

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

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What Are You Complaining About? (Part 7)

Exodus 16:7-12; Philippians 2:14

Last month we considered The Misunderstanding from the life of Stephen. As we also saw with Joseph, as seeing with Stephen, and will see in Paul's life, we often will be misunderstood. We will be doing what is right, but those that we are trying to help will not see it that way. We saw in Stephen's case that there was verbal Fighting as the men tried to combat what Stephen was preaching. But we also saw The Failure as they were unable "to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke." May we be so full of the Holy Ghost that when others try to "dispute" with us, they will be unable to combat what we say. May our words truly be the words of the Holy Ghost speaking through us. That is the only message that will change the hearts of those to whom we are speaking or preaching. Our words do not matter. But the words of the Holy Ghost through us do matter. His words will cause a reaction. That is what we turn to now.

When the men could not combat Stephen verbally, they turned to another avenue. They began The Mistreatment of Stephen. There are two things that we can learn from this mistreatment. First, we can expect others to mistreat us when we are trying to serve Christ and help them. It will probably be a different kind of mistreatment than Stephen's, but nonetheless we may be mistreated by those that we are trying to help. The other thought goes along with this and follows the theme of the message—complaining. Our mistreatment will probably be less severe than what Stephen faced. It can be no worse because he was killed for what he preached. Someone may die in this time period for the Gospel, but most of us will not have to worry about that. Because Stephen was able to endure his mistreatment without complaining, we should be able to endure whatever mistreatment we face without complaining. As I have tried to point out several times

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during the course of this message, there is no right at any time for anyone to complain. God is always in control. We must realize that and trust in Him at all times. He will make everything right. Even when we are mistreated, do not complain.

Now let us look at Stephen's mistreatment in a little more detail. The first aspect of the mistreatment was an *Assault with Words*. As we saw earlier, the men tried to "dispute" with Stephen. When they could not prove him wrong or prove themselves to be right, their attitude changed. They now were going to accuse Stephen of blasphemy, so they could try him and condemn him. The assault with words began with Their Misleading. Since disputing had not worked, the men endeavor to lie about Stephen. Acts 6:11 says, "Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God." Of course, the Bible does not give any details. In many cases, the accounts are a summary of what took place over several days, weeks, and sometimes years. This episode with Stephen could have been over a period of several days. The chronology in Acts does not allow for an extended period of time, so I think it is for just a period of days. The "disputing" mentioned in Acts 6:9, could have happened on several occasions. I mention this because the word suborn in verse 11 means "to instruct privately; to instigate; to induce someone to do something wrong, especially to commit perjury." The way everything works out, and because of the meaning of suborn, it seems that the men who were opposing Stephen planned on this occasion to bring Stephen before the Sanhedrin to try him. Perhaps they had been disputing for several days. When they realized that they could not "resist" him, they instructed these men to lie and say that Stephen had blasphemed God.

It is amazing to me how the unsaved, religious crowd can accuse a Bible believer of doing something that the Bible believer would not do. There is no way under any circumstance that Stephen would blaspheme the name of God. But because the people misunderstood what Stephen was saying, they accuse him of blasphemy. Because of what is said in verses 13 and 14, I believe that the accusers of Stephen

instructed these witnesses to use Stephen's own words against him. I believe there is some truth to what is said in verse 14, "*and [Jesus] shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.*" Again, I can only speculate at this point, but perhaps Stephen said something like this: "Jesus Christ died on the cross. That is the fulfillment of all of the sacrifices. No more will we need to offer a lamb on the altar. No longer will we need to sprinkle the blood upon the mercy seat. Jesus has completed salvation once for all." Could Stephen have understood the truth about salvation and really said something like this? Because he was filled with the Holy Ghost, absolutely! I believe he really understood what Christ did and that there would be no need of sacrifices any more. However, what should have brought joy to the heart of these Jews, instead brought anger. Stephen was attacking their religion. He was showing them the truth of completed salvation in Jesus Christ, but they misunderstood him and now they are verbally mistreating him.

From the names of the groups in verse 9, it seems that they had come up for a feast in Jerusalem. Libertines is thought to indicate a group of Jews, whereas the other names identify the locations where they live. Although Acts does not identify this account as occurring at a feast time, perhaps that is why they are in Jerusalem and why they react so vehemently about the customs being changed. They are obedient to what the Old Testament says, but Stephen tells them that Christ has fulfilled the law, and they do not need to offer sacrifices any more. They hear Stephen preach on the temple grounds or somewhere in Jerusalem. Over the course of a few days, they cannot combat what he says, and they "*suborn*" men to lie about Stephen's messages. Then they take the confrontation a step further.

From the actions of these men, they are intent on stopping the preaching of Stephen. Their misleading turns into *Their Moving*. Verse 12 says, "*And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council.*" The words stirred up mean "to move together with others; to throw into commotion." Open debate has not stopped

Stephen. The suborning has done its job. The word has spread concerning the blasphemy of Stephen, and he is brought before the council (the Sanhedrin). Perhaps the same men who had spread the word, now testify falsely that Stephen has blasphemed. Stephen has said nothing at all that would be blasphemous to God, the law, or the temple. He has preached nothing but the truth. But the people did not want to hear it. He is now on trial for his life.

After hearing the testimony, the council looks at Stephen. Perhaps they are expecting to see fear. Perhaps they are expecting to see one who is ready to defend himself and try to get out of the situation. But when they look at his face, they see something that they did not expect. Acts 6:15 says, "*And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.*" Imagine the surprise the men on the council received. Where there was usually panic and fear, there was "*the face of an angel.*" What exactly does that mean? Some take it to just picture calmness and peace. While that is no doubt true, I think there was more to it than that. I believe the glory of the Holy Ghost was literally shining through. I believe that Stephen's face was shining like Moses' face when he came down from Mt. Sinai. Stephen had been disputed with, verbally attacked, and lied about, but that could not shake his faith in God. He could have complained and lashed back at these people, but he is so controlled by the Holy Ghost that he does just the opposite. He is at peace with God, and the peace of God shines through. May the same be said of us when we face difficult times.

Stephen is given a chance to defend himself. He does so for the majority of Acts 9. He recounts the history of Israel, and then shows how the nation as a whole had rejected the truth of God's Word. He then applies what he has preached to them as well. He is not attacking them because they mistreated him. He is boldly telling them that they have rejected God's message. He is not concerned about himself, but he is concerned that they have not accepted God's Word. He calls them stiffnecked, uncircumcised in heart, and resisters of the Holy Ghost. He calls them betrayers and murderers

of Christ, and says that they have not kept the word of God. Some will say that Stephen was unnecessarily harsh, but the Bible is clear to state both before and after the message that he is “*full of the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 6:5; 7:55). Stephen is not unduly harsh, but bold in confronting the people with their sin. We need preaching today that does the same.

The message of Stephen results in the *Assault with Weapons*. There is *The Initial Assault* described in Acts 7:54. It says, “*When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.*” Some take this to mean that were gnashing at him as dogs or wolves would, but I think the better understanding is just what the verse says—“*they gnashed on him.*” They literally took Stephen’s flesh between their teeth and pulled at it. They were so angry at what he was saying about the truth of Christ and the false basis of their hope that they were acting like wild animals. They had tried to attack with words, but they could not stop him. Now they had rejected the truth of God and wanted Stephen to stop. They would have to kill him to shut him up. We will discuss that next month.