

Living in Faith

Lesson for March 24, 2024

Unit I: Faith-FULL versus Faith-LESS

Adult Topic: When the World is Against Us

Background Scripture: Acts 6

Printed Text: Acts 6:7-15

Key verse: “Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.” (Acts 6:9-10, NIV)

During China's Boxer Rebellion of 1900, insurgents captured a mission station, blocked all the gates but one, and in front of that one gate placed a cross flat on the ground. Then the word was passed to those inside that any who trampled the cross underfoot would be permitted their freedom and life, but that any refusing would be shot. Terribly frightened, the first seven students trampled the cross under their feet and were allowed to go free. But the eighth student, a young girl, refused to commit the sacrilegious act. Kneeling beside the cross in prayer for strength, she arose and moved carefully around the cross, and went out to face the firing squad. Strengthened by her example, every one of the remaining ninety-two students followed her to the firing squad.

Today in the Word, February, 1989

Unifying Lesson Principle

People who are falsely accused and persecuted often feel that the whole world is against them. What sustains us in the face of injustice and persecution? The testimony of Stephen encourages us to be obedient to the faith inspired by the grace, power, and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

(Sunday School Commentary, 2023-2024, Townsend Press, p. 270)

Key Terms

1. **Angel** (verse 15) – A created heavenly being who serves as God's messenger. Both the Hebrew *malak* and the Greek *angelos* indicate that these beings also act decisively in fulfilling God's will in the world.
2. **Wisdom** (verse 10) – Ability to discern inner qualities and relationships; insight; good sense; judgment. Wisdom was a common way of thinking in the ancient world of Israel. It was a way of viewing and approaching life, which involved instructing the young in proper conduct and morality and answering the philosophical questions about life's meaning..

Lesson Background

The book of Acts is the second of a two-part work, both traditionally attributed to Luke. The introduction to Luke (Luke 1:1–4) also explains the purpose of the book of Acts: to create an orderly record. Luke travelled with Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24), and the writer of Acts uses the terms “we” or “us” in several instances (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5; 27:1). This further supports the view that Luke was indeed the author.

Luke is most likely the only Gentile (non-Jewish) author of New Testament writing, emphasizing God's plan for all people. He also wrote the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:1–4) as the first segment of a two-part work. In Acts, Luke picks up where his Gospel ends, starting with the ascension of Jesus and continuing to the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment in approximately AD 62.

Acts is one of the largest books in the New Testament, expressing the theme summarized in Acts 1:8: being witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The first section focuses on the growth of the church in and around Jerusalem (Acts 1:1—8:3). Following a time of waiting and prayer (Acts 1), the Holy Spirit arrives on Pentecost and empowers the apostles to speak in different languages. Peter shares the gospel and more than 3,000 people are baptized that day (Acts 2:41). The first church forms (Acts 2:42–47), while miracles begin to occur through the apostles (Acts 3:1—5:42). Other church leaders emerge to serve, teach, and face persecution, especially in the death of the first martyr, Stephen (Acts 6:1—8:3).

Acts 6 an introduction to the first Christian martyr and the start of real persecution against the church. Well over five thousand men, not to mention women and children, have chosen to follow Jesus (Acts 4:4; 5:14). The Jewish leadership take notice; they arrest the apostles, command they stop teaching in Jesus' name, and beat them (Acts 5:40). Their punishment has the opposite effect they'd hoped for; instead of intimidated, the apostles rejoice, knowing that if Jesus' enemies are persecuting them, they must be doing something right (Acts 5:41).

This chapter has two short sections. Acts 6:1–7 describes some of the growing pains of the early church and how the leadership responds. Jerusalem is in Judea; the residents speak Aramaic and some Hebrew. But many of the Jesus-followers in Jerusalem are not locals. Some came for a short trip but found Jesus, then stayed so they could learn more from the apostles (Acts 2:9–11, 42). Others followed the custom of returning to Jerusalem to die in the land of their people. The travelers do not have access to their assets back home, and the elderly may have had to leave their local synagogues that provided support. Local believers pool their resources to provide for everyone (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37).

Those Jews, and consequently those Jews who had become Jesus-followers, who lived in countries and territories with more Romans and Greeks were called “Hellenists.” The prefix Helle- means “Greece,” and Hellenist Jews spoke more Greek than Aramaic. There were so many Hellenist Jews in Jerusalem that people travelling from different territories had their own synagogues (Acts 6:9). The Jesus-followers from Judea naturally knew their own widows and provided for them, but they didn't necessarily know the widows from the other synagogues, so

the Hellenist widows didn't always get what they needed. When the apostles learn this, they appoint seven men to take charge of dispersing the food fairly. One of these men is Stephen.

In the second section (Acts 6:8–15), Stephen proves to be more than just an honest man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5), he's also a great apologist who skillfully debates the Hellenist Jews who dispute the message of Jesus. These Jews cannot withstand his logic or the Holy Spirit working in his words, but they don't believe his message, so they incite men to falsely testify that Stephen speaks against Moses, God, and the temple. They accuse Stephen of the same charge of which the Sanhedrin accused Jesus: threatening to destroy the temple (Mark 14:58). Damaging a religious structure was against Roman law and punishable by death.

Stephen's argument is much more subtle than what his enemies accuse him of. He isn't saying he wants to destroy the temple. He's saying that the temple is not necessary to worship God. He's not wrong, but his unconventional way of looking at Jewish tradition leads to his status as the first Christian martyr (Acts 7).

Lesson in Depth

I. A Formidable Witness (Acts 6:7-11)

The first several chapters of Acts report the growing community of believers in Jerusalem despite conflicts within and external adversity. Chapter 6 begins, “Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number...” thus indicating the narrative continues the pattern established following Pentecost (2:1-47).

The conflict between the Hebrews and the Hellenists is a division over language and culture. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews. They complain that the Aramaic-speaking Jews, likely natives, neglect the Hellenistic widows in the distribution of food. “Widows” may imply any who were disadvantaged in some way. The Hellenists were most likely immigrants and a minority in this new community of believers. The distribution of food suggests divisions over social and cultural habits and customs.

The community of disciples shifts the focus from neglect of the widows in the distribution of food to neglect of “the word of God” by waiting on tables (6:2). They resolve the conflict by creating a division of labor. The community selected seven men to wait tables, thus freeing the disciples for ministry of the word (verses 3-4). The men appointed for distribution of food are named in verses 5 and 6. Only Stephen and Philip appear again in Acts, each one in the role of furthering the word of God. The account of Stephen before the council and his death follows the conflict over food distribution.

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem: Considering all that could have gone wrong when Satan tried to attack through division, everyone involved deserves much credit.

Those with the complaint, the Hellenists, did the right thing: They made the need known, instead of complaining and whining, and they trusted the solution of the apostles.

Those of the other party, the Hebrews, did the right thing: They recognized that the Hellenists had a legitimate need and they trusted the solution of the apostles.

The seven chosen men did the right thing: They accepted the call to unglamorous service.

The apostles did the right thing: They responded to the need without distracting themselves from their central task.

And the word of God spread: Because this situation was handled with wisdom and sensitivity to those who were offended, a potentially divisive issue was defused, and the gospel continued to go forth. Even **a great many of the priests** came to faith in Jesus.

Stephen, full of faith and power: Stephen was one of the first seven deacons in the New Testament church. The Apostles established their qualifications for selection as “men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Luke says Stephen was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5).

Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people: God did **great wonders and signs** through the apostles; but also through others like Stephen, one of the servants chosen to help the widows. God used Stephen because he was *full of faith and power*. The Bible commends Stephen in everything; he was “*full of grace and power*” (Acts 6:8). He did “*great wonders and signs*” that endorsed his teaching. He did more than what was first required of him as a deacon; which was to serve tables to meet the needs of Greek and Hebrew widows.

Opposition arose... Disputing with Stephen: As the church grew, some in the religious power structure felt more threatened. Because of jealousy, the high priest and the Sadducees first arrested the Apostles (Acts 5:17). Since these Jewish leaders, who rejected Jesus as the Messiah, could not intimidate the Apostles into silence, they sought to debate some of the church deacons in order to silence them. As far as we know, they began by arguing with Stephen.

Stephen debated with Jews from **the Synagogue of the Freedmen**. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he showed greater wisdom than his opponents (they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke).

Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”: The opponents of Stephen could not win a fair fight, so they used lies and secret strategies to shape popular opinion against Stephen.

Normally, Luke would not know what the opponents of Stephen secretly induced men to say. Possibly he knew it because a man named Saul of Tarsus was among the opponents. Some of them were from Paul’s home region of Cilicia. Saul (who became known as Paul the apostle) may have told Luke about this incident.

II. A Marked Witness (Acts 6:12-15)

They stirred up the people: The opponents of Stephen could do nothing against the followers of Jesus until they got popular opinion on their side.

These Jews used techniques similar to those that led to the arrest and trial of Jesus. They stirred up the crowd by telling lies. Then, they tried to surprise Stephen, and they arrested him; they took him before the Sanhedrin (the same Council that demanded the Apostles stop teaching, but the Apostles chose to obey God and keep teaching about Jesus: see Acts 5:29).

Previously, persecution against the apostles had been limited because popular opinion was with them (Acts 2:47, 5:26). Popular opinion can be easily shaped. The same crowds that praised Jesus (Luke 19:35-40) soon called for His crucifixion (Luke 23:18-23). The crowds that loved the apostles (Acts 2:47, 5:26) cry out against Stephen. This is why we should never let popular opinion shape the vision or focus of the church, but let it rest on God's eternal Word.

They set up false witnesses: Even though the apostles were beaten and suffered at the orders of the Council, they kept teaching that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 5:40-42). The false witnesses did not directly confront the teachings of Stephen about the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and was the Messiah. They disregarded the truth and remained unteachable. They distorted Jesus' teachings, for He never spoke against the House of God; rather, Jesus cleansed His Father's House (the Temple in Jerusalem) so it could be a House of Prayer. Jesus and Stephen did speak against the ungodly ways of some of the religious leaders who mistreated the House of God and the Law of God.

We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.... This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law...Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs: These were the accusations against Stephen. Significantly, many of the same false accusations were leveled against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61). It is a good thing to be accused of the same things Jesus was accused of.

They accused him of these things because Stephen clearly taught that:

- Jesus was greater than Moses (*blasphemous words against Moses*).
- Jesus was God (*blasphemous words against... God*).
- Jesus was greater than the temple (*blasphemous words against this holy place*).
- Jesus was the fulfillment of the law (*blasphemous words against...the law*).
- Jesus was greater than their religious customs and traditions (*Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs*).

Of course, Stephen never taught **against Moses and God**, but his glorification of Jesus was twisted. Stephen never spoke **blasphemous words against this holy place** (the temple), but he would not make it an idol as many Jewish people in that day did. Stephen had his words twisted, and false accusations were brought against him.

All who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him: Stephen was on trial before the highest religious court he could face; examined by honored, educated, and powerful men. He had been falsely accused and seemed to have lost popular support.

His face as the face of an angel: Stephen's face did not have that mild, soft, angelic look that we see in so many paintings; nor was it a look of stern judgment and wrath. Instead, his face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one that knows and trusts his God. His face had the same reflected glory that Moses had as he beheld God intimately.

“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 (Exodus 34:29).” (Marshall)

The face of an angel also means that Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or terror, because he knew his life was in God's hands and that Jesus never forsakes His people.

As these false charges were made against Stephen, he knew they had done the same to Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets before them. Rather than Stephen being intimidated and threatened by these lying witnesses, the Holy Spirit within Stephen transformed his countenance and he showed forth the innocence of an angel, who loves God and who loves telling the truth.

Lesson Summary

Stephen was bold in proclaiming his faith in Jesus Christ, even in the face of opposition and potential danger. His example encourages us to boldly proclaim our faith and stand firm in our beliefs, regardless of the circumstances. This lesson further teaches us:

- 1. Spiritual Warfare:** This lesson illustrates the spiritual warfare that early Christians faced. Stephen, one of the seven chosen to serve, faced opposition and false accusations. This serves as a reminder that as Christians, we are engaged in a spiritual battle and must be prepared to face opposition.
- 2. Faithfulness to God's Word:** Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin shows his deep knowledge of and commitment to God's Word. His example reminds us of the importance of studying and understanding the Scriptures, and of remaining faithful to God's Word in all circumstances.
- 3. Suffering for Christ:** Stephen's martyrdom is a stark reminder that following Christ may involve suffering and persecution. His example challenges us to be willing to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel, trusting that God is with us and will ultimately bring about justice.
- 4. Faithfulness in Persecution:** Despite facing persecution and false accusations, Stephen remained faithful to his beliefs and continued to boldly proclaim the gospel. This teaches us the importance of remaining faithful to God even in the face of adversity.
- 5. The Role of the Holy Spirit:** Throughout this passage, we see the importance of the Holy Spirit in guiding, empowering, and equipping believers for their ministry. This reminds us of the need to rely on the Holy Spirit for strength and guidance in our own lives.

Our ultimate hope and citizenship are in heaven, and that we should live with an eternal perspective, focusing on the things that truly matter in light of eternity.