

The Portrait of Stephen

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 6:8-15 / June 22, 2025

Introduction:

As we return to our study of the book of Acts, the next section of Luke's narrative spans from Acts 6:8-9:31, covering the spread of the gospel to Judea and Samaria. In this section Luke shows the gospel spreading through the lives and teaching of three people; Stephen in chapters 6-7, Philip in chapter 8, and a Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, whom we know as Paul, in chapter 9. Over the next three weeks, we will examine the importance of the life, message, and death of Stephen, whom Luke calls in verse 5, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." Stephen is an important figure in church history as the first Christian martyr whose death becomes the catalyst for the gospel expanding beyond Jerusalem. Yet, the portrait Luke paints of Stephen and his sermon before the Sanhedrin are just as significant to church history, as they solidify important truths about the new covenant in Christ. This morning, I want to consider four things from Luke's portrait of Stephen in Acts 6:8-15 and how it calls us to respond. First, we see,

Stephen was Marked by God's Grace, Power, and Wisdom

Follow the emphasis of Luke's description of Stephen. Look at verse 8, "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people." It is significant that Stephen is doing the same works as the apostle but note how Luke focuses on the work behind those things saying Stephen was, "full of grace and power." These two words appear together in Acts 4:33, "with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." The point is to emphasize God's divine grace and power flowing through Stephen. The Greek term for grace is understood in two ways. In the New Testament, it describes the riches of God's unmerited favor. Yet, outside of Christian literature, it was used to speak of charm and winsomeness. I believe Luke intends us to see both in Stephen. God's grace was flowing through Stephen in his speech and actions. Notice how Luke continues in verses 9-10, "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. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking." It's unclear Luke is referring to members of one Greek speaking synagogue or multiple synagogues. Either way, the goal is to highlight many seeking to challenge the teaching of Stephen. Consider what this implies about Stephen's life. Stephen wasn't solely focus in caring for the widows, he was active in spreading the gospel. Now how Luke contrasts those who disputed with Stephen with the wisdom and Spirit Stephen had that no one could withstand. This is another echo of the promise Jesus gave to the disciples in Luke 21:15, "I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict." The emphasis, again, is on the Spirit's work in him. Family, consider the significance of this. Each of these things highlight the Spirit's touch on his life, describing him as being marked by the same grace, power, and wisdom of the apostles, and walking in the same promise given to them. The Spirit was moving through more than the apostles to advance the kingdom of Christ. This should give us confidence that the Spirit's work isn't regulated to the professionals, and He can powerfully use any of us to spread the gospel. Second, we see,

Stephen was Treated with Familiar Contempt

We might expect Stephen to be celebrated for these things, but that is not the case. Look at verses 11-14, "Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' 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, and they set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 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.'" Before we look at the charges, pay attention to the details of what they did. First, they persuaded men to spread charges of blasphemy.

Second, they stirred up the people, elders and scribes with their charges, seized Stephen and brought him to trial. Finally, they set up false witnesses against him. Where have we seen these things before? Each element takes place in Jesus' arrest and trial. Jesus was seized by the people, scribes and elders in Mark 14:43-44. False witnesses were brought against Him in Mark 14:56-58. And He was charged with blasphemy in Mark 14:62-64. The contempt Stephen faced mirrors the contempt Jesus faced. Church, we can expect to experience the contempt of our Savior when we live for His kingdom. Jesus said in John 15:18-21, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 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. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me." This familiar contempt calls our hearts to be sober minded about what will come from living for Christ's kingdom. Ease and comfort may not be the signs we think they are. Our enemy is at work to undermine the gospel and will not be happy when we stand firm in it. This brings us to the third thing we see,

Stephen was Committed to the Supremacy of Christ

Pay attention to the charges they brought against Stephen. Look again at verses 11-14, "Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' ... and they set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 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.'" The testimonies of the false witnesses in verses 13-14 clarify the charges of blasphemy in verse 11 through intensification. The words they considered blasphemous against Moses and God are the words spoken against the holy place and the law, which more specifically is that Jesus will destroy this place, which is the temple, and change the custom of Moses. So, their charges are based on what Stephen was saying Jesus has done and will do the temple and the law. What could that have been? Consider with me what Jesus said regarding His death and resurrection in relationship to the temple. In Mark 14:58, false witnesses were brought against Jesus, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" While Jesus was on the cross, we are told in Mark 15:29-30, people passed by and said, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" Where did these charges come from? In John 2:19-22, we discover what led to these charges. After Jesus overthrew the merchant tables in the temple, the Jews ask for a sign that gave Jesus the authority to do these things. "Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'" The Jews understood Him to be speaking of the temple, so they respond, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" Now, note what John clarifies in verses 21-22, Jesus "was speaking about the temple of his body," and when Jesus, "was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." So, Jesus did speak of this temple being destroyed but was referring to the temple of His body. Now, here's what we need to ask. Was there intention behind referring to Himself this way while in the temple? And what did the disciples remember and believe in after He was raised? The key is in John's comment in verse 21, "Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body." The disciples understood what Jesus meant and believed in what Jesus was His death and resurrection would mean for the temple. Hebrews 9-10 teaches us the tabernacle, and by extension the temple, were designed to be copies of heavenly things. And Hebrews 9:24-26 tells us, Christ Jesus, through His death, "entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf... once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." And Hebrews 10:9-10, reveals His coming, "does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

The temple and sacrifices were place holders, so to speak, instituted by God to point to Christ's perfect sacrifice in the new covenant. In this way, Christ's death and resurrection did destroy the earthly temple, though it remained standing. The copies were no longer needed, because the reality had been accomplished. Stephen, along with the apostles, understood this and their teaching continued to dismantle the temple system while the physical temple still existed. Luke alludes to their success in verse 7, when recording, "a great many priests were obedient to the faith." As priests came to trust in Christ, they understood the temple practices were obsolete and this caused a stir. Now, consider what Christ's coming also meant for the Jewish customs and law of Moses. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-18, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." Jesus Christ did in fact change everything. He fulfilled the law and superseded the temple. The charges brought against Stephen show his teaching involved showing the supremacy of Christ over the temple and law. This is what ruffled the feathers of those in the synagogues because the temple and law were the foundations of worship. Now, this brings up one more question we need to ask. It would appear these charges aren't entirely false. So, what does Luke mean by recording this as false witnesses? They are false in the sense that these things are not against the temple and law, nor are they blasphemous words against Moses and God. Stephen's message next week will show this clearly. John Stott comments, "What Jesus taught, then, was that the temple and the law would be superseded, meaning not that they had never been divine gifts in the first place, but that they would find their God-intended fulfillment in him, the Messiah. Jesus was and is himself the replacement of the temple and the fulfillment of the law. Moreover, to affirm that both temple and law pointed forward to him and are now fulfilled in him is to magnify their importance, not to denigrate it" (John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 129). Stephen was teaching how God's eternal purposes meant that Christ would supersede the temple and the law, as they found their fulfillment in them, and this is precisely what Stephen's opponents didn't want to hear. Family, our enemy is ok with continued religious customs and practices that draw attention away from the supremacy of Christ. But once we begin to emphasize the sufficiency of the gospel and claim God's purposes come only through Jesus Christ, once we point to His supremacy over all things, the enemy will attack. This portrait of Stephen and his sermon following this hold out the importance of committing to the same truth. Which brings us to the last thing we see,

Stephen was a Testimony of Glory

Note how Luke concludes this part of the story. Look at verse 15, "And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." This conclusion captures the imagination. What did everyone see as they looked at Stephen? Was his face actually shining or did they just observe a peaceful and courageous countenance? We don't know exactly but Luke's phrasing alludes to Moses' appearance in Exodus 34:29-30, "When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him." Whether Stephen's face shone like Moses or he simply had a countenance that stunned them, this allusion is no coincidence. Luke's goal to convey God's endorsement of Stephen's life and faith. Just as Moses' ministry of the law was accompanied by God's approval, Stephen's interpretation of its fulfillment in Christ was as well.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, I want to consider two responses I see this passage calling for. First,

1) It Calls us to Listen to Stephen's Words

Next week, we are going to hear the high priest ask if these things are true and Stephen will deliver a powerful sermon that solidifies the truth, ending in a pointed rebuke of those in opposition to Christ.

As Luke surrounds that sermon with the portrait and death of Stephen, his primary goal is to help us see the importance of the truth Stephen lived under and died for. Let our passage move your heart to lean into what we understand of Stephen's teaching and what he will speak of in next week's passage. Know that Christ's sacrifice on the cross has opened the true way to God and this gives all who trust in Him a sweet and bold confidence that doesn't exist apart from Him. As Hebrews 10:19-23 says, "since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." Throw aside anything you think you need beyond the blood of Jesus Christ and turn to Christ for mercy and grace as you listen to Stephen's words. Second,

2) It Calls us to Imitate Stephen's Life

How do you desire to be known? Our answer to this question determines what we spend our lives in pursuit of. Some desire to be known by their intellectual prowess, athletic ability, financial savvy, work ethic, or certain skills. Their dedication to perfect their craft, increase their knowledge, or spend their time reflects these desires. How many of us desire to be known as being full of faith and of the Spirit? Stephen's time on the scene is short, but his life and faith stand as a powerful example of what the Lord can do through those who are captivated by the gospel and trusting in His Spirit at work within them. Our passage today provides a portrait of someone worth imitating, both in who he is and what he gave his life for. See him living for the gospel and follow in his footsteps. Desire to be marked by grace, power, and spiritual wisdom. Commit yourself to the supremacy of Christ. And long to be a testimony to the glory of God as you live in a dark and dying world. As you are considering these responses, you are welcome to sit and reflect or stand and sing. You are also invited to come and kneel before the Lord if the Spirit leads, and we have a team of people ready to pray with you whom you will find worshipping with lanyards on. Draw near to God in full assurance of faith and ask the Spirit to guide your response. Would you pray with me?