

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

Evangelist W. Paul Redmond Sr.

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Stephen: The Man who was Faithful to the End (Part 2)

Acts 6-7

Last month we introduced the message about Stephen. Having seen how he makes his entrance into Scripture, we now begin the heart of the message itself. It is interesting to remember that this is all that we know about Stephen. His life is not a long life, nor is his ministry, in human terms, very successful. We often think highly of men who had long ministries in churches and who saw many responses to their preaching. While it is natural and not necessarily wrong to do so, we must remember that long ministries and many converts are not the mark of success in the eyes of God. Success in God's eyes is described in I Corinthians 4:2—*“Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.”* Those are the same words that the master uses for his servants in the parable recorded in Matthew 25. This parable is often seen as a picture of the Judgment Seat of Christ where believers are rewarded for their service to Christ. In this parable, the master uses the same words for both servants even though one accomplished more than the other. The master said to both, *“Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things.”* Success in God's eyes is not a big church, many converts, preaching a lot of meetings, or any other measuring stick that we usually hold up. Success in the eyes of God is faithfulness. That is what we see in Stephen.

Stephen did not leave Jerusalem, did not start any churches, and was not even the pastor of the church in Jerusalem. In the minds of many around today, he would not be worthy of mentioning. But he was faithful to the task that God set before him. He did not have several messages recorded in Scripture and did not even write a book in the Bible. But of all the men recorded in Acts, there is not one

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greater in what he did than Stephen. He was not Paul, nor Peter, nor even James, who by Acts 15 seems to be the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Yet none stand any higher than Stephen. Bigness is not success. Widespread renown is not important in the eyes of God. God calls us to faithfulness! That is what is important to God. No one else may ever know of your ministry, but it does not matter if anyone else does. God wants faithfulness. We see faithfulness clearly pictured in the life of Stephen.

The first part of Stephen's life is characterized by being **Faithful in His Difficulty**. For the believer, life will not be easy. Our thoughts have been perverted over the last fifty years or so by false teachers who say that everything will be wonderful once you are saved. You will not be rolling in money after your conversion. Everyone will not be happy with the way that you are living your life. Jesus, in John 15, says that the world will hate believers. We are reminded of this fact in I John 3:13—*“Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.”* The world hated Christ and His early followers. They will hate us if we are faithfully following Him.

We could look at the lives of several believers who faced difficult times to prove that hardships are normal for believers, but we want to keep our focus on Stephen. Acts 6 begins with the apostles needing help and seven men chosen to do so. Verse 8 begins the account of Stephen that we are focusing on. The Bible does not say how much time elapses between verses 7 and 8. In fact, as you read the passage, it would seem that Stephen's activity of *“wonders and miracles”* in verse 8 helped to bring about the multiplication of disciples and the conversion of priests described in verse 7. At the most, I would think that just a few weeks pass in the time between Stephen's selection by the people and his death. It also could have been just a few days. Regardless of the elapsed time, Stephen was faithful.

Four things stand out in the passage as we consider that Stephen was Faithful in His Difficulty. The first is The Struggle. Acts 6:9 says, *“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.” Some writers think that we are close to the day of Pentecost and these are Jews who are still around Jerusalem. Others think that these are Jews who are originally from the places identified who are now residing in Jerusalem. Why they became so disturbed at Stephen’s preaching is anyone’s guess. But they did. Perhaps they lived in an area of Jerusalem that Stephen was preaching in. Regardless of the reason, Stephen preached and a struggle ensued.

Verse 9 closes with the words, “*Disputing with Stephen.*” The word dispute means “to question together; to seek or examine together.” While Stephen was preaching, these members of the synagogue were questioning and examining what Stephen was saying. Although there is nothing wrong with trying to learn more through honest questions, or looking in Scripture to make sure what the preacher is saying is right, that is not what these people were doing. In Acts 17:11, the Bereans were commended for searching the Scriptures to compare what was said to Scripture itself. That is something all of us should do more. But these were not questioning to learn more. Because of their reaction in the following verses, we can tell that they were questioning the truth and reality of Stephen’s preaching. They were not wanting to learn more. They were trying to disprove what Stephen was saying. To phrase it another way, they were arguing against Stephen.

We can only speculate as to whether this was done privately or publicly. The public aspect could have taken place anywhere in Jerusalem, or because the description given is similar to the way things were done in a synagogue, it could have taken place there. It could have been that as Stephen was preaching they began to interrupt him and say that he was preaching contrary to Scripture. He would say that Jesus died and rose again to provide salvation, and these men would interrupt and say that salvation was through the sacrifices that God gave to Moses in the law. Stephen would continue to preach and say the truth, and they would continue to

interrupt and question what he was saying. I suppose it could have been in the form of a question and answer session where the men would question Stephen about something, Stephen would respond, and then they would argue against what Stephen said.

The public aspect could also have been where they publicly taught contrary to Stephen’s teaching. To the same people that Stephen had preached to, they would teach what they thought was right. In doing so, they put questions in the minds of the people about Stephen’s preaching. While this may have been possible, the language to me indicates that it was a direct questioning between the Jews and Stephen.

This could have been a private dispute also manifesting itself in two ways. The men could have come to Stephen privately and began to debate and question the validity of Stephen’s preaching. They also could have talked to those who responded to Stephen’s preaching. They could have met the people in their home and tried to reason with them as to why their teaching was right and Stephen’s was wrong. While these thoughts are possible, eventually the dispute was made public. In fact, all of these scenarios are possible. The men could have met with Stephen and with those who responded to Stephen’s preaching in a private manner initially. When that did not work, public disputes during Stephen’s messages may have taken place.

I mention these scenarios to try to place us in the situation that Stephen was in. He was not seeking for trouble, but trouble came as a natural outgrowth of his faithfulness in serving Jesus. This truth is all through the book of Acts and the New Testament, as I mentioned earlier in the message. Stephen was faithfully preaching the truth, and men did not like it. We must recognize that this will happen and be prepared for the fact that religion and the natural man do not like the Gospel. When people are told that their belief is wrong, and Jesus alone is the hope of salvation, they will get upset and will question and argue and dispute. We probably will not end up like Stephen, but the first part that took place here will undoubtedly happen. Men will

argue and debate whether what we are preaching is right or not. As long as we accept their position, everything is fine. But if you point out their error, tempers may flare and disputing will occur.

It is interesting to note that the word disputing is in the present tense. This did not occur only once, but several times. Over the time that Stephen preached, several days or a few weeks, these men would dispute with Stephen. Stephen's life ended at the hands of these people, but we must realize that disputing will occur often. For us, we may be able to handle one crowd that may publicly or privately dispute what we are saying, but others will show up. We must be prepared for continual attacks against the truth that we are preaching.

I will develop this thought more next month, but notice The Shortcoming. These men continually disputed with Stephen, but verse 10 says, "*And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.*" They tried many times, but failed. Why? Because Stephen was filled with the Holy Ghost.