

PM Acts 6:1-15 & 7:51-8:3 Four Years Later

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[0 : 00] In these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

! And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering.

And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

[1 : 15] These they set before the apostles and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase.

And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.

And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

[2 : 41] For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

And the high priest said, Are these things so? And Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me. Stephen then goes on to give a defense of his position going through how he accepts the relationship and the accounts of how God dealt with Abraham and Moses and David.

But he looks at them from the perspective of someone who has seen the Lord Jesus. And he cannot but in honesty present the facts of the case to this council of people who are arraigned against him bringing up false accusation and he says in verse 51 of chapter 7 You stiff-necked people uncircumcised in heart and ears you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did so do you which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute and they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the righteous one whom you have now betrayed and murdered you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it now when they heard these things they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him but he full of the

Holy Spirit gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and he said behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God but they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him then they cast him out of the city and stoned him and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul and as they were stoning Stephen he called out Lord Jesus receive my spirit and falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice Lord do not hold this sin against them and when he had said this he fell asleep and

[5 : 58] Saul approved of his execution and there arose in that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him but Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison and this is how the church grew I find it hard to resist a little bit of testimony here not so much personal as of a close relative who found it very hard indeed to come to terms with the depression and suicide of a brother and in wrestling with this for many many months she found consolation and assurance in a verse from

Psalms 112 that we've just sung it says in verse 7 he is not afraid of bad news his heart is firm trusting in the Lord and you know that's a very profound testimony to the grace of God working in our hearts that in times of such turbulence and insecurity in our lives we are not afraid of bad news because our hearts are firm trusting in the Lord and we know that he is sovereign he that he rules he will have his way and whatever seems to be happening in this world our God reigns amen well tonight

I thought it would be a good idea if you looked at the proposed title for this talk to continue where we left off this morning because we looked at the first day or two of the new church of Jesus Christ after Pentecost and the title for tonight is four years later well the fledgling church as we thought about it this morning from day one from its very inception was controlled by and infused by full of the Holy Spirit and we have Peter in that chapter two that we read this morning preaching that fiery sermon at Pentecost just a mere seven weeks from the brutal and immoral and utterly unjust murder of the Lord

Jesus nailed to that cross at Golgotha and we have that timid bruised Jesus denying unlearned fisherman Peter we have him now as a changed man he's changed by Jesus resurrection and he's empowered by the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had promised and he's full of holy zeal and he doesn't mince his words men of Israel hear these words Jesus of Nazareth a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst as you yourselves know this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men

God raised him up loosing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it in short Peter saying Jesus is the son of God you know fine well all that he was and he did but you killed him however God's plan is higher and greater than anything you could do and he raised him to life and we are here as witnesses of all this nothing could have changed such a timid unlearned fisherman to a proclaimer of the truth of the gospel in front of hostile people he was signing his death warrant!

[11 : 40] If he was doing it on his own but he was infused with the Holy Spirit and these people who heard him convicted by the Holy Spirit and moved by the undeniable truth of the sermon around 3,000 3,000 my friends came to faith that Pentecost day and they together with 120 or so who were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit they made up the new church and as we thought this morning the church was founded on four focus points teaching of the apostles fellowship breaking of bread and prayer and then the apostles performed wonderful miracles much to the awe of the church but the practical outworking of this faith in the risen Lord Jesus led to meeting and sharing day in day out having material things in common meeting what the needy required by selling property and possessions breaking bread together praising

God and the result was that the church grew and the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved this is a glorious and wonderful coming together of the people of God under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit what could possibly go wrong well people did people went wrong people always can and will go wrong fallen people inside the church and outside the church we have Ananias and Sapphira conspiring to lie and test the spirit of the Lord with fatal consequences and we've got the religious authorities who are seeing their power base and their position in society being eroded by these upstart Christ followers and they're determined to do something about it and they had the disciples arrested interrogated warned beaten! threatened! And they might even have faced a worse punishment had it not been for the intervention under God's spirit of course of that respected teacher the Pharisee Gamaliel who warned the agitated and vicious Sadducees to let the apostles be because if they were not of God they would fail while if a remote possibility perhaps but if they were of God the very Sanhedrin would find itself fighting against God and surely they didn't want that I was at pains to point out this

morning that the book we're reading is not a complete history of the early church it's literally acts of apostolic men selected extracts from all that Jesus continued to do through the activities of his followers after his resurrection and so after those initial confrontations in chapters 3 and 4 and 5 of Acts there seems to have been a period of relative calm during which as chapter 5 verse 42 records and every day in the temple and from house to house they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus but more trouble from within and from without the church was just round the corner so after an unspecified length of time as the church grew it became increasingly apparent the apostles were being drawn more and more into as they put it waiting on tables a kind of meals without wheels service for the financially and the socially disadvantaged now it was a plan a kind of ad hoc welfare plan born at Pentecost but one that became less and less practically feasible as the church mushroomed and grew this social work if you like was not the apostles original anointing their gifting and in an attempt to correct this they followed Moses' example in the desert remember Jethro Moses' father-in-law came and told him you can't judge all these people you'll kill yourself delegate and so that's what they did the apostles delegated so that they could give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word two of the original points of focus at day one of the church so there was a kind of ad hoc election if you like this was held and a perfect seven of deacons were proposed and seconded by the church and as we read the job description in chapter six the bar was set very high for these deacons remember deacon or diaconus in Greek means servant remember Jesus' own words in Mark 10 45 the son of man did not come to be deaconed to to be served but to deacon to serve himself and to give himself as a ransom for many fallen human beings being what they are

[17 : 45] I suppose it's actually a surprise that there wasn't a falling out before the start of chapter six the exact timing is not certain but we may be a couple of years into the church's existence by this point and the church was uniform in its belief in the risen Christ as the saviour of the world but it was decidedly non-uniform in its own composition now Jerusalem was a melting pot of Jews from all over the known world and the church at that point the Christian church was composed of primarily converted Jews you see it was also mandated if possible that at least once a year Jews should try to get to Jerusalem for one of the three major feasts there was Passover the feast of unleavened bread that was in spring and there was Pentecost the feast of weeks in late

May or early June 50 days after the Passover and then there was Succot the feast of tabernacles in the autumn so not just Palestine Jews but the diaspora would try to come remember Simon from Cyrene in northeast Libya as we would know it nowadays the father of Alexander and Rufus he'd come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when he was seized on by the Romans to carry Jesus cross recorded in Mark 15 21 so there would have been all sorts of Jews with their own languages in Jerusalem as in Acts 2 but there was a fluctuating population depending on whether it was feast time or not but there was something else happening too I think within the free church we may have observed certainly in the past though maybe not so much now a tendency for the natives of

Lewis and Skye who have lived most of their lives in the central belt or even further south to gravitate back to the island of their birth and their ancestors in their later years this is not a new phenomenon many Jews from the diaspora all over the known world would try to migrate back to Palestine in their later years so that they could die and be buried in Jerusalem and they spent their later years in the suburbs of Jerusalem but the men of these families tended to die earlier than the women and that may be something to do with the biological superiority of women over men or even the hard time men have in their lives who knows but the consequences of all this was that there were lots of widows in Jerusalem many of these were from areas where there was a strong Greek influence and where Greek was the main language spoken these were the Hellenistic Jews that we read about in chapter 6 verse 1 that's how they came about that's who they were and try as they might they were different from Judean Jews just as natives of Lewis are different from natives of Skye try telling the two of them that they're the same and they were different in language and culture and there were tensions which emerged within the Christian church as a result that one there got more food than I did I think it's the Jews from Judea who are getting a bigger share I can just imagine the sigh of relief breathed by the twelve apostles as they landed this hot potato onto the laps of the seven godly deacons now months must have elapsed as these good deacons did their work but eventually we reach the second half of chapter 6 and the events of chapter 7 which a variety of commentators think occurred around 34 or 35

AD four or five years after Jesus was crucified and four or five years after Jesus rose again so that's not even as long as from the start of Covid until now but we've got a situation where the church has blossomed though as we thought this morning Acts 6 verse 7 as it were draws a line under phase one of that manifesto proclaimed by Jesus himself in chapter one about his followers being witnesses!

[23 : 06] in Jerusalem and Judea and Sumeria to the ends of the earth in 6 verse 7 it says and the word of God continued to increase and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith but that was as far as the church went it was in Jerusalem but what about Judea and Samaria and forwards to the ends of the earth how's that going to work what's the Lord Jesus going to continue to do and pivotal to what happens next is a very special saint called Stephen whom we're going to look at but as we know Stephen became the first martyr the so called proto martyr of the Christian faith martyr is a Greek word for witness as you probably know already but the point about these martyr witnesses is their holy boldness to continue to declare what they know and see to be true despite opposition even to the extent of yielding up their very lives martyrs and these martyrs were not confined to early

New Testament times but as we know very well many were the martyrs around reformation and covenanter times but the martyrdoms continue in the persecuted church even today we don't see this but these martyrdoms are going on in Iraq and Syria and Iran and Pakistan and Afghanistan and Myanmar and a hundred other countries and we haven't even touched the African continent but bearing witness even unto death is what Stephen did under the influence of the Holy Spirit and what followed it was like the release of a log jam of satanic hostility to Christ and the result was great persecution such that Christ followers converted Jews converted diaspora many of them were scattered far and wide taking the good news of the gospel of

Jesus Christ with them and so the gospel continued to spread but phase two of the gospel and the spread of that was driven by persecution as well as by proclamation so let's ponder for a few minutes Stephen whose day the feast of Stephen is of course commemorated one day after Jesus' birth on the 26th December he was a very important figure in the early church and much venerated in centuries past and even now well four years ago I welcomed someone new who had come to the evening service at the Baptist church and it turned out he was a Christian cardiology registrar doing a short term locum in the hospital and he'd been praying that God would lead him to meet a Christian cardiologist and for once I turned out to be the answer to prayer rather than being the subject of it and this lad was Nepali by birth and he was living and working for his full time training post in Manchester a lovely lad with whom Leslie and I bonded and we remain close friends with him and his delightful wife and three daughters even now we meet up regularly but he was very softly spoken I don't hear as well as I used to and I suspect I share that phenomenon with others here whatever I thought he said his name was Stephen and after we'd had him home for some supper as we exchanged details as he was leaving it turned out his name was G1 not Stephen why didn't you tell me I had your name wrong

I asked him and that was about an hour and a half of Stephening away well he said Stephen is my favourite character from the Bible and it was such an honour to be called by his name so what what was so special about Stephen many commentators think think that he was actually one of the Hellenistic Jews himself and it was through interaction with the Hellenistic Jews that the circumstances arose which led to his murder we're told in verse 9 of chapter 6 that then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen as it was called and of the Cyrenians and Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia and Asia rose up and disputed with Stephen but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking then they secretly instigated men who said we've heard him speak blasphemous words against

[28 : 44] Moses and God and they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes and they came upon him and they seized him and brought him before the council and they set up false witnesses!

who said this man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law for we've heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us and isn't this so beautiful friends and gazing at him all even his enemies all who sat in the council saw his face was like the face of an angel the freedmen or libertines so called they were hellenistic jews but not christian ones and they had their own synagogue within Jerusalem so as an apologist for the christian faith stephen met with and debated with these jews perhaps on

their own turf as we would put it but his intellect and his oratory put these Jews in the shade and pride and jealousy erupted and led to name calling and false testimony trumped up charges arraignment before the authorities it was a pattern of behaviour motivated by self interest and pride and this mimicked what happened to the

Lord Jesus but it's a pattern of behaviour prevalent today on both sides of the Atlantic the false charge against Stephen was blasphemy he was in the dock and in chapter 7 we're given a fairly detailed account of this particular deacon's defence basically in his defence as I said earlier he declares that he believes in all that Abraham said and did all that Moses said and did and wrote and all that the prophets said and did but he looks at the totality of Jewish history in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ and he slants the interpretation and assessment of scripture to show that Jesus of Nazareth murdered like the prophets before him by the very Jews he came to save and who were in front of Stephen that

Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the law and the prophets to the last letter and stroke of a pen and he was inspired literally was Stephen in his exposition of scripture but the effect that it had on the high priest and the Sanhedrin was naked hostility and heinous violence as their fury as in their fury they gnashed their teeth they ground their teeth together they hated this man but the final straw was a particular declaration of the most beautiful truth the Jews thought it was the worst blasphemy as they stoned Stephen to death but he simply told it like it was he said what he saw it was as if the mist of the physical world was blown away by the wind of the spirit and Stephen saw spiritual eternal reality he saw the son of man standing at the right hand of God he was home

Saul to be Paul thoroughly approved of the mob violence and murder but little did he know what lay ahead of him for him under the providence of God what I'd like to do though is consider just for two or three minutes what made Stephen tick he was very gifted in a way he out apostled the apostles you see he preached wonderful sermons as we have seen he knew scripture inside out he taught the truth as it is in Jesus that is after all what chapter seven is all about and he was able to argue and debate and give a reason for the hope he had but he had evangelical zeal engaging with others to tell forth the good news about Jesus but like the apostles in chapter six verse eight he also performed great wonders and signs among the people and this man Stephen was the first to die for his

[34 : 05] Christian faith though apostles were to follow this route at a later date he didn't simply wait on tables did Stephen and distribute food equitably between all the different ethnic groups within the new church though he did that too recently I came across a prayer of one of the Puritans Thomas Brooks which I think helps us to understand what Stephen was about I read another prayer from this book by Samuel Rutherford earlier I commend it to you it's a little book called Tim Chester by Tim Chester who really has edited Puritan prayers it's called Into His Presence and I think it will enhance your quiet times it certainly has mine one of the prayers in that book goes like this and Thomas

Brooks is praying and he says Lord Jesus may I crave nothing nor wish for anything that is not found in you for in you there is light to enlighten the soul wisdom to counsel the soul power to support the soul goodness to supply the soul mercy to pardon the soul beauty to delight the soul glory to ravish the soul fullness to fill the soul that's the key about Stephen Paul who so approved of Stephen's brutal murder later wrote in one of his carried away mega sentences beginning Ephesians 3 14 for this reason says

Paul I bow my knees before the father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith that you that you being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and here it is so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God Stephen was filled full in all sorts of ways firstly verses 3 and 5 of chapter 6 he was full of the spirit the Holy

Spirit now because we do not behave as Stephen behaved does this mean that we are not full of the spirit it seems to me that when we ask Jesus into our lives that he fulfills his promise no surprise there and the Holy Spirit comes to live in our hearts but because we are fallen saved though we may be like Paul we struggle against doing what we shouldn't and not doing what we should and there is a battle going on and our evil desires try to quench the spirit again and again it is as if we have someone come to stay with us and we lock them away in their bedroom don't let them

integrate with any other visitors we may have the spirit in all his glorious fullness is in our hearts but we try our utmost not to let him to be seen not so

Stephen he didn't wear a phylactery on his sleeve he wore his heart on his sleeve his soul his saviour he was full of the Holy Spirit and nobody but the agents of Satan as in the Sanhedrin tried to deny it now we will remember from our reading of scripture all sorts of activity of the spirit and all sorts of the fruit of the spirit the usual list quoted from Galatians 5 22 but the fruit of the spirit is love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness self control against such things there is no law and those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires well Stephen displayed all this in abundance as an imitator of God as an imitator of Jesus [39 : 38] Christ the second thing was that Stephen was full of wisdom chapter 6 verse 3 now wisdom is nowhere quoted as a fruit of the spirit but heavenly wisdom is a gift of God there for the asking James 1 and 5 says if any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him but let him ask in faith with no doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that's driven and tossed by the wind for that person must not suppose he will receive anything from the Lord he's a double minded man unstable in all his ways I reckon we may all know gracious Christians who have been unwise just as we will know wise men and women who are deeply unspiritual

Stephen and the other six deacons had in their job description fullness of the spirit and fullness of wisdom a formidable and glorious combination but he was thirdly full of faith verse 5 describes him as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit and we don't know whether Stephen had been around Jesus and we don't know if he'd been around the disciples before the crucifixion remember we're just two years on when he was appointed deacon or whether as some would assert he was a Hellenistic Jew himself who'd come to faith at Pentecost or later but if the latter then he would fall into that category described by Jesus as being blessed blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed just let our minds take in that Stephen though he was around the place may not have met

Jesus he's in the same boat as we are and what blessing blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed full of faith so Stephen was full as in not half full or two thirds full or a wee bit or a lot but full of faith he knew whom he had believed and he was fully persuaded he was able to keep that which he had committed to him against that day fourthly in verse 8 we find he was full of God's grace let's remind ourselves mercy is not receiving what we deserve grace is receiving what we don't deserve grace is God's riches at

Christ's expense it is by grace that we have been saved Ephesians 2 and 8 for it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not from yourselves it is the gift of God not by works so that no one can boast Stephen was full to the brim of grace as he was of faith as he was of wisdom as he was of the spirit of Jesus Christ and the consequence was faithfully that he was full of power power to perform those very wonders and signs outlined in verse 8 which mimicked again the behaviour and activity of the Lord Jesus remember as Peter described it in Acts 10 talking to Cornelius you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea says Peter there beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed how

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil for God was with him this was the self same power of which Stephen was full what Paul describes as his incomparably great power for us who believe but possibly the most remarkable feature of Stephen's Christ like character was that he was full of forgiveness R.T.

[44 : 26] Kendall describes that forgiveness of verse 60 in chapter 7 as Stephen's finest hour he fulfills Jesus example which we may repeat in that section of the prayer from Matthew 6 which Jesus taught his disciples forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors Stephen's words fell on his knees just before the Lord Jesus did receive his spirit where Lord do not hold this sin against them and he echoed the Lord Jesus on the cross Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing are you or am I full of forgiveness like Stephen are we full of the Holy Spirit not quenching his glorious transformation in our lives are we full of wisdom are we full of faith are we full of

God's grace are we full of power are we full of Christ as Thomas Brooks said do I know Christ's fullness filling my soul let's pray together