

17—Acts 6.8 – 7.1—Stephen the Servant

I. Introduction

- a. I heard the testimony of a Romanian Pastor several years ago. I have mentioned a few things about him before but his story came to mind again this week as I read this text.
- b. He became a follower of Christ as a young boy in Romania in the communist days. Persecution of people outside of the state-sanctioned church was common. Historically when the great schism of 1054 divided the church in that day—the west, Roman Catholic and the east, Eastern Orthodox.
- c. Pastor Josef Tson grew up a Baptist in Russian Orthodox country. He was slapped by the priests even while in school. As he grew older, he wanted to preach. He began studying and was making lots of progress until one of his professors gave him some liberal theology making fun of the atonement. He essentially walked away from the faith and then tried to prove the government run church that he was part of them.
- d. Eventually, he ran into Richard Wurmbrand who explained the atonement and got him back on track. He immediately went to Oxford to seminary. There he met Martin Lloyd Jones and joined his fellowship of pastors until he graduated.
- e. But he went back to Romania after graduating. The Russian Orthodox church soon took notice of him and the church he pastored. They arrested him. Beat him. Interrogated him. And eventually, they dug up his past when he had walked away from the faith years ago. The authorities told the church he pastored about the things he had done back then. He was more by this than the beatings. He called it stolen martyrdom.
- f. When those who opposed Stephen could not withstand his wisdom, they picked up mud and, in his case, they just fabricated lies.

II. Main Point

- a. The risen Lord Jesus extends his work through Stephen by grace and power through the Holy Spirit in cross-bearing service and Christ-centered teaching.

III. Outline

- a. The Grace-filled Servant
- b. The Truth Telling Witness
- c. The Fearless Prisoner

IV. Exposition

- a. It might be surprising to read that Stephen, the servant, performed wonders and signs like Jesus and the Apostles did. One might think that those things were reserved for the Apostles only but we see that work being extended through Stephen, the deacon. Grace is at work in this servant to extend more and more grace to others.
 - i. As I have mentioned, these words have a definite connection to God's salvation of Israel out of Egypt. There He performed signs and wonders before Pharaoh and delivered them out of slavery.
 1. Indeed, Jesus came as the Passover Lamb that he might free his people from slavery to sin.
 2. The risen Lord Jesus is doing this through his church and here we see this work being performed through someone who is not an apostle.
 3. We know this had to happen if the Kingdom were to continue to advance. The Twelve cannot accomplish this task alone.
 - ii. This must be said again. Stephen is an ordinary person just like us. The Apostles had obviously obeyed the great commission Jesus gave them to make disciples of all nations.
 1. Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 2. Teaching them to observe all that I commanded.
 3. And going!

- iii. The church had just appointed Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit to serve the widows. There's no reason to separate that from what we see here. And this appointment to service wasn't limited to distributing food and money only.
 1. In fact, there's good reason to think that while he was serving the Greek widows, he was also performing these signs and wonders among a larger Hellenist group of people.
 2. As you will notice there in v. 9, all of those who are disputing with him are from a Jewish synagogue of Freedman—those freed from slavery from other nations.
 - a. It's easy to imagine how his serving of the widows opened up opportunities to serve and be a witness for Christ among the widows' family and friends.
 - b. Indeed, the Freedmen are still not free. Freedom comes in Christ. As Jesus said in (Jn. 8:36) ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.
- iv. Before going any further, I want to ask some questions. What does grace and power have to do with the work Stephen is doing? And then I want ask if grace has changed you to serve like this?
 1. First, what is grace and power?
 - a. We rightly think of grace as the unmerited favor of God. His love and care for us is called grace because we deserve far different. If our culture were to hear this, they would say otherwise.
 - i. That's a misunderstanding of God and humanity. There's no human being that deserves God's favor and love. He freely gives grace to people who do not deserve it. It is unmerited!
 - b. But grace is more than God disposition towards his people. Let's consider how Paul uses grace in (1 Cor. 15:9-10) ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.
 - i. People who have received God's grace talk like this. I am the least...I am unworthy. I worked harder but it wasn't me but the grace of God at work in me.
 - ii. I think this text uses grace two different ways. One is God's disposition of favor towards Paul.
 - iii. But at the end of v. 10, most understand this to be God's enabling power that changes us and causes us to accomplish this work.
 1. A negative illustration comes to mind. We are studying Esther on Wednesday nights. In that story, a man named Haman is second in command to the king of Persia. He not only has the favor of the king but he has the authority to act on behalf of the king. Indeed, he wears the king's signet ring. He is not the king but he carries the power of the king.
 2. Do you see how they work together?
 2. Luke describes Stephen as full of grace and power. He is an unworthy servant who has the favor of God and he serves in the power and authority of his King—King Jesus.
 - a. In that grace he performs the signs and wonders of God for the purpose of displaying God's grace among the people. God's grace towards Stephen becomes visible to them people through the signs and wonders; the serving of widows and Christ-centered teaching.
 - i. And let's not forget that he displays Christ through his own character as he was a man of good repute.

- b. At the end of Stephen's life, he also displays the clearest picture of Christ in his death. But we will have to wait to see that in a couple of weeks.
 - 3. Has God's grace transformed your life? Are you the same person you were before you claimed to have been saved?
 - a. I asked these questions in my life about 18 years ago. I had to come to grips with the evidence of my life. It told the truth about me.
 - b. 20 years ago, the Lord saved me by his grace. I had grown up in the church like many of you. I had made a profession faith when I was young. But my life did not change. I wasn't looking to change anything. I didn't want to be eternally condemned in hell. That's all I remember wanting. That's not saving faith.
 - c. But that all changed twenty years ago. I was changed so immediately and so drastically that I wasn't the same person.
 - d. I become hungry for more. I began reading and studying the Bible. I read other books. I was being disciplined by my pastor. I was sharing the gospel. I was serving others. Jesus had become my life. That wasn't me. That was grace at work in me.
 - i. I recall talking to one of my hunting buddies (we were really tight) and saying this isn't even fun anymore. That was a miracle because it had been my life.
 - e. What about you? Some people are so attached to life as they know it that to them it really doesn't matter if they believe the gospel. They just love being a part of a community. They love to belong. They love the Christian culture. It's their family. They aren't willing to give that up even if they do not believe gospel. They know enough of the Christian lingo to get them. Most come year after year and have never spoken of Jesus' work of grace in their life. They never read God's word. Prayer is absent. And they go unnoticed by most.
 - f. Just to be clear. The transformation of grace in your life is not what saves you. It is the result of that saving grace.
 - g. But to be like Jesus or to be like Stephen takes a lot of work.
 - v. This work of grace in Stephen that had transformed him through hard work of grace that taught him the Scriptures and wisdom shows up when this group of Jews rose up against him and disputed with him.
 - 1. They were not able to oppose the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.
 - a. Maybe this was an example of what Jesus said would happen in (Lk. 21:12-15) ¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.
 - b. That does NOT negate the essential work that he had given himself to. What do I mean?
 - i. (Acts 2:42) ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
 - ii. It's possible for you to speak about something you do not know but that is not normal. Jesus' promise that I just read doesn't say settle in your mind WHAT to answer but HOW to answer.

1. In other words, when you are in those hard and tense situations, he will give you a mouth and wisdom that cannot be contradicted.
 2. It reminds me of Moses when God said to him in response to Moses saying he has trouble speaking (not knowing)-- (Exod. 4:10-12) ¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." ¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? ¹² Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."
- b. Like Pharaoh and the Egyptians, these Jews of Freedman synagogue seek a way to get the upper hand on Stephen. They cannot oppose his wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking so they look for false witnesses but Stephen is the truth telling witness.
- i. In v. 11 we see these Jews secretly instigating men to smear Stephen's witness.
 1. The statement they give is this: "We have heard him say blasphemous words against Moses and God."
 2. This tactic is a common practice. It's hard to fake love. The statement at this point is without any evidence. It is vague. In fact, I think it shows up in the order for which they name the blasphemy—Moses then God, as though the Lord were an afterthought.
 - a. Stephen is alone...in one way. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is with him. But it is his word against this group of men.
 - b. They immediately begin to stir up the people, the elders, and the scribes. People are easily worked up sometimes. They let their emotions run the show, not the truth. Things enter through the senses. Too often times, feelings are the only means to make a decision.
 - i. We should be better than that. We must take every thought captive and bring it to the word of God to be tested to see if it is right.
 1. I remember often telling my kids as we watched TV together and a commercial came on. I would point out how they were trying to give their product credibility by things like the actor wearing a white coat and stethoscope. Those things do not make a product good. You need evidence.
 2. How many times do people spout off some stats but give no source? People will believe anything. They could have polled five friends who believe the way they do.
 - ii. Don't be easily swayed. We talked about this last week. Don't be like the wave that is tossed to and fro.
 1. Ask questions. Where did you get that information? Where did they get it? Don't swallow the pill until you know what it is.
 - ii. They work up the people so easily and so well, there in v. 12 they are come upon Stephen, the truth-telling witness, and seize him and bring him before the council.
 1. I suppose the instigators know the council needs a little more than the previous vague statement. So, there in v. 13, they set up false witnesses.
 - a. Hold on. They undoubtable hear the Ten Commandments frequently in the synagogue. And there aren't too hard to remember. Bearing false witness is one of the most basic things they are taught.

- b. They wickedly get someone else to do this for them since they were unable to oppose Stephen earlier. Knowingly or not, these false witnesses have been encouraged to sin against God's law.
 - 2. Here is their statement to the council: (Acts 6:13-14) "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ 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."
 - a. The silence of Stephen through all of this is staggering. He acts a lot like Jesus in this scene. He doesn't defend himself. He doesn't break out and argue with the false witnesses.
 - i. When you do, you will often end up giving them more mud to throw. Their emotions are running the show and Stephen is silently listening in full compliance.
 - b. On the other hand, these false witnesses speak very childish. "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law."
 - i. Never? I take note when people use these 100% words.
 - ii. And I know that when some of the Jews speak of "this holy place" they mean more than that. They mean this is where our God dwells. To speak against the temple is to speak against our God.
 - iii. It is possible that they care more about the holy place than the holy God!
 - 1. They seem to have no trouble bearing false witness.
 - 2. When people want something, they will find a way to make it happen.
 - c. Since we don't know what the previous conversations had been, we cannot compare the words of Stephen, the truth-telling witness, with the false witnesses.
 - i. We are told they instigated this. We are told they are false witnesses. This is a similar statement used against Jesus when he was on trial.
 - ii. Twisting words are pretty easy.
 - iii. These are serious charges from multiple witnesses.
 - iv. Stephen stands alone in the grace and power of God. How will he respond?
 - c. He is the fearless Prisoner
 - i. The council does not ask any follow up questions to the false witnesses.
 - ii. They turn their attention to Stephen. In v. 15, they gaze at him. His face was like the face of an angel.
 - 1. From other places, we know that encountering angels can be a fearful thing. They often have a bright glow about them. They are heavenly beings.
 - 2. But we also know they do not look like Clarence either. Ha! (Kevin Deyoung)
 - 3. Whatever this means, we never see an angel who is afraid. They are powerful beings.
 - iii. From what we have seen so far, I conclude that what they see in Stephen is fearlessness.
 - 1. Maybe his face glows a bit like Moses when he was in the tent of meeting.
 - 2. He is full of grace and power and he trusts in the Lord his God!
 - iv. The final word for now comes from the high priest: "Are these things so?"
 - 1. We will have to wait and see how Stephen will respond.
 - 2. And let us take note to see who is really on trial here. The synagogue of Freedman and the council of the Jews or Stephen?

V. Response

- a. You never know how things will go. You only must gladly obey the Lord no matter what. In the crowd stands a man named Saul. He was among those of the Freedman Synagogue from Cilicia.
- b. God uses hard events in people's lives to accomplish his purposes. Will Stephen be used of the Lord to faithfully display his character and testify truthfully the gospel hope?
- c. Will we?