

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

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Stephen: The Man who was Faithful to the End (Part 4)

Acts 6-7

In this message on the life of Stephen, we are considering that he is Faithful in His Difficulty. We considered The Struggle and The Shortcoming, and left off last month in the midst of The Shaping. We saw how the enemies of Stephen suborned men to lie about Stephen which led the people to be stirred up against him. But this was just the beginning of what the leaders in the synagogues wanted to do to Stephen. They had not been able to stop him, so they would appeal to a higher authority. They would bring him to the council, known outside of Scripture as the Sanhedrin. This was the Jewish high court that judged matters relating to the nation of Israel. They had some authority to extend punishment, but could not carry out a sentence of death. That had to be done by the Roman governor.

After stirring the mob through their lying, the men that had been suborned are now called upon to testify concerning Stephen. This is how Acts 6:13-14 describes the situation: *“And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.”* Because they are now before the council, these men who earlier had stirred up the people are testifying against Stephen. The accusation is blasphemy. As I mentioned last month in commenting on verse 11, Stephen is accused of the same crime that Jesus was accused of on many occasions—blasphemy. Now it is in court, and if found guilty, Stephen would be stoned. He knew what the penalty would be, and the men cannot wait to see his reaction.

Did Stephen really blaspheme? We know for a certainty that he

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did not, because a man full of the Holy Ghost will not blaspheme God. In the eyes of the people who did not accept Stephen's preaching that Jesus is the Son of God and the only way of salvation, his message was blasphemy. But according to Scripture, Stephen preached the truth. The Bible identifies the men as false witnesses, and they were because Stephen did not blaspheme. But as I read what they say about Stephen, I believe Stephen was given an understanding that would not be fully revealed until later. Stephen was accused of saying that Jesus would *“destroy this place”* (the temple), and change the customs of Moses. The customs undoubtedly referred to the sacrifices and feasts that the Jews were supposed to practice. (It is interesting that they would hold this as a reason to reject what Stephen was preaching and that he was worthy of death, when the nation repeatedly throughout its history often neglected for long periods of time these very practices.) In the course of the debates that went on with the men in the synagogues, perhaps they mentioned how important the sacrifices were. Stephen, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom (Acts 6:5,10), said that Jesus was the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament sacrifices and feasts. He went on to say that with Christ's death and resurrection there was no need for any more sacrifices. They were simply pictures that pointed to Christ. He fulfilled them all. This is revealed completely through the remainder of the New Testament, but Stephen, and probably the apostles, had already been shown that glorious truth.

As Jesus did not blaspheme by declaring Himself God because He was God, so Stephen did not blaspheme by declaring the end of the temple and customs because Jesus came to fulfill and end those customs completely. There was no more need of the lamb, goat, bull, or turtledove to be sacrificed because Jesus Himself had died and resurrected, providing a complete, eternal salvation. I believe wholeheartedly that Stephen preached that message. His message was rejected by religion then, and has always, and will continue to be rejected by religion. Regardless of its acceptance or rejection, we, like Stephen, must proclaim the truth.

After causing the crowd to be against Stephen and falsely accusing him of blasphemy, the men want to see how Stephen will respond. Here we see The Surprise. Acts 6:15 explicitly states, “*And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.*” The members of the council had seen many people accused of blasphemy. Many had been terrified and probably broke down, begging for forgiveness. Now they look at Stephen to see what his response would be. The words looking stedfastly mean to gaze or to fix the eyes upon. It was not a casual glance, but being experienced in cases like this, they knew they could tell with an intense look whether the person was guilty or not. The members of the council, and probably the accusers of Stephen, were stunned by what they saw.

They expected to see fear or, at least, anger coming through Stephen’s face. If he was guilty of blasphemy, surely he would be afraid of the execution that would follow. But they see no fear in his face. If he was not guilty, anger would be obvious in his face because the natural reaction to being falsely accused is anger. But the Bible describes his face as being like the face of an angel. What does that mean?

I think it is safe to say that none of these men in the council had ever seen an angel, so the terminology must be a description of the most majestic thing they can imagine. His face was glorious to behold, if even these sinners knew something was different. Some suggest that there was peace, calmness, and assurance in contrast to the fear of others who had been before the council. While Stephen obviously had great peace, I believe there was more than just a peaceful countenance. I believe there was a literal heavenly glow in Stephen’s face like Moses’s face when he came down from Mount Sinai after seeing the glory of God. Stephen’s face was shining from within as the Holy Ghost was manifesting Himself through Stephen. Stephen was not in control of his life. Two times it has already been said that he was “*full of the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 6:3,5). Now even the unsaved, religious crowd can see it. They will not appreciate it, but

they cannot dismiss God the Holy Ghost shining through Stephen. May we be so surrendered, so full of the Holy Ghost, that in times of difficulty, the Lord will be able to shine through us.

Having been Faithful in His Difficulty, we now will see that Stephen was **Faithful in His Declaration**. Upon seeing the glory in Stephen’s face, the high priest asks in Acts 7:1, “*Are these things so?*” Now Stephen has a chance to respond to the accusations. His response may seem unusual to us. It is a message that he delivers to the council, witnesses, accusers, and crowd. It is not your typical defense in a trial, although because his trial is about religion, it makes sense. He will recount the history of Israel, then make an application of that history to the people before him. It really is a sermon—a preacher preaching to a congregation. We would do well to pattern our messages after Stephen.

Stephen was Faithful in his Declaration because of The Accuracy of his message. Many preachers (I use that term loosely) claim to be Spirit-filled, but you know that they are not because the message that they are preaching is wrong. The Holy Spirit does not lead someone to do anything contrary to His Word. He is the One Who led holy men of God to pen down the Scriptures, and He will lead people today by those same Scriptures. He will not, and does not, give new Scriptures today. The Word of God was completed with the book of Revelation. The warning given in Revelation 22:18-19 about adding or taking away from the prophecy is in particular talking about the book of Revelation, but it is applicable to the entire Bible. God the Holy Ghost finished His inspired written Word with Revelation. We have all of God’s written Word given to us from Genesis to Revelation. We will never receive any other. Someone who says that they have a “new” revelation, or something that was hidden that God just gave them, is a liar and a friend of the devil. He is not a messenger from God.

The same is true when one supposedly stays with the Bible. They may reject any “new” revelation, but if they are truly Spirit-filled,

their teaching will also accurately line up with the Bible. A Spirit-filled believer will understand Scripture and will interpret it correctly. He will not say something is all right because it feels good, but because the Bible says it is right and does not condemn it. There are many preachers and believers around today who will practice something that is wrong. The Bible clearly condemns it. When asked about it, they reply, "It just feels right." Right and wrong is not based upon how something feels! Right and wrong is based upon Scripture. If we are truly Spirit-filled, He will make that known to us. If we follow feelings, we are following the flesh, not the Spirit!

Stephen knew the Word of God. He began with Abraham and gave his history. He continued with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. He then described how Moses led the people out of Egypt, talked about the tabernacle, and briefly discussed the reigns of David and Solomon. This short synopsis of Israel's history was completely accurate. Stephen knew God's Word. One who is Spirit-filled and desires to truly follow God will have a hunger for the Word of God. May we be Spirit-filled and accurately use God's Word.