

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

Evangelist W. Paul Redmond Sr.

Volume 10, Issue 7

December 2013

What Are You Complaining About? (Part 6)

Exodus 16:7-12; Philippians 2:14

Having focused on the life of Joseph and how he did not complain when faced with adverse circumstances, we now will consider **The Life of Stephen**. Whereas the details about Joseph comprised almost a third of the book of Genesis, the life of Stephen is described only in two chapters in Acts. There is no mention made about his early life. We do not even find the details about his conversion. He may have been among the 120 gathered in the upper room right before Pentecost, or he may have been among the number converted at Pentecost. We do not know because the Bible does not say. But what is contained in the two chapters that record the account of Stephen are powerful, and there is much to learn from what we do know about him.

As we come to Acts 6, the church at Jerusalem has exploded in number. What began with 120, grew instantly on Pentecost when 3,000 were converted. Because God was adding to the church daily (2:47), by Acts 4:4, we know that there are 5,000 men. We can only speculate as to the number of women, but it would be a safe guess to say that there are at least the same number of women, if not more. Included in the number of women were some widows. It was among these widows that a problem arose in the early church.

In Acts 6:1, we read that there was murmuring by the Grecians against the Hebrews, *“because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”* The Bible gives no details as to what the *“daily ministration”* was, but it was probably the distribution of money or food. The situation seems to be that Hebrew widows were provided for, but the Grecian (Greek-speaking Jews born outside of Palestine) widows were overlooked. This caused the only murmuring in the

-2-

early church. Regardless of the situation, the murmuring was wrong. As we saw in the introduction, only unsaved, or non-Spirit filled believers murmur or complain. These Grecian believers had quenched and grieved the Holy Ghost when they complained. We must be mindful of this in our own lives. However we may think it justified, complaining is always sin. If we do sin by complaining, we must confess and ask forgiveness and ask to be filled with the Holy Ghost again.

The apostles knew how serious the situation was in the early church. It was not right that anyone be neglected for any reason, especially these widows who were probably in desperate need of food just to survive. They gave the matter great importance and sought to find an immediate solution. They could not desert their greater duty of prayer and the ministry of the Word. Someone else in the church would have to help meet the needs of the widows. It is this occasion that introduces Stephen. He is among the seven that are chosen by the church and ordained by the apostles. While they are often called deacons, they are not called so here. From what we do know about Stephen and Philip, they would more appropriately be called assistant pastors because Stephen and Philip preach— Stephen in Acts 6 and 7 and Philip in Acts 8 and 21:8.

As the situation with the widows is resolved, we are given a description of Stephen’s ministry. It is summarized in Acts 6:8, *“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.”* This activity, as the earlier ministry of Peter, John, and the other apostles, did not sit well with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Stephen’s ministry will cause The Misunderstanding that we read about in verses 9 and 10. As we saw with Joseph, just doing and saying what God wants you to do and say will cause a disturbance among unbelievers. Stephen does not have a malicious intent. He is not trying to hurt anyone. He is not doing anything wrong. He is simply preaching the Gospel. That is what is misunderstood and that is what will result in Stephen’s death.

We must recognize the fact that doing what God wants us to do—preaching the Gospel—will cause misunderstanding. Most of the time it will be the unsaved that will misunderstand, but sometimes it will be the saved who will perhaps misunderstand the amount of times that one preaches or something else in relation to the ministry. As we saw with Joseph and are seeing with Stephen, being misunderstood will be a common reaction to our service of the Lord. We must expect it and be ready when it does come.

There are two aspects to the misunderstanding of Stephen. First, there is *The Fighting*. In Acts 6:9, we read, “*Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.*” Notice that it is the religious (though unsaved) crowd that is causing the problems with Stephen. The fighting that I am referring to is verbal. The end of the verse says that they are “*disputing with Stephen.*” Disputing means to question together, to examine together, to discuss. While there is nothing wrong with asking questions so one can learn more about the Word of God, nor with “searching the Scriptures daily” as the Berean believers would do later, that is not the attitude that these people had, as we see in the end. Perhaps they started with a good attitude, but it did not remain good for long. As I read the passage, it seems that their desire was to “trip” Stephen up and to find something that would make the people reject what Stephen was saying and keep following their teaching. The Bible does not give any details about conversions under Stephen’s ministry; it just says that he did “*great wonders and miracles.*” Perhaps these people were upset because of those that had already been converted. Perhaps Stephen’s ministry was just among those already in the church, as is stated in the early part of Acts 6. Regardless of whether Stephen was able to reach out to others, he was still antagonizing the unsaved religious crowd with his faithfulness in serving the Lord. They tried everything they could to hinder the effectiveness of Stephen’s ministry.

Exactly how this disputing was going on, we can only guess.

Because of the preposition “with,” I believe that they were disputing with Stephen face to face. I do not think that they were going to the other believers privately and disputing with them about what Stephen said. That goes on a lot in churches and homes today and is a huge problem, but the language does not seem to indicate that here. The question to me is whether this crowd was disputing with Stephen privately, or if they were disputing with Stephen while he was publicly preaching. Because of what verse 10 says, I tend to think that it was a public disputing. Also, because they were “*of the synagogue,*” the disputing may have followed the synagogue pattern which allowed for discussion of matters between certain groups. As I mentioned earlier, the whole purpose was to stop the conversion of the Jews and the preaching of Stephen. The chief priests and other religious leaders had tried to stop the apostles earlier by various threatenings and beatings; this group was trying to stop Stephen by disputing—debating and disagreeing with what he said.

As we endeavor to preach the Gospel or even witness on the street or on the job, we must be prepared for misunderstandings like Stephen faced. It may not happen to the extent of Stephen’s situation, but we will probably face it nonetheless. Some may try to argue with us on the street or on the job. Some may ridicule us to try to get others not to listen to us. They may think that we are trying to cause disruption in their homes, neighborhoods, or workplace. Our desire is none of those. We desire to let them and everyone else know that their religion will not save them from eternal damnation. They may misunderstand and say that we are personally attacking them. It is not a personal attack against them. It is the clear declaration of God’s truth. If it is offensive, then so be it. God’s truth must be made known. We must declare it as clearly as possible, but we also must realize that we will be misunderstood. It may be uncomfortable for our flesh, but we must allow the Holy Spirit to dominate, and put the flesh in subjection.

The second aspect to notice about the misunderstanding is *The Failure*. Those that disputed with Stephen were, no doubt, learned

men, but they could not overcome what he said. Acts 6:10 says, “*And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.*” The phrase “*able to resist*” means to stand against, to successfully withstand, to oppose. Everything that they tried in response to what Stephen said did not succeed. They may have argued as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. When they made their point, Stephen made his and proved that they were wrong and that he was right. Maybe they argued that if Jesus was the Messiah, he would not have died. Stephen then quoted or read passages like Isaiah 53 that prove the Messiah would die. Whatever it was, Stephen had the answer for their accusations. They could say nothing against him.

How could Stephen be ready for every statement they made? How could they not “get” him? The answer is found in the last half of verse 10. It was because of “*the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.*” Earlier in Acts 6:3 and 5, it is said of Stephen that he was full of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost supplied the wisdom that defeated the disputers. The spirit (forcefulness or energy) of Stephen was supplied by the Holy Ghost. It was not Stephen’s learning or ability that defeated the accusers. It was the Holy Ghost. If we are filled with the Holy Ghost, we can overcome our accusers as well. We will continue next month.