

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

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Stephen: The Man who was Faithful to the End (Part 3)

Acts 6-7

Last month we began considering that Stephen was Faithful in His Difficulty. In developing that idea, we spent most of the message on The Struggle in which Stephen was involved. We closed with a few sentences on The Shortcoming. That is where we pick up the message this month.

Acts 6:10 says, “*And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.*” The words were not able mean “to be strong; to have power; and to have strength.” The tense used is the imperfect tense—something that happened repeatedly in the past. The words to resist mean “to stand against; to successfully withstand; to oppose.” As the disputing was done continually, so was the fact that these men “*were not able*” to obtain victory over Stephen in their verbal confrontations. These men, no doubt, tried every argument that they could. If it was done in the synagogue over a two to three week period, these men may have prepared ahead of time. In their minds, Stephen was wrong, and they were going to prove him wrong. They studied the Old Testament and prepared quotations to supposedly combat what Stephen was saying. But nothing worked. Everything fell apart when Stephen delivered his response.

Because there are several synagogues mentioned and because the plural pronoun they is used in verse 10, perhaps they verbally attacked Stephen all at the same time. In their preparation against Stephen, perhaps each one took a different approach, even studying different portions of the Old Testament. No doubt they thought that Stephen might be able to handle one at a time, but he would never be able to defend himself or his beliefs if attacked by all of them. But he did!

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The situation as described was probably taking place in a synagogue, but I mentioned last month that the men could have gone to the people individually and tried to refute what Stephen was preaching. Even in trying to do this, the men were not successful. Stephen had shown the people so clearly what was truth that they would not accept what the other men were saying. If they did have a question, they would bring it to Stephen, and he would easily refute the false ideas of these men, and the people would become stronger in the true faith.

Every attack against Stephen’s preaching, whether it was public or private, did not succeed. How was that possible? These men ganged up on Stephen. They were no doubt sincere and well grounded in the Jewish religion. Some writers think that because Saul (later Paul) took part in the stoning, he was among the group. We know that he was a Pharisee, a well-learned man. No doubt, there were others as well-educated as Saul, and some of them were probably older with years of experience in religious debate. Since we know nothing about Stephen other than what is mentioned in this passage, we can only speculate about his background, but I think it would be safe to say that he was at a disadvantage in education. I know of no proof that he was previously a Pharisee, so his training was probably less than many, if not all, of the men that were disputing with him. If his training was equal, we know, because of the text, that he was all alone. It was him against several. But instead of cowering in fear and apologizing for upsetting the crowd, Stephen was bold in his manner and unconquerable in his speech. How could he take on these learned men by himself and defeat them?

The answer is found in the last part of verse 10. Those who desired to defeat Stephen could not overcome “*the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.*” This is the very foundation of powerful preaching. This is what will make the message clear to sinners. And, yes, this is what will make the devil and his religious leaders mad—a man preaching in the wisdom of the Spirit. (Now I know that the word spirit is not capitalized here, but in the 1600's and 1700's,

capitalization rules were not standardized as they are today. I will argue that this has to be the Holy Spirit. It is not Stephen's spirit that makes the difference; it is the Holy Spirit.) Even if this is taken to be Stephen's spirit, and some good men hold that thought, it is that way because he is filled with the Holy Ghost as mentioned in verse 5.

As the dispute began, the men thought that their arguments would win the day. Their logical reasoning and previous success would quiet down this renegade preacher. But when they uttered something they thought was profound, Stephen's answer refuted what they said and made it seem childish. How could that be? Because Stephen was full of the Holy Ghost—the Holy Ghost was in complete control of him. When Stephen answered these men, it was not his wisdom—it was the Holy Ghost. The power that he displayed was not his power—it was that of the Holy Ghost. Like so many confrontations that take place in Scripture, this verbal war was lopsided—not in the favor of the group that had religious education and more people, but in the favor of the man under the complete, total domination of the Holy Ghost. Stephen, full of the Holy Ghost, was going to win this debate. It was impossible for him to lose. It is a foretaste of Romans 8:31b, *“If God be for us, who can be against us?”* It is why Bob Jones Sr. said, “You and God make a majority in your community.” The world and the flesh may say that you are no match for what you will face. If you try to gain the victory by fighting the flesh with the flesh, they are right. You will lose. If you try to overcome the world with your wisdom and ability, they are right. You will lose. If you try to preach the Gospel with your fancy delivery and gimmicks, you will not be truly successful. You must surrender to the will and power of the Holy Ghost. You must allow Him to have total control. Then the devil and his followers will be defeated. Then souls will be truly converted. But only when we allow ourselves to be under the complete power and control of the Holy Ghost.

Many times this world looks like a hopeless place. As with Elisha's servant, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and many others, we are hopelessly outnumbered. But we must remember what these men

found out and told others. God is on our side. Everything is not hopeless. God's Word will not return void. God will make sure that His will is done. We must trust in Him, be filled with the Spirit, and just let God use us in the way that He sees fit. We must remember that God will do everything right.

After realizing The Shortcoming, the men arranged The Shaping. Acts 6:11-14 record the process that took place. Verse 11 says that they suborned men. Suborn means “to put up; to prompt.” The word applies to those who are told what to say. The remainder of verse 11 says, *“We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.”* The men who failed to limit Stephen's preaching are determined to stop him. They accuse him of blasphemy. Stephen had uttered nothing blasphemous against God. A man full of the Holy Ghost will only utter blessings to God. As the word suborn indicates, the religious leaders of these synagogues tell the men to spread the word about Stephen's “blasphemy.” This is the only way they know to stop Stephen. It is interesting to note that Jesus, in Matthew 26:65, was accused of blasphemy as well. Jesus had told the disciples that the world hated him and would hate them in John 15:18-25. This is just one example of the fulfillment of what Jesus said.

Because of what Jesus, Stephen, and others faced, we must be prepared for the time when we will be lied about. We, as Stephen, will be doing what we are supposed to do—preaching the Gospel. But religion will not appreciate the exposure of their false teaching. As a result, they will try to stop what we are doing. When various means are not successful, they will do what these men did to Stephen. They will lie. While it will hurt, this must be expected. We must prepare for it. As Jesus said in John 15:20, we are not greater than Him. They persecuted Him, and they will persecute us. We may not lose our life, but lies, no doubt, will be spread about us.

As the men expected, the people, elders, and scribes were stirred up. The word stirred means “to throw into commotion; to stir

violently; to excite.” The men who had argued with Stephen were embarrassed and angered. What they wanted done, stirring the people and other leaders up, had begun. The accusations of blasphemy may have started in the synagogue among those who rejected Stephen’s preaching. From there it spread to those outside the synagogue. There had already been “problems” with the apostles that were still fresh on the memories of many of these religious leaders. After not being able to stop them, perhaps they were determined to make an example of Stephen. We can only speculate as to what made the difference. Perhaps it was the spread from the temple area to other parts of Jerusalem. Regardless of the reason, the people and religious leaders were stirred to violence.

The suborning and stirring up led to the setting up of false witnesses. The words set up mean “to cause; to make to stand; to place; to put.” These are the same people mentioned earlier. At that time it was locally in the synagogue or just as talebearers spreading rumors. Now they are testifying before the council where Stephen had been brought. We will continue from this point next month.