and with them will go the gospel of Christ. And we are introduced to a person that we had just briefly seen in the last paragraph, and that happens to be Stephen. And you look at his labour, and his evangelistic zeal and ministry, you recognize that he was not just involved in the ministry of helping distribution of goods, but was involved in the making and maturing of disciples for the glory of God. We also notice that this man was held in high regard in the church. As the church looked to seven men to stem the early controversy in the church, the very first name on that list was Stephen. His martyrdom would have been deeply painful and disturbing. He would have been a cherished and loved brother in Christ who was active among the people of God.

There are a few things we need to point out before we begin. One about these are Hellenistic Jews that we meet in this paragraph. Where the Hellenists of the previous paragraph were believers and wanted to rectify their difficulties, this group was anything but. They have no desire for Christ. The opposition against the church does not come from one source, but the way is wide that leads to destruction, and those who are on it want to be on it and not to be told of the narrow path through Christ that leads to life.

The other thing to think about in this paragraph is, although he is not mentioned until the end of the next chapter, Saul of Taurus would have been present here in all the disputing with Stephen. He would have heard the words of the gospel, and the arguments from the Old Testament Scriptures of Jesus being the Messiah. He was a Hellenistic Jew of high standing. And Stephen is the forerunner of the apostle Paul. The same spirit that is in Stephen will be in Paul. And also, so far through this gospel the main spokesman has been Peter, but now we will hear another voice. And think of it, Peter is the apostle to the Jews, but Paul is sent as the apostle to the Gentiles - to the non-Jewish people. And who is Stephen preaching to? He is preaching to Jews who are from all over the Roman Empire, emblematic of the gospel that will be taken to the ends of the world.

And as we look at Stephen, God raised up this man for such a time like this. But I think many times we put these men on a pedestal. They don't make Stephens anymore. And we forget that these are just ordinary men who end up doing extraordinary things for God because of the work that God formed deep within them. And as we look at the sanctification process (which is being changed to be more like Christ), we realize that it is all of God. Any change that comes over our lives is because of Him and he deserves all the glory. But at the same time we are called to be effort into being changed, seeking to to look at our hearts, and with his grace be changed into Christ that we might be productive vessels for his eternal glory.

Listen to what Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13, **“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (notice the command here, work it out, put effort into godliness and seek to obey Christ), for it is**

God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” God is working in us to effect that change. But here is the question: in a day and age of easy believism where professing believers care more about the world and want to be like the world, are you seeking his change in your life? Where have you changed in your life over the past month or week? Where are you working out the salvation that has been purchased for you and putting off sin and putting on Christ?

In this passage we see a man who has been molded by God, and now able to stand in the furnace of affliction and opposition for the glory of Christ. And God chooses to use those who seek to be changed because there is a principle here. The more we are changed the less we worry about self and the more we reach out to others. And you can see that with Stephen. You can see he ministered to the people of God and he was a gospel light to those without Christ. I want to look at his character this morning and hope it will be a challenge and encouragement to seek those characteristics in our lives. And I want to look at two verses that really bring out Stephens spiritual character and what God had produced in him. And both verses use the word “full.” You can see in verse 5, who was Stephen? “A man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” And then in verse 8, “And Stephen, full of grace and power.”

1. We need to see his spiritual convictions. V. 5.

We realize as humans we are made both materially and immaterially. There is an external and an internal. There is body and soul. And the question we have to grapple with is which one is more important? And as we seek to answer that question, we realize the importance of the body. We realize our physical self can influence our inner self or the soul. Just get lack of sleep and you see the interaction of the physical with the soul. But which one lasts, which one keeps going? And the answer is the soul. We talk about ourselves being absent from our bodies and present with the Lord. We talk about knowing the true you is knowing the immaterial self. It is amazing that we agree with that as believers that it is far more important what is inside than what we see outside. Yet the vast majority of emphasis is on the external. It is on how you look. Yet when you look at the beauty of Christ it's not in how he looked but in the real Jesus - his character and godliness. There are no images of Jesus by design. And may I say the same with Stephen. The reason he is able to minister and love and speak is not because of the external person, but because of who he is on the inside. And who are you? You can see it through how we function, from what comes out.

And the reason that Stephen is able to stand and make known Christ is because of what is in him. And we see what is in him right here in verse 5. He is “**a man full of faith.**” Now here is the question: what does it mean “full of faith”? We realize that we begin our Christian life by faith. And faith speaks of something that we do not see, but something that we are convinced of. We realize Jesus is the God-man. We take that by faith. We do not walk by sight. None of us have seen the glorious transfiguration of Jesus on the mount that Peter, James and John saw. We walk by faith. We walk by faith in the interpretation of the cross, that he died for us taking the penalty we deserve, and he rose again, victorious over death, so we can know all our sins are paid for. And that is how we begin. We begin our Christian lives by faith.

But we continue to live and also grow in the life of faith in God and his Word and His promises. In other words, faith is not something abstract or mystical or momentary.

But something substantial. We know who Jesus is and we know what he has done. But there is the experience of faith, and I believe that is what Luke is describing in Stephen and what the church at Jerusalem saw in Stephen, and one of the reasons they chose him. Jesus speaks of the disciples as having little faith, but he also described the Centurion who came and asked Jesus to heal his servant and that he didn't need to come but could but speak and it would be done as having great faith. Listen to the description of Abraham in Romans 4:19-20, "**He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead** (since he was about a hundred years old), **or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.**" Abraham did not weaken in faith, unbelief did not make him waver. Why? Because his faith was great. In what sense was it great? He did not waver in believing the promises of God.

And here is where the battle comes in — in our lives. Here is where we waver in unbelief. What we profess many times, at least in certain moments, is not what we believe. We say we believe God is sovereign but the moment your child does something, you are ready to lose your temper. You are ready to take control and be sovereign. God is not sovereign. Or the moment someone asks you a question, and you know the truth will be hurtful or get you in trouble. I don't trust in the God of truth but we tell a lie. Or the moment we engage in lustful fantasies we live in unbelief is the holiness of God.

Here we see Stephen was full of faith. It is talking about that in his inner self he was absolutely convinced of the truths of the gospel and the implications in his life. And therefore when pressure came, the inner self came out, and he gave the truth of Christ in the attitude of Christ. But where did that faith come from? And the easy and the right answer is God. But look at the second aspect of his inner character. "**a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.**" That word "full" covers both his faith and the Holy Spirit. Stephen is full or filled with the presence of the Spirit. And all believers again are given the Spirit at the moment they believe. In fact, he is the cause of our belief. He gives new life and makes us his Temple. The fullness of the Spirit is something that we have talked about before. And it means to be controlled. If you are controlled by anger, it will come out. If you are controlled by lustful fantasies you will work for opportunities to have them fulfilled. They will manifest themselves. But if you are filled with the Spirit of God, you will manifest Christ.

And isn't it amazing that Jesus the perfect man was filled with the Spirit beyond measure. He came to do the will of God, and after being tempted again and again, he responded in such a way that he glorified his Father. He never changed the truth but sought to make much of the Father. And the instrument that Jesus used, and we will see that Stephen will use in the Scripture. To be Spirit filled is to be so saturated and full and believing the Scriptures that they dwell in our hearts and what comes out of us is honouring and glorifying to Christ — Spirit filled individuals and individuals that are full of faith. And they are full of faith in a person. He makes the difference in how they respond. They make much of Jesus. They love Jesus and adore Jesus. How do you tell in the Spirit is present? It is when Jesus is made much of and believed and is

cherished and there is such a controlling conviction in his work and promises. That is change that comes internally and leads to external.

And the question we can ask each one of us as we look at our inner person: are we full of faith in Jesus? Are we Spirit filled and seeking to make much of Jesus, and you can really see it when the pressure is on. You see that in Stephen, and may I say it is to be the norm in each of us as believers in Christ.

2. We see spiritual convictions will manifest themselves. V.8.

There is a way we will respond because of who we are on the inside. Jesus says it this way in Luke 6:43-44, **“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.”** How do we know the difference between an apple tree and a pear tree? We know because of the fruit it produces. Well, what causes apples to grow and not pears? And the answer is the roots. It is what you cannot see. And it is the same with us? What causes us to lash out in anger or to be impatient? We want to blame the people and the circumstances. We want to say something on the outside. But it is our roots. It is our heart. It is not that Stephen responded with the right truths but he also responded in the right way. So often we can speak the right truths but speak them in anger or frustration and we are not representing the Lord but ourselves. We love to tell ourselves the lie we are not like this but whatever is in our hearts manifests itself. This is who we are. We cannot change what we are unwilling to admit.

And you can see who Stephen is. He is full of faith, full of the Word, a changed man with a changed heart, full of the Holy Spirit so much so that what comes out of him is Christ like. And you see that in verse 8, **“And Stephen, full of grace.”** Now again, think through what the Scriptures are saying. What does it mean to be filled with grace or be controlled by grace? Well, there are two aspects. One is that he is full of the grace that God has given him through the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the conviction that God has been so gracious to him. He has not only given what he does not deserve but also given his favour. He is now the Lord’s forevermore. He is now able to go through the persecution that God permitted in his life because of the grace of God. Like the apostles that had been beaten he is no doubt thankful to live and suffer for Christ. He does not have the worth or the standing on his own to do anything for the Lord, so God in his grace is gracious to him, and he is overwhelmed with that grace. He is not filled with fear and controlled by fear but gratitude and joy in Christ. When you are controlled by gratitude and joy realizing what you do deserve and what you have from Christ then there is a way you are going to respond. Listen to what Paul says, and listen to how grace changes him in 2 Timothy 1:12, **“which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.”**

We are so filled with bitterness rather than grace because we really do believe we are better and more deserving than we are. He is controlled by God’s spectacular and truly amazing grace. It gets back to what is in his heart in verse 6, full of faith in this grace, and full of the Spirit that causes him to rejoice in “Amazing grace how sweet

the sound that saved a wretch like me.” The prison doors are open and he is not controlled by fear, even if it means his death.

But the second aspect of “full of grace,” is not only are you overwhelmed with God’s grace to you, you become a channel for that grace to others. There is a sweetness and a gentleness in the way you handle and approach others that have done or seek to do you harm. It is not that he just spoke truth but he cared about these individuals and truly longed for them to come to Christ. He epitomized what is written in 2 Timothy 2:24-25, **“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.”** He is not quarrelsome. Some individuals and even pastors are always looking for a fight. But he spoke the truth with gentleness and conviction and sought that they would be brought to repentance. It is not enough to be right, to have the right theology and gospel are essential, but that truth must be accompanied with a heart that believes it and loves the truth of Christ so much so that our disposition is one of grace.

We get so angry with people, so frustrated with them. We might walk away, hang up the phone or ignore calls, or shout or go silent. But Stephen is saturated with the gospel of Christ. It controls him. We will not look at it today, but look at the last verse in this chapter, **“And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”** Imagine the fear this engendered among those who looked. There was not that rage or bitterness written all over him. But there was such a peace and joy and tranquility about Stephen as he gave truth. He knew his Lord was with him, and whatever the outcome he has a trust in him. The grace of Christ controlled him. And we also see it toward the end of the next chapter, (59-60) **“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”** Sound familiar? Sounds like the words of our Lord. Now if individuals are executing you for something good that you have done, this is not the way people respond. Why is he able to respond this way. He is full of faith and the Holy Spirit, which causes him to be full of grace.

Also, let’s look at the rest of the verse here in verse 8, **“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.”** And here we have the first recorded miracles in the Book of Acts that was not done by the apostles. It was the apostles, Stephen, Barnabas, and Philip are the only ones where these wonder and signs were done. And again, the emphasis here is they were related or apostolic delegates who were related in some way to the apostles but more importantly to the message, because the major emphasis here and the next chapter is not on the signs and wonders but who they pointed to, and that is to Jesus Christ.

But here you have a powerful life, and why is it powerful? Why is his life so impactful that we are discussing it two thousand years later? And the answer is not the signs and wonders. People never seem to even notice that, but his character to stand for Christ especially when the going got tough. He is the first martyr of the church. What an example of a life full of faith and full of grace. Here is the question as we end: what is your life going to be filled with? What will you and I be remembered for? Will we

leave a legacy of trust and commitment for Christ? God wants us to cooperate with him and really put effort into knowing him and growing to love and adore him, so much so that we are no longer controlled by the things of this life but by our Lord. And if we are controlled by him then he is going to use our lives for his glory.