

Stephen - One to imitate. Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:54-8:1

When Ruth Bell, who later would marry Billy Graham, was a little girl, she had a passion for martyrdom. She grew up in China, where her parents were missionaries. She used to pray every night that the Lord would let her be a martyr before the end of the year. She wanted bandits to capture and behead her for Jesus' sake. Her sister, Rosa, used to think, "How horrid!" So every night when Ruth prayed like that, Rosa would pray, "Lord, don't You listen to her." (*A Foreign Devil in China*, John Pollock [World Wide Publications], p. 174.)

While we should not pray for martyrdom, we should desire to imitate the bold witness of those who have given their lives for the sake of the gospel. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, left us an example of a godly, courageous witness. His name means "victor's crown."

STEPHEN WAS A MAN OF GODLY CHARACTER.

We met Stephen last week, where he was picked as one of the seven men to help distribute food to the Hellenistic widows in a fair manner. We do not know what kind of a time gap exists between the commissioning of these seven prototype deacons and the incident described in our text. Perhaps Stephen had done well in this administrative job, so that he could delegate the daily details to someone else, freeing him up to preach the gospel. As we saw last week, not even the apostles could do both, so it is not likely that Stephen carried on both ministries at the same time. Five inner qualities and one outward quality show Stephen to be a man of godly character.

A. HIS GODLY CHARACTER SHOWS ITSELF IN FIVE INNER QUALITIES:

1) HE WAS FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

This was a requirement that the apostles laid down for the seven men who were to serve tables

(6:3). They had to have a good reputation, specifically, of being full of the Holy Spirit. This did not refer to an ecstatic experience, but to a daily walk under the control of the Holy Spirit that had continued for a long enough time to produce the evident fruit of the Spirit.

This quality is implied of Stephen in 6:10, where it states that his opponents could not cope with the wisdom and Spirit with which he was speaking. It is debatable whether “spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit or to the powerful manner in which Stephen spoke. But even if it refers to the manner of Stephen’s speaking, the power behind it came from the Holy Spirit. As Jesus had told His disciples, when they would be delivered up before synagogues and rulers, the Holy Spirit would teach them in that very hour what they needed to say (Luke 12:12). Thus Stephen’s wisdom and spirit in arguing with these Hellenistic Jews came from his being full of the Holy Spirit. That Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit in his defence before the Sanhedrin is specifically stated in 7:55.

Biblically, the main evidence of being filled with the Spirit is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Those qualities are not produced overnight or by an ecstatic experience, but over months and years of walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). Being full of the Spirit does not imply sinless perfection. No one achieves that in this life. Even the most godly of saints have their areas of imperfection and weakness. Even after a lifetime of walking in the Spirit, a godly man or woman can fall into sin, even into serious sin (David is a solemn warning!).

2) HE WAS FULL OF WISDOM.

This was the second requirement for the men who served tables (6:3). It is also seen in Stephen in 6:10. The Greek word for “wisdom” is used only four times in Acts, twice of Stephen (6:3, 10) and twice in his message before the Sanhedrin (7:10, 22). Proverbs 2:6 states, “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.” Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Thus wisdom comes from knowing God, and Scripture reveals His wisdom.

Wisdom comes from a Hebrew word meaning “skill.” It is used of the craftsmen who had the skill to make the tabernacle and the furniture that went in it (Exod. 36:1, 2). Thus it has the nuance of the skill to live a life that is truly beautiful. It refers to right conduct in obedience to God’s will, not just to mastering a body of knowledge. God’s wisdom is summed up in Jesus Christ and the cross. To those who are perishing, the cross is foolishness, but to those who

have been called by God, Christ is both “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:18, 24). To be people full of wisdom, we must grow in our understanding of the cross of Christ, where human pride is humbled and God’s grace is exalted. Every system of salvation that mingles human good works with God’s grace nullifies the cross and is opposed to God’s wisdom. Faithful witnesses, like Stephen, will refute the wisdom of this world and will extol the wisdom of Christ and the cross.

3) HE WAS FULL OF FAITH.

Stephen is described in 6:5 as being full of faith, referring to his faith in God. Stephen’s sermon in chapter 7 shows that he believed in a sovereign God who called Abraham out of a pagan country and through His covenant dealings with Abraham and his descendants, brought Jesus the Righteous One to save His people, in spite of their history of rebellion. God is sovereign even in the matter of the cross of Christ (2:23; 4:27-28).

You can only be full of faith if you believe in a sovereign God who uses even the wicked deeds of people to accomplish His eternal purpose. When we join Stephen in understanding how God is sovereignly working our suffering and perhaps even our martyrdom into His plan, we will be full of faith.

4) HE WAS FULL OF GRACE.

The same thing is said of Jesus Christ, who was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Jesus was God’s grace personified. With regard to Stephen, the phrase implies that he had a personal understanding and experience of God’s grace as revealed in the cross of Christ. He knew that salvation is not by our works of righteousness, but rather by the undeserved favor of God, shown to us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8; Titus 3:5-6). “If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Rom. 11:6). Stephen’s Jewish opponents boasted in their observance of the law, although as we will see, they were blind to their own violation of it. But Stephen boasted in the grace of God, freely bestowed on undeserving sinners.

A person who understands and lives God’s grace as seen in the cross also becomes a person who shows grace to others. An inward experience of grace flows outward into a gracious

spirit toward others. Stephen's being full of grace means that he was a gracious man. He did not curse his persecutors as they threw stones to crush his bones, but rather blessed them by praying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (7:60). The most effective witnesses have a clear understanding of the gospel of God's grace and they are gracious toward others, even to those who are rude, offensive, or do them harm.

5) HE WAS FULL OF POWER.

God gave Stephen the ability to perform "great wonders and signs among the people" (6:8). These works of power are not described so that readers would gawk; they are simply reported. Whether this power came upon him after the apostles laid hands on him or before, we are not told. Except for the 12 apostles, only Stephen, Philip (8:6-7), and Barnabas (15:12) in the early church are reported to have performed miracles. The tense of the verb ("was performing," 6:8) indicates that Stephen was doing these miraculous works frequently.

B. HIS GODLY CHARACTER SHOWS ITSELF IN ONE OUTER QUALITY: AN ANGELIC COUNTENANCE.

I'm not sure what the face of an angel looks like, but Stephen had such a countenance as he stood before the council. I presume that Luke got this report from Paul, who was there. Whether it was a radiant glow, like the shining of Moses' face when he came down from the mountain, or a serene calmness, we can't say. But his face did not look normal. Howard Marshall says, "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 (Ex. 34:29ff.)" (Acts [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 131).

Measure your character against the character of Stephen. To what degree are you full of the Holy Spirit; full of wisdom; full of faith; full of grace; full of power. What are you doing to improve in these areas? If you improve in all these areas; you will come out looking like an angel and that is not a bad image!

STEPHEN'S MESSAGE POINTS US TO THE SOVEREIGN, ABUNDANT GRACE OF GOD TOWARD REBELLIOUS SINNERS, BUT ALSO TO THE DANGER OF HARDENING OUR HEARTS AGAINST GOD'S GRACE.

Stephen's message focuses on three issues: (1) the patriarchal period (7:2-16); (2) Moses and the law (7:17-43); and, (3) the tabernacle and temple (7:44-50). The conclusion (7:51-53) is a scathing denunciation of the Sanhedrin, who were following in the rebellious pattern of their forefathers.

1. ISRAEL'S HISTORY REVEALS GOD'S SOVEREIGN, ABUNDANT GRACE.

Stephen demonstrates clearly that God initiated the process of calling out a people for His name and that He continued to pour out His grace on these people in spite of their own rebellion. He began by calling Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran (7:2).

Stephen refers to God as "the God of glory," showing His majesty and separateness from sinful humanity. Abraham was a pagan idolater, living in a pagan culture, with no merit in him for God to appear to him and make a covenant with him. Why did God not call Abraham's entire family, or why did He not tell Abraham to reach out to the cities of Ur or Haran, rather than to make the long journey to the land of Canaan? We do not know. All we know is that God sovereignly chose Abraham and poured out His grace on him. God's sovereignty is further underscored in 7:4 where Stephen states that God removed Abraham into this country. The nation of Israel owed its existence to God's gracious promise to make a great nation out of Abraham's descendants and to give them the land of Canaan.

2. ISRAEL'S HISTORY REVEALS THEIR OWN STUBBORN, REBELLIOUS PROPENSITY TO REJECT GOD'S GRACIOUS DEALINGS WITH THEM.

But in spite of God's sovereign, abundant grace, Israel rebelled against God and His servant Moses in the wilderness. They turned back to Egypt in their hearts (7:39) and worshiped the golden calf. God gave the nation up to their idolatry, so that later they worshiped the false gods of Canaan (7:42-43). Even so, in His grace God had given them the tabernacle, and later the temple, as the place where He met with them, although as Stephen reminds them by quoting Isaiah 66:1-2, God is not bound by a man-made dwelling, since He made all things. Thus all through his message, Stephen emphasizes God's sovereign, abundant grace, shown to the nation of Israel in spite of her repeated sins.

3. **ISRAEL'S HISTORY REVEALS THEIR** PATTERN OF LIMITING WORSHIP TO A SACRED PLACE, RATHER THAN TO A SACRED PERSON, WHO MADE ALL THAT IS.

The Jews in Stephen's day were fiercely loyal to the land, to Jerusalem, and to the temple as the only centre for worshiping God. So throughout his message, Stephen repeatedly shows them that God historically had revealed Himself to His servants in Gentile territory, apart from the temple. He called Abraham in the land of Mesopotamia. He did not give Abraham any inheritance in the land, "not even a foot of ground" (7:5). God predicted to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land, but not until they were enslaved and mistreated in a foreign land for 400 years (7:6).

Also, God revealed Himself to Moses in the foreign land of Midian through the burning bush. That ground was holy because the living God was there (7:33). Also, God was with Moses and the nation in the wilderness (outside of the land), and God spoke directly to Moses on Mount Sinai (also outside of the land; 7:38). By calling the law "living oracles," Stephen shows that the charge of him speaking against the law was not true. He revered God's Law. It was the rebellious nation that had repeatedly despised it.

Stephen's message to the Sanhedrin is our message for today.

We worship a God who is full of grace and calls us to be givers of that grace. He is sovereign over all the world and all people. We need to continue to put our trust into this Sovereign gracious God.

We have to guard ourselves against our propensity and vulnerability to be rebellious. We naturally say NO and want everything our way. We must supernaturally say YES and be obedient to God. It is the work of the Spirit to convict us of sin, righteousness and judgment. We must heed the voice of the Spirit and repent of any rebelliousness in our hearts.

We must continue to worship God and not the building that we use to worship Him. Last year Liz and I went to the de-consecration of Maughan Church so that it could be levelled to make way for a high rise offices and accommodation. This church had held many memories of my

searching for God; the training of God for ministry through worship and care of the unlovely in our society; the meeting with my future wife and the place that we got married in. To see it now no more still has a tinge of sadness.

But I have to be careful that buildings and their meaning for me does not supplant my relationship with God who must be the focus. I have been privileged to visit many churches, great and small, historically significant and insignificant and what I have appreciated is not just the architecture and stained glass windows but more importantly appreciating the worship of God by ordinary people down through the ages who used this building.

STEPHEN'S EXAMPLE OF MARTYRDOM

The godly manner in which Stephen died is contrasted here with the grisly wickedness of these supposedly respectable Jewish leaders. He was calm, clear-headed, articulate, and kind, even as the rocks were crushing his body. But these normally dignified members of the high council were out of control with rage. They gnashed their teeth, they screamed at the top of their voices, they covered their ears so as not to hear what they considered Stephen's blasphemy. They rushed upon him, drove him out of the city, and stoned him to death. The Greek word for "rushed" is used of the herd of demon-possessed swine rushing off the cliff into the ocean after Jesus cleansed the Gerasene demoniac. Scholars debate whether the death sentence on Stephen was a judicial decision or mob violence. While there was a semblance of judicial proceedings at first, the end result seems to be that of men controlled by rage and hatred.

Luke notes that the witnesses who began stoning Stephen laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul (7:58). He adds that "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death" (8:1). As a result, that very day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem. Saul began ravaging the church like a wild boar ravages a vineyard (Ps. 80:13), obviously with the approval of the Sanhedrin. He entered house after house, dragging off to prison both men and women who believed in Jesus. Many of them were put to death (26:10). Saul later described his own behavior as being "furiously enraged at them" (26:11).

Note how the Lord supported Stephen in this grand finale of his short life. First, all three members of the Trinity are mentioned in 7:55. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God the Father, which must have looked like the brightness of the sun. To His right hand, there stood the risen and ascended Jesus. Stephen was so awed by this vision that he could not keep it to himself. He said, "Behold, I see the

heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). This is the only time that this title is used other than by Jesus. Except for two times in Revelation (1:13; 14:14), which use the phrase “one like a son of man,” it is the last time it is used in the New Testament.

There were several reasons that this statement was significant. First, it immediately brought to the minds of every member of the Sanhedrin Jesus’ words when He had been on trial before them. The same high priest, Caiaphas, had asked Jesus, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus replied, “I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). By these words, Jesus claimed to combine in His person the prophetic words of Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1. The Daniel passage spoke of one like a Son of Man who received from the Ancient of Days “dominion, glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him.” In Psalm 110, David hears the Lord saying to his Lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” Here Stephen affirms that Jesus is exactly where He predicted He would be, at the right hand of God, the risen Lord of power and glory! It should have hit these men with full force that Jesus was exactly who He had claimed to be!

While we may not become martyrs like Stephen, we can face our own death like Stephen.

1. **Look to see Jesus:** Stephen looked into heaven and the Lord gave him a literal vision of the splendor of God’s glory and of Jesus standing at the right hand of His throne.

2. **Invoke the name of Jesus:** As Stephen died, he called upon the Lord Jesus in prayer.

3. **Trust Jesus:** Clearly, Stephen trusted Jesus to receive his spirit as it was separated from his body at the moment of death. Although he suffered a terrible, violent, painful death, he died with a supernatural peace.

4. **Forgive like Jesus:** On the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). In imitation of His Lord, Stephen’s dying words were, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” That prayer was answered in the conversion of Saul.

It was the prayer of a man free from bitterness toward those who were wrongfully killing him. Stephen could pray it because he had practiced a life of forgiving others ever since he had experienced the Lord's gracious forgiveness of his own sins.

Clement Shahbaz Bhatti was born in Pakistan in 1968. He entered into the life of politics, and became the first Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs in Pakistan. He regularly spoke against the laws concerning Pakistan blasphemy, and was the only Christian to serve on the cabinet. He was labelled a blasphemer of Muhammad. In 2011, after leaving his mother's home, Clement's car was sprayed with a barrage of bullets. He was pronounced dead upon his arrival at the nearby hospital.

Sister Leonella Sgorbati was born in 1940. When she was 25, she entered the convent as a Consolata Missionary Sister. She spent years ministering as a missionary sister in Kenya, and in 2002 moved to Somalia. There she worked to open a training center for Somalis who wished to become nurses at the only hospital in Somalia. On September 17, 2006, she was shot as she left the centre from teaching nursing classes. Her last words were "I forgive, I forgive, I forgive."

May we imitate Stephen and those who have died for the cause of Christ. Amen.