

10/11/15

Acts 6:8-15

Gospel Impact

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² 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, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "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." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

(Pastor Prays)

The man named Stephen is a whisper in the wind. We are introduced to him in Chapter 6 when he's arrested. He preached one sermon in Chapter 7 and at the end of the chapter, he is gone, the first Christian to be killed for being a Christian.

But there is an intensity growing in Acts, a deepening and hardening hatred of all things Christian. Chapter 6 tells us the story of the third trial in front of the council, and with each successive trial, there is a growing hatred for Christianity which sounds a lot like the world we live in.

When the Apostles were arrested in Acts chapter 4, their trial ended in a warning. When they were arrested in Chapter 5, it ended in a beating. But this trial around Stephen ends in death.

So why would we hold him up as an example? Why would Luke write the whole chapter about him? You never hear of converts because of his ministry. Stephen didn't book any deals or hit the speaker's circuit. He didn't have thousands following him asking for leadership advice or how to start an effective ministry. Stephen was just a simple guy who loved Jesus and lived with courage and that made an impact for the Kingdom of God. And I really think that is where the story leads us.

In a day of self-awareness and self-improvement and even self-promotion and pictures taken as “selfies,” Stephen is like cold water thrown in our faces reminding us that God has not called us to live long or be impressive. He’s called us to be faithful.

And so I wonder, “Where are they?” Where are the faithful men and women who will live recklessly and selflessly for the Glory of God and the sake of the Gospel?

I have an agenda. Today, I am calling you to get your eyes up and get off the multiplied worries of this world and see the glorious will of God. You were made for more than you're living in now. You were made to live for the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

Life is not about longevity and peace. Life is about Christ and His Kingdom. If you miss that, you miss the whole point of your existence so...

By God’s Grace, Live For Gospel Impact

How do we do that? Stephen’s life gives us a roadmap. Let’s look at the description of Stephen.

Live With a Genuine Faith

To see that in Stephen's life we’ve got to back up to v. 5 and then come forward to his sermon in Chapter 7. Notice what Luke writes in v. 5:

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

Full of – in Greek - πλήρης or plérés. It means "to be filled up with, to be completely convinced." To see what Stephen believed, you just need to read his sermon in Chapter 7.

We won’t go through it all but if you read from v. 1-v. 51, Stephen believed.

He Believed that God is in Control

He is in control of history and world events and daily life. He believed God is involved in the lives of his children, using good and bad to bring them close. Look, when you really believe this as a Christian, you can believe that your past is in the past. That whatever sin abounded in you, God’s grace abounds more. You can believe in your future, that God is there ordering the events of your life – both painful and peaceful – for His Glory and your ultimate good.

Let me tell you what else he believed.

He Believed in the Saving Power of the Cross and the Ruling Power of Christ

To see this you’ve got to turn the page over to Chapter 7, near the end of his speech. He speaks with such passion. Let’s just read it:

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the

law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

There you will find a very specific belief in the exclusive and saving power of Christ. But there is one more piece to Stephen’s belief:

He Believed in God’s Goodness

In Chapter 7:59-60, as he was being stoned, listen to what he prayed.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

He died believing in and trusting the Goodness of God, even though he was being killed. He was full of faith.

He believed God was in control. Do you believe that? Do you trust that your life is in the hands of a sovereign God who rules the universe? If so, sleep becomes sweeter and life more peaceful because you know he works in all things together for good.

He believed in the Saving Power of the Cross. That Christ died for sinners and looking of Christ and believing will save. Do you believe in the Amazing Grace of God?

He believed God is Good. Do you believe that even if you die young or suffer tragedy and don’t understand until that day!? By God’s Grace we live for Gospel Impact with genuine faith.

Live With Winsome Grace and Spiritual Power

I use those together because that seems to be the description of Stephen in Chapter 6, v. 8:

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Grace and spiritual power were the personal qualities that equipped Stephen for the ultimate witness he would soon bear. In fact, he was so filled with the Holy Spirit and Grace and Wisdom and Power, notice what Luke tells us in v. 10 as his accusers rose up against him:

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. In Luke 21:15, Jesus said “for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Just get the picture: v. 9 tells us that Stephen had opposition from all angles and v. 10 tells us they can’t stand up against his witness. Then in v. 11 they start a smear campaign. Get ready for it. Since they couldn’t resist his faith, wisdom, grace and power, they resorted to underhanded methods. V. 11 says they secretly instigated men,

scandalous charges. V. 13 says they set up false witnesses and v. 14 that they twisted his words. V. 14 is a partial quote of Jesus that's twisted at the end. They misrepresent and twist his words and they will do the same with you so that what you are trying to say will be turned into something you never meant.

That's how the Gospel of Christ and sharing the Gospel, which is an act of love, so often is thought of as judgmental-ism, because you speak about sin. And so we are called to live with the winsome grace that lets the world know you were in a deep hole of sin and someone pulled you out and now you are trying to do the same. You are not a superior person but a *changed* person by the grace of God that is displayed through your faith in Christ alone. It's why we live our lives in the shadow of the cross tethered to the beams of the cross so we never wander beyond the protective shadow of the blood of Christ and by God's grace, we live for Gospel impact.

Live with genuine faith. Live with winsome grace and spiritual power...

Live With Proof of Our Conversion

V. 15 is a strange and startling verse. When the people who hated Stephen the most looked at him, look what they saw.

In v. 15: *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

Even in how he looked there was proof. His countenance and demeanor gave evidence. Before Cain killed Abel in Genesis 4, God asked Cain, "Why has your countenance fallen?" Before his accusers killed Stephen, his countenance was like Moses' coming down from the mountain or like Jesus's at the transfiguration. Something had changed and it is seen in his countenance, a visible, tangible proof of conversion.

And I'll land my plane close by here with this question: If you claim to be a Christian, are you living with proof of conversion? Do you live with genuine faith? Do people see a winsome grace and spiritual power in your life? Do you live with proof of conversion? If not, join Stephen at the cross, turning from your sin and turning to Christ and, by God's Grace, live For Gospel impact.

(Pastor rays)