

Full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom

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[0:00] I've read that several times and not spotted it. As soon as it comes up on the screen, you notice that something about that. The term has come to mean one who dies, gives their life for the faith.

And Stephen is the first one we read in Acts who indeed did give his life for the faith. And we're going to look at the work of, or the life of Stephen, or what Luke tells us about Stephen.

And we'll see why it's relevant to the Holy Spirit in a minute. But, as I said, in Acts 5, which we hadn't read, first of all there are some more apostolic signs, which again gets the apostles arrested again, but this time they're released by an angel.

And then there's a short time of sort of peace and consolidation. And Acts 6 really sort of describes that.

But the confrontation is only going to be delayed. And meanwhile, the church has got internal problems. And what do the apostles say is the solution to those internal problems?

[1:38] In this case of a dispute between the Greek-speaking and the Hebrew-speaking Jews. The solution is to find someone full of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Now, I don't know whether you're going to be surprised by this.

I certainly was when I looked it up. But the term full of the Holy Spirit actually only occurs in the writings of Luke. I was quite surprised when I realized this.

The word filled with the Holy Spirit occurs in other places, in the writings of Paul and so on. For instance, in Ephesians 5.18, where he says, don't get drunk on wine, but be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And other places. And perhaps some similar ideas of being full of the Holy Spirit occur in the writing of Paul. When, for instance, he says things like, by the Spirit put to death the works of the flesh. But the actual phrase, full of the Holy Spirit, only occurs in Luke. And it's Luke, perhaps, who has focused on the fact that the Christian life is really about the Holy Spirit.

[2:55] The Christian life is supposed to be full of the Holy Spirit. But the word for full here is pleres, which is different from the word filled, which is pletho.

Obviously, the words are related in Greek. But as in England, English, they don't mean the same thing. Filled is an active word. Full means, obviously describes the state of being full.

But, in fact, according to Strong's, pleres, full, can have other meanings. It can mean just full up, like a vessel that is full up.

But it can also mean covered over, as you might cover over, say, something with gold leaf to make it look more beautiful. Or you might infuse, fill something up in the sense of infuse it with the, you might light some incense, say, and infuse the whole room with the smell of your perfume.

So, where does this word full, this phrase full of the Holy Spirit occur? Even in the writings of Luke, it's not very common. It occurs once in Luke's Gospel, in Luke 4, verse 1.

[4:14] And there it refers to Jesus himself as being full of the Spirit. That's the only occurrence of the phrase in Luke's Gospel. Although, in chapter 10, 21, again referring to Jesus, it talks about joy in the Spirit, which might be a related idea, but the actual term full of the Spirit only occurs once in Luke's Gospel, where it refers to Jesus himself.

In Acts, it occurs four times. I put them up on the slide there. And you'll notice, if you look at it, that it refers to, first of all, to all the deacons, the servants, those who were appointed to administer the

food distribution.

So, obviously, that includes Stephen, who's the first one of them listed. It occurs twice, referring to Stephen himself, in 6.5 and then in 7.55.

And then the only other occurrence in Acts is in chapter 11, 24, where it refers to Barnabas. And Barnabas, in a rather similar way to Stephen, is described there as being full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

So, in fact, that last occurrence with Barnabas is the only occurrence in Acts that doesn't refer to Stephen. Stephen is given to us by Luke as the example of one who is full of the Holy Spirit.

[5:59] Stephen is presented to us as the prime example. But clearly, of course, he's meant to be an example. Luke is not suggesting that he's the only person who was ever full of the Holy Spirit, obviously.

Indeed, all the deacons, all the seven that were chosen, were described as being full. The qualification was that they were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

So, obviously, this is regarded, in a sense, as a sign, if you like, of Christian maturity. And Stephen is given us as that example.

So, we can look at Stephen to see what that meant, how being full of the Holy Spirit affected what he said and did. And I think the point to make, of course, is that this demonstrates not the immediate experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit, but rather a longer-term thing, not a perfection, but a mature Christian life, a life that has been remodeled by the Holy Spirit.

It's usually that the phrase full of the Holy Spirit is, every time except the last reference to Stephen, is attached to something else. Either full of the Holy Spirit in wisdom or full of the Holy Spirit in faith.

[7:25] And, clearly, these are linked together. The effect of the being full of the Holy Spirit is to bring about wisdom and faith. So, let's look at what this example of Stephen, the things that he does, and the things that the Spirit does through him.

Or, perhaps better to say, it is the things that he does, but he does through the Spirit, through being full of the Spirit. And, we'll look at the three items in his life, aspects of his life that Luke describes.

First of all, Stephen, the deacon, the administrator. And then, we'll look at Stephen, the apologist.

I'm sorry, I couldn't think of a, you know, to use a long word there, I couldn't think of a better word.

But, an apologist, as I said at the bottom on the slide there, is someone who argues for the truth of the faith. Not so much just proclaims it, as argues and persuades people that it must be true.

And, we call that, and the person who does that, an apologist. And, I think that's a good description of what Stephen was. And, of course, the only real speech of his we've got recorded is his defense when he's brought before the council.

[8:37] So, we can look a bit at that. And, then, finally, we'll look at Stephen, the martyr. In other words, we'll look at his death. And, what the Holy Spirit had to say or had to do about his death.

So, let's, first of all, look at Stephen, the deacon. Because, that's the first time we meet him in Acts 6, 1-7. And, we can see that the church was getting a bit bigger now.

And, any organization, large and small, needs administrators. As long as there were empires, there were accountants.

You can't run an empire without an accountant, without accountants. You can't be done. You need administrators. Yet, often, the world looks down on such people, doesn't it?

It calls them pen pushers, or clerks, or bean counters, or even sometimes just jobsworths. The suggestion being that, you know, they're only there to make it difficult for the really creative people.

[9:42] The people who, you know, really do the actual work. That's often the attitude, isn't it? But, the apostles didn't see it that way.

Brothers and sisters, the beans do need to be counted.

These men that are presented to the apostles are actually exactly the reverse of that, aren't they? In fact, what Luke tells us is, without them, if they hadn't taken up that job, the ministry of the word would have got neglected.

But, because they were there, because they took on that responsibility, then the word of God spread. That's what he tells us. And we notice, this isn't a job for those lacking the talent to do anything else.

In fact, the people who were selected for this role are some of the most talented people the church has available. We can see that if we just look at the two who are described in detail.

Stephen, who is described, as we've just read about Stephen, and in the next chapter, it talks about Philip. These are men of wisdom and talent and vision. They're not jobsworths, who just want a job to keep them busy and stop everybody else doing their job.

[11:03] And, of course, when it comes to the church, just talent alone is not enough. That spiritual wisdom is required. The wisdom to say the right things, no doubt, to the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews, to smooth over their dispute, to say the right thing, and to make sure that everybody feels they're being treated fairly, not only that justice is being done, but that it's being seen to be done.

And that requires wisdom. And so, that is the qualification that is required of these servants, these deacons. And how does that happen?

It comes from a life that's been impregnated with the Holy Spirit, isn't it? It's not a worldly wisdom. It's a wisdom that comes from being full of the Holy Spirit. And when the administrators are spiritually wise, then the Word of God spreads rapidly, as it says in chapter 6, verse 7.

And, of course, one does need to remind those of us, because I'm actually a deacon in this church, those of us who do serve the church in administrative roles, that it isn't our job to make it difficult for the preaching of the Word.

Our job is to make the Word of God spread. And so we need to have the heart of a servant, and indeed all of us in the church need to have the heart of a servant.

[12:31] So, I don't think we should just sort of skip over these first seven verses. It's not really the important thing about Stephen. I think it is an important thing about Stephen, that he had the heart of a servant.

He had wisdom to make things work properly. And that is described as a result of being full of the Holy Spirit. Stephen, however, does move on from this role, or at least moves on to other things. So let's look now at Stephen, the apologist. Stephen, actually, is one of the few non-apostles who's, to which Luke says that he did signs and miracles before the people.

So he's, but that's not what Luke tells us he was mainly famous for. We're told what he was really good at in verses 9 and 10.

We see it's not just the apostles now that are proclaiming the message. Stephen is doing it and he's arguing. Arguing with the Jews, proving that, obviously what he was aiming to do was prove that Jesus was the Messiah, the one they'd rejected, was the one they shouldn't have rejected.

[13:54] And Stephen is arguing for that case. And it says that through the Spirit, the others couldn't stand, these opponents couldn't stand against him. They found that his wisdom was too great to stand up against.

So his opponents are getting really upset by this. And having failed to make the charges against the apostles' stick, Stephen is put on trial.

And you'll notice there are basically two charges. It's spelled out a bit, but there are basically two charges. First of all, that he was speaking against the place, presumably meaning the temple and Jerusalem.

And secondly, that he was undermining the law of Moses, changing the customs of Moses. They're in 6.13 and then more or less repeated in verse 14, though it's a bit more specific.

It says that Stephen was teaching that Jesus had said he would destroy this place, destroy the temple, and change the customs handed down by Moses. Now, Luke tells us that these were false witnesses, and presumably Stephen didn't actually say that, because Jesus certainly didn't claim that he would destroy the temple.

[15:13] What he did say is, if you destroy this temple, I'll build it again in three days. And he did predict, certainly, the destruction of the temple, but he didn't actually say that he would destroy the temple himself, merely that it would be destroyed.

But like all effective lies, the most effective lies, these are half-truths, of course. The charges don't bear no relation to the truth at all.

There is some truth in them, but it's distorted and made to mean something different. But what they had to say did have some connection to reality.

So that was the charge, as they were brought before the council, that Jesus will remove our place, the place of the Jews, and in particular, I think they seem to be thinking about the temple, and that he will abolish the law of Moses, so that, in particular, of course, between the two of those things, the sacrifices and the temple worship would cease to exist.

That was what they were claiming. So how does Stephen defend himself? And notice that Stephen's defense does answer the charge, the charge of chapter 6, verses 13 and 14.

[16:36] That's why I thought it was worth reading all of it, although, obviously, we can't go through it all in detail, so I've just tried to summarize it, but we have read it all. First of all, he talks about the place, the place being more the country, the promised land, rather than the temple and Jerusalem itself.

But he talks about the place, and he reminds them of all its history, how it was promised to Abraham, and how that promise was kept alive by Jacob and Joseph, who gave instructions about being buried in the promised land.

But God's promise was actually fulfilled, he reminds them, through this Moses, the Moses who they're so very keen to remember. And in fact, you'll notice that Stephen has a lot to say about Moses.

The main section of his argument, from verse 20 further to verse 43, is all about Moses. And what does he say about Moses?

Well, first of all, it was indeed Moses who delivered on the promise of God, who led the people into Egypt, out of Egypt. But he reminds them of a couple of other things about this event.

[17:55] First of all, he reminds them that Moses himself had spoken about a prophet who was to come, verse 37 that is, and reminds them that Moses had told them that when the prophet comes, they should listen to him.

And moreover, Stephen points out that even at the time, even at the time of the Exodus, it wasn't that they were all behind Moses all the way.

Quite the reverse, the people rebelled, in fact, against Moses' leadership, in verses 39 to 43. So, no, it's all very well, you saying, we're following Moses, but even at the Exodus, you didn't really follow Moses faithfully.

And he's going to make the point, of course, that they're not following Moses faithfully now either. The people rebelled. So now, Stephen turns to the temple that they're so keen to defend.

And we find that in verses 44 to 50, the temple and the sacrifices. And he reminds them that initially, they hadn't had a fancy building.

[19:06] when Jesus has said that the, destroy the temple and I'd rebuild it in three days, they said, well, it's taken 46 years already and it's not finished.

You know, it takes a long time to build a great fancy temple. But, Stephen reminds them, it wasn't really the building that was important because, initially, they hadn't even had a fancy building.

They just had a mobile tent that they'd carried around with them as God led them. See that in verses 44 to 46. And then, yes, Solomon, in the end, did build a temple.

But, what did Solomon himself say about it? He said that God does not live in a building made by human hands. You know, it's not that God actually lives here and if you take away his house, God will go away.

I mean, it just doesn't work like that. And, we did read that a few weeks ago in Phil's work on 1 Kings, in 1 Kings 8.27 particularly, Solomon says that the dedication of the temple, you don't, your real dwelling place is heaven, of course.

[20:17] And, the message is reinforced by Isaiah. The quotation there is, a quotation of Isaiah 66, 1 and 2, which again says that the Lord doesn't live in a house made by hands.

So then, Stephen sums up his defense in verses 51 to 53. And what is his argument? His argument is that you received the law from Moses, but you never kept it.

that God sent the prophets, but your ancestors ignored them or killed them. And then he says, and you're no different.

You're no different to your ancestors. You're guilty of murder. You're the one who killed the very prophet that Moses spoke of. And really, the sum of the argument is that the old covenant has failed, not because there was anything wrong with the covenant as such, but simply because they never kept it.

They always were unable to keep the law of Moses. and the old covenant has failed and soon it will be swept away.

[21:40] And how does Stephen finish? Notice in chapter 7, verse 51, he says, you will always resist the spirit. The spirit of God had come to Moses and through the prophets and they'd resisted.

Now the spirit of God had come upon Jesus and you'd ignored it. Now the spirit of God has come to the church. And proclaiming the words of God, but you've ignored it.

You'll always resist the spirit. It's the spirit that the Jews are resisting. And this finally is too much for the council. The moderate voices that Gamaliel and the others that we'd read about in chapter 5, 34 and 39 just get shouted down.

Now the extremists get their say. And they're drowned in a tide of rage. And the court turns into a lynch mob.

All thoughts of legality and the Roman authority are swept aside as they literally close their ears. Verse 57 actually says that, doesn't it? They stick their fingers in their ears.

[22:51] They don't want to hear it. And so what do they say? Stephen must die and he must die now. But then how will he die?

But before we leave that, let's remember that this wisdom that he had to turn their arguments on his head comes from being full of the Holy Spirit. It's a spiritual wisdom, a spiritual insight, spiritual understanding.

And it comes, no doubt, from having studied the scriptures illuminated by the Holy Spirit. So let's look finally at Stephen's death.

And what a contrast. The priests, men who should have been men of gravitas and balance and wisdom, are turned into a lynch mob.

They're enraged. But their victim is calm. He's still full of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us that again in verse 55.

[23:58] In fact, that's the only occasion in Acts where it simply says he's full of the Holy Spirit. Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit without attaching anything else to it.

Stephen realizes that he's about to die. There's not going to be any thoughts and say of legality or going to the Roman authorities this time. It's going to be a lynch party.

But he's calm. And instead of his life flashing before him, what does he see? He sees a vision of Jesus. He says he sees heaven opened and sees a vision of Jesus.

He keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus. And then as the stones are thrown, he commits his spirit to Jesus. And did you notice that his dying words in verse 60 echoes those of Jesus himself asking for forgiveness for the mob, forgiveness for those who had were doing, said don't lay this sin to their charge.

It was a compassionate prayer for his very tormentors. But as it happens, this is a prayer that God largely chooses not to answer.

[25:17] The time of reckoning for their sin is soon coming. The fate of Jerusalem and the temple is sealed perhaps by this act of violence and the ones that follow.

And the gospel will move out of Jerusalem. It will indeed go from that place. And in chapter 8, we see it moves on to Samaria. We'll be looking at that next.

But still, Stephen's message and prayer isn't totally without result, is it? there is one person there whom God will choose to forgive.

And that person is Saul. We meet him in chapter 7, verse 58 and in chapter 8, verse 1. He was there consenting to their death, even approving it.

But it must have had some impact on him. I mean, he got even more angry and breathed out threats. And yet, it must have had some impact on him.

[26:24] We think of Paul having the Damascus Road abrupt conversion. But Luke reminds us that it wasn't all that. You know, he had heard the

gospel. He had heard what Stephen had said and the apostles had said.

It wasn't so, you know, based on nothing at all, Saul's conversion. And in perhaps, in that, for that person at least, Stephen's prayer was effective.

And there, that sin wouldn't be held against Saul. Saul himself, he changed his name to Paul. Of course, Paul himself said, I'm the worst of sinners.

I persecuted the church. But God had, got mercy on me. And perhaps that was, partly because of Stephen's prayer. But Paul, of course, would be the apostle who would say, clearest of all, that the old covenant was dead and that the time of grace had come.

And it would be Paul, of course, who would be the great evangelist to the Gentiles who would say, finally, that the Jews have rejected and that God would look for children of Abraham somewhere else.

[27:49] So Stephen is presented to us by Luke as an example. an example of a person whose life has been remodeled by the Spirit. And I'm sure this is what is meant by being full of the Holy Spirit.

I mean, it can't be something totally different, just because Luke mentions it. It must be something described, in other words, in the writings of Paul and the other apostles. And I say, I think, putting to death by the works of the flesh by the Spirit.

Other references to the Spirit of making us holy. I think it must mean the same thing, but it's Luke, above all, who focuses and shows us that your whole life, it's not just an experience of being filled with the Spirit, which might sort of go up and down a bit, which it does, if we're honest, isn't it?

Sometimes we feel that the Spirit is close and we feel that the Spirit comes to us in a particular time of need. But this thing of being full of the Spirit, I think, is different.

It's a matter of having your whole life remodeled and, say, remade by the Holy Spirit. It's a matter of having the law written, not on a tablet of stone or even on a printed book or even on an iPad, but having the law in your heart.

[29:15] So, Sir Stephen is the example of the one who is full of the Holy Spirit. What can we say then? How does that work out in his life?

How did that work out in Stephen's life and how, perhaps, should it work out in our lives? First of all, we notice they did indeed have the heart of a servant. He was prepared to do the work, prepared to, you know, source out the widows.

It might not have seen a very glamorous job in a sense. It probably wasn't, particularly as people in those days tend to have a rather low opinion of women sometimes. He might have said, I'll just let them argue about it.

You know, they're always going to argue, but no, he wouldn't. He was prepared to get down there and be a servant to whoever needed his help. And in spite of all he went through, in spite of his great intelligence and wisdom and power in argument, his heart was still compassionate.

He would speak forcefully, but he still wanted them to turn. He wanted his listeners to turn. He wasn't trying to prove he was right and everybody else was wrong.

[30:33] He argued with a heart of compassion. And yet, the spirit meant that his proclamation was both powerful and intelligent.

Paul says, doesn't he, I wanted to speak to you, not in words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and in power. And Stephen stands as an example of one who did that. And again, not so much, it seems, in this case, by a particular experience of filling, as we read with Peter, but rather by a whole life that had been reconstructed, constructed, which the Holy Spirit meant that he had this wisdom that he was able to answer his critics and show that indeed that they just weren't making sense.

So how could we sum this up and what is it that we really want to emulate? What is it that if we are full of the Holy Spirit we would expect?

Well, his life and death spoke of Jesus, didn't it? That was his message. His message was the prophet that you should listen to. Not that you should listen to me, but that you should listen to the prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[31:52] His whole life and death spoke of Jesus and the evidence of that was the wisdom and the faith that the Spirit gave him. So, I haven't really got an application because the whole example is the application.

we should aim to be like Stephen, to be full of the Holy Spirit and have that wisdom and faith that the Holy Spirit gave him.