

## **“THE SEIZING OF STEPHEN.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Acts 6:8-15**

### **Introduction.**

How many of you have been impacted or influenced or greatly helped by a person who was in your life for a very short time? Someone who in the span of a few months or weeks or maybe even hours left a positive lasting mark?

Who knows maybe you have been touched by an angel unawares? Some brief encounters can be as profound and life changing as a lifelong friendship.

This reminds us not to take for granted how God might use us in some stranger's life, how a word or action could make a lasting impression. Being salt and light, bringing a cup of cold water, lifting a broken spirit, doesn't have to take a long time. Don't underestimate what the Holy Spirit of God can do through you if you are open and available and paying attention to what He is doing around you.

Stephen comes on the stage of Biblical history in Acts 6 and by the end of chapter seven he is dead and gone, but not forgotten. He has left a powerful example in his brief appearance. It is obvious Luke wants us to know him because he tells us a lot about him and he included his speech which is the longest speech in Acts.

### **Stephen's curriculum vitae, full of grace and power.**

Stephen was a recent convert to Christianity, a part of the young Greek speaking church in Jerusalem. In a short time he already stood out as a man of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He was set apart and ordained by the apostles to be a deacon.

Listen to all that Luke includes in Stephen's curriculum vitae or resume.

Full of faith.

Full of the Holy Spirit.

Full of grace and power doing great signs and wonders.

Others could not withstand the wisdom with which he spoke by the Holy Spirit.

His face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen wasn't this way by nature or by background or upbringing. He was this way by taking the Gospel seriously, by repenting and believing in Jesus and submitting to God. He was this way by seeking God and His Word and His Spirit. God took him and in a very brief time used him for God's glory.

God filled him with *faith*, the same faith that you and I have, but the difference was he lived it out in complete trust in Jesus and willingness to serve and sacrifice at whatever the cost. His faith expressed itself in his courage and boldness, with a fearlessness, not being bound up by what others might say or think.

God gave him great *wisdom*, eloquence, able to defend the truth of the Gospel in a manner that silenced critics. God gave him the words he needed when he needed them.

God filled him with *power*. Like Jesus promised in Acts 1:8, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses.”

None of this was Stephen’s doing, but the work of the Holy Spirit in him. We can’t do without Him and we are always in need of more of His power and presence and transforming work; and more boldness and faith and wisdom.

**Luke 11:13** If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

Stephen wasn’t unique because he had what we don’t. He was unique in the way he relied on and trusted and availed himself of what we all have. Take Jesus at His word and pray and ask.

The grace of God doesn’t just forgive us our sins, it changes us, transform us, make us different.

**Titus 2:11-12** For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

Stephen is the kind of man you would want your daughter to date and marry. No need to chase him off with a shotgun.

This is the sort of man Phama and I have prayed and continue to pray our sons will be. Hardly a night passes when I don’t plead with God to make our sons to be godly men, full of faith and repentance, and that they will be godly husbands and fathers, with godly wives and godly children and grandchildren.

And then I ask God to do that for my family, I pray He will do it for this flock. We pray and ask for what matters most to us and that’s what matters most to me.

What does it profit a man to gain the world and have a good job and a nice family and a promising future and a good retirement, if he loses his soul, if he doesn't have an eternal future, if he hasn't sought God and His righteousness and His will first and foremost?

What a waste to only pay attention to the first eighty or ninety years of our life and not the next 40,000 years of our lives.

None of us knows how long we will live on earth. Some of us may have very short careers. God may call us home early. How do we want our lives to be lived, how would we like to be remembered? What would we like others to say about our character, about the kind of person we were?

We all have the same Spirit that Stephen had. We too can pray for wisdom and for knowledge of the truth and zeal and boldness to speak it.

### **The Synagogue of the Freedmen.**

Where the power of God is especially on display, in faith and zeal and power, there the fury of Satan will be unleashed. Where you have the Gospel, there is a cross, there is opposition.

The bold defense of the truth of God in a godless culture invites attack, malice and opposition. Soon there were rumors, gossip which led to lies and slander and misrepresentation. The better he answered and the more unanswerable he was, the more the deceit grew. They couldn't win by fair and reasonable debate, so they resorted to distortions and lies, and then finally violence.

The synagogue of the Freedmen refers to Jews who had been carried off as slaves to other parts of the Roman Empire, and then later freed. They are foreigners, from present day north Africa, Libya, Egypt, and the southern coast of Turkey. Cilicia was Paul's home town.

Stephen and Paul may have attended the same synagogue.

***They made two accusations.*** They accused him of blasphemy and disrespect of the two pillars of Judaism, the Temple and the Law. They said Stephen was speaking against Moses and God by saying that the Temple and the Law were temporary, that Jesus said He would tear down the Temple and change the customs of Moses.

They twisted what Jesus said and distorted it. Jesus never showed any disrespect of the Law. He fulfilled it, the Law pointed to Him and He completes and fulfills and upholds it.

Jesus said His own body was the perfect fulfillment of the Temple. Christ is the original, the pattern on which the Temple is based. Christ is the more excellent sanctuary in which the fullness of God dwells. Jesus takes the place of the sacrifices and of the priests.

It makes sense a great many priests became Christians as we read last week, they came to see they were out of a job and no longer necessary, Jesus was the new high priest and the new Lamb of God who takes away all our sins once and for all.

***His face was like an angel.***

Most people when charged with serious crimes and brought into a courtroom and put on the stand appear pale and nervous, shaking, trembling in voice, intimidated.

But the opposite is true of Stephen, he was positively angelic, full of faith and the Spirit, of grace and power, without fear and ready to defend the truth of the Gospel. He has a supernatural calm, peace, something like the presence of God.

Something like this was said about Moses when he came down off the mountain of God. This Stephen who was accused of disrespecting Moses, looks like Moses.

Maybe the simplest way to put this, he bore the mark of one who spent time with God, like Moses on the mountain. The closer we live to God the closer we will reflect something of His glory and grace.

I know people who bear the mark of having spent lots of time with God, in His Word, in prayer, in worship, growing in grace and in the knowledge of God. You can see it in their demeanor, in their peace and patience, in their selflessness, in their none anxious presence.

***Now let's pause for just a second and reflect on what we have just seen.***

Some of you are struggling a bit with the idea of being more like Stephen or praying God will make you more like Stephen. That sounds a little too fanatical or holy rollerish or heaven forbid, too much like a pastor or like Billy Graham. You're afraid if you are more like Stephen your friends will freak out, or you won't get any Facebook likes or worse yet, they might put you up for elder.

You think there must be an alternative, some middle ground, you know, something a little more lukewarmish.

Look at the alternative to loving Jesus and loving the Gospel. Do you see the character of those who don't like Stephen and Christianity and the church and the Gospel? Look at those who are trying to go along to get along, who are going with the status quo.

They are not able to answer against the truth, they have no good reasons or arguments, they are on the losing side, so are lying, twisting facts, resisting God, they are trying to make the Gospel look ridiculous.

Who wants to be on the side of resisting God or ignoring God or neglecting God? Who wants to be on the side of the enemies of God?

At some point you are going to have to make a choice and take a stand. At some point your true colors have to show. Why are you here today? Is this real or just for outward appearances?

Desire the wisdom of God over the lies of the world.

Desire the power of God over the power of darkness.

Desire the Spirit of God to transform you and your family.

### **Why does the world hate the church?**

People hate whatever threatens their bad conscience. Unbelievers have a bad conscience. Because they are living and acting in a way that produces guilt and shame they work hard to cover up and silence the voices in their head. When someone comes along and unmasks them, they hate it.

One sure sign of a bad conscience is when they stoop to base their defense on lies and distortions. They find those with no conscience, willing to tell lies and bear false witness to destroy another person.

If you throw a rock into a pack of dogs, the one that yelps is the one that got hit. If you say or do something Christ-like, the one who yelps is the one with the bad conscience.

If you want to find out where the bad consciences are in our culture, look for the one's yelling the loudest, the one's instigating law suits against Christians, the one's shouting down the free speech of those opposed to abortion or same sex unions, or some other sexual perversions. Look for the coercion, the pressure in school, on the job, in the family.

**John 3:19** And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

**I John 3:12-13** We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.

“Abel's goodness exposed Cain's badness. Abel's righteousness convicted Cain of his unrighteousness.

“Christian, you must expect to be hated today for the same reason. Your goodness unmasks the badness of the unbelievers around you. Your light illumines their darkness. Your truth exposes their error. Your holiness declares their depravity. Your life stands in judgment of them, it convicts them of their guilt, it shows them who God expects them to be.

“My friend, the more you love and honor God, the more you expose the evil of those who do not. The more you expose the evil of those who dishonor God, the more they'll hate you.

They'll hate you because of who you love, because of who you resemble. They hated Jesus and they'll hate those who are like Jesus" (Tim Challies).

There is a myth many of us evangelical Christians believe. We believe when trouble like this comes it's our fault. If we were just more careful and moderate, more balanced, more gracious and conciliatory, then we would have been received better.

It is not true. Until and unless you join their side, as long as you hold any view contrary to the world, you will be attacked and hated. Their goal is to silence you.

You cannot proclaim the full truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ without incurring misrepresentations and accusations, of being accused of engaging in hate speech.

Jesus was perfect and said everything perfectly and He was crucified for it. Don't think you can do better than Him.

If your values and your priorities and your lifestyle fits comfortably with the world to the point no one has any issues with you, then there is something seriously wrong, you are too cozy with the world, hiding your light under a bushel. Beware when all people speak well of you, when the world loves and accepts and embraces you. Something is seriously wrong.

Carl Trueman observes, "A man without enemies is a man without honor." A Christian without enemies is a Christian who is not like Christ, which is to say he is not really a Christian.

Here is our problem, we all want to be loved and we all want to be loved by everyone, by God and by the world. We want everyone to like us and say nice things about us and want to hang out with us.

**Luke 6:22-23** Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

### **Application.**

Parents dealing with a child's bad conscience.

Spouses dealing with conflict in their marriage.

Love the truth, humble yourself before the truth. Live for God's approval, not the worlds.