

Stephen - The Man of God

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[0 : 0 0] You see that in the New Testament church, there were believers who were examples to other Christians. Go to the church in Thessalonica, for example, and there that church in Thessalonica was commended by none less than the Apostle Paul.

As examples to other believers for their receiving the gospel with joy despite their sufferings. And then the Apostle Paul himself, he was and he is an example for other Christians to follow.

You go to his letter to the church in Philippi and there you see in that letter he's calling on the church there to follow his example. Follow his example and imitating him, imitating him in the way that he lived according to his Christian lifestyle.

In his delighting in the Lord, in his zeal and following the Saviour. Calling on the believers in Philippi to imitate his cross-centered life.

The way that he lived his life in the light of the victory of the Lord Jesus on the cross. So, in the realm of believers as examples to others, we're going to look at the example of Stephen.

[1 : 1 6] Because as we see recorded here by Luke, the author of Acts, if we see Stephen's life in witness, then we see here an example of a believer who truly was a person of God, a man of God.

Because you see, if you and I want to mature as Christians, then we'll want to look at examples of other Christians, other believers. Those who quite categorically were strong in the Lord.

Those whose life in witness shone for the Lord. And whose life in witness give you and I encouragement to stand for truth in an ever-increasing society where the wider church has shown such hostility because it's standing for the Gospel.

So, just reading this flyer from the Christian Institute. Scotland needs Christians to speak and act with wisdom, grace and courage.

Unless we look at the example of Stephen this evening, or certainly look at the first part that we find here in Acts, we'll see that Stephen exemplified that standing and speaking with wisdom, grace and courage.

[2 : 3 2] So, we're going to look at this example of a godly man. For our example, for our encouragement. And encouragement, as we said, standing for truth.

For you who know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour. And to help us take that stand for truth, to help us to take that stand with wisdom and grace and courage and power.

Well, let's look at Stephen. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Here's this man of God, a man whose character is so commended in these pages of Scripture that we should look more closely at his words, at his witness, because his words and witness tell of the courage of true faith when a Christian is being imposed by those who hate the Lord Jesus.

And as we look at Stephen's example, it's for you and I to be inspired. To be inspired in your, the more taking your stand for truth.

Especially when, you know, so often in the face of what seems to be almost overwhelming opposition. We feel weak, we feel fragile. When there's that concerted opposition that seems so powerful, so increasing in venom.

[3 : 52] Well, look at Stephen. Look at Stephen's example. It's there for you and I to be encouraged. It's for you and I to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

That Stephen was strong in the Lord and the power of God's might. Especially when all around seems so hostile to the one true faith in the Lord Jesus. So, in this section in Acts 8 to 15, we're going to look at three things for our encouragement this evening.

Firstly, the godly character of Stephen. Then secondly, the godly witness of Stephen. And then that intriguing verse in verse 15, the godly appearance of Stephen.

So, firstly, the godly character of Stephen. We meet Stephen, first of all, in that first section we read there in chapter 6. I mean, obviously, he's already a man who's been marked out within the Christian community there in Jerusalem.

Somebody who already has been noticed as having particular godly character. I mean, there he is included in the seven men. Seven men who were chosen for their diaconal responsibilities and helping in the relief of the poor.

[5 : 07] They've already got a good reputation within that church in Jerusalem. They're obviously men of wisdom. Their lives have already obviously borne testimony to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within them.

But notice when you read that section again, when you see these seven names, notice that it's only Stephen who's particularly singled out for his being full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit.

Now, that's not to say, of course, that the other six men didn't have faith or didn't have the Holy Spirit within them. Of course not. But obviously Stephen has stood out for his godly character.

And so much so is sufficient for Stephen to be an example to you and I in godliness and spiritual maturity. In fact, it's fascinating.

You see the way that Stephen is consistently describing his character in the sense of fullness. Fullness. I'll sort of jiggle the verses about it. But look, verse 5, full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 10] Then verse 8, full of grace and power. Alongside these other six chosen men. Then back to verse 3, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. You see the consistency, the constant expression of fullness.

Fullness in his godliness. Fullness. A maturity. Through his constant walk with the Lord. And let's look at these aspects of his fullness that tell of his godly character.

Let's look at the fullness of the Holy Spirit, firstly. There's Stephen indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Obviously in his consistent lifestyle, bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

There's a consistent lifestyle in the whole of his character. Obviously in the relationships that he formed that displayed the Spirit's influence. His humble dependence on the Spirit's power to enable him to do the work that God had assigned him for the cause of the Gospel.

The power of the Holy Spirit would be seen, would be particularly evident. As we'll see in a moment when he was in trial for his faith. If he's giving his testimony.

[7 : 23] We'll look at that more fully, God willing, next week. But obviously the power of the Spirit's there with him as he's standing before his accusers. But surely the point is this. Here's a man of godly character.

And it's evident in the Spirit's enabling power in Stephen's life. He has, as somebody's remarked, he has this abiding condition. The abiding condition of being indwelt in full of the Holy Spirit.

I don't know how old Stephen was at this point. I don't know how many years he'd been a Christian. But one thing we do know is that here's a man of mature faith.

His very life is characterized by what Paul would later describe as walking by the Spirit. A life that would be demonstrated by the fruits of the Spirit that Paul would later speak of in the church in Galatia.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. A life demonstrated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 29] A life lived to accomplish what God had given him to do. Not in his own strength. But in strength of God the Spirit.

For you who are a Christian. You are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And it's for you and me to keep in step with the Spirit. To walk daily with the Spirit.

And to grow and to grow in what we call progressive holiness. Progressive maturity. As Spirit-filled believers. How do we do that? Surely through a daily walk with God and full dependence on him.

Acknowledging always that we can do nothing but nothing of ourselves in the work of the kingdom of God. So without the enabling power of the Spirit, no preacher is going to be an effective tool in his master's service.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit, no one of us are going to achieve anything in the work of the kingdom. In other words, it's going to crumble in the face of adversity when we're being attacked for our faith.

[9 : 37] Without the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian is going to remain so unproductive in the work that he or she has been given to do for the Lord. No, you and I are to be full of the Holy Spirit as Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit.

What else do we notice here in verse 5? He's full of faith. He's not just described as a faithful servant. He's a man full of faith.

Faith, of course, faith in God. Faith in the one who'd saved him. Faith in the one who'd led him thus far in the work that Stephen had been assigned to do in the church there in Jerusalem.

Now, fullness of faith. Well, again, we'll see that more clearly when Stephen's on trial there before the Sanhedrin, before the Jewish council.

But, you know, you can see how Stephen trusted God fully. You know, think of the times before when Jesus was with his disciples. And Jesus berated his disciples for their little faith.

[10 : 40] Remember when they were in that storm and Jesus was on the boat. And the disciples were afraid even though Jesus was with them in that very boat. And Jesus said to them, Oh, you of little faith.

And, of course, Stephen being full of faith, in such contrast to the many times when you and I exercise such little faith in the sovereign God who works out all things for his glory.

Well, there's Stephen full of faith. He's stepping forward in faith. He's doing the work of that servant leadership that we read of there in verse, the start of chapter 6 with these other six men in Jerusalem.

Stephen didn't know what was going to happen next in his life. He didn't know what God had before him for his work. He didn't know what was going to happen, as we read there of the opposition from Jewish opponents and then later the Jewish council.

Stephen lived by that fullness of faith, knowing that the sovereign God was with him always, at all times. And so it was for Stephen to trust God fully, completely, wholly for all that would come to pass in God's perfect ordering of events in Stephen's life, and, of course, the life of the church.

- [12 : 05] And in this still very early part of 2018, it's for you and I to be full of faith, to be fully and completely trusting in God for all things, for all that lies before us, because we are to know and to have that absolute conviction of faith that God has gone ahead, has gone ahead.

God knows the beginning from the end. He is the beginning. He is the Alpha and the Omega. So it's for you and I to be strengthened in faith, to cry out, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

Keep trusting in God for all things, for all, every aspect of your life. For every aspect of the life of this church, for this congregation. We don't know what tomorrow is going to bring.

We know that God is with us in that tomorrow. And so it's for you and I to trust him fully and not be plagued, as so often could be the case, to be plagued with a lack of faith that lives by sight and not by faith.

So Stephen there, man full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith. And then what else do we see? He's a man full of wisdom. In fact, twice he's described as being full of wisdom.

- [13 : 27] Verse 3 there, along with the other six chosen men. And then again in verse 10, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking these Jewish opponents.

Wisdom. Wisdom. And we have to say it's a rare jewel of grace. It's a treasure that, you know, we need to exercise constantly, continually.

If you and I are going to live well and correctly for the glory of God, because God gives to his people, he gives wisdom to his people, to you and I.

Because it's wisdom that is that grace that enables you and I, of course with the Holy Spirit's enabling, to make right decisions, to do those things that are appropriate in the very different circumstances that we find ourselves in the service of God.

So wisdom comes from God. And of course, wisdom was seen supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. He's described that. Jesus is described as the wisdom of God.

- [14 : 32] But remember, at all times, Jesus did that which was right. At all times, Jesus behaved appropriately. At all times, he was wise.

He said the right words. He behaved correctly. He did the right actions. He did all that was right in conforming to the will of God. That wisdom, of course, was seen supremely on the cross.

Jesus did there on the cross. He bore our sins, that which was absolutely appropriate in his dying for sinners, taking upon himself our sins, so that you and I might become the righteousness of God.

And for Stephen here to be, well, to be described, to be referred to twice in being full of wisdom, surely we're seeing here this emphasis on Stephen as a man who knew God.

Because it was his heart's desire to do the will of God with the wisdom that God had given him to exercise the various responsibilities that Stephen was given in that church. Now, look at the responsibilities that Stephen had.

- [15 : 38] On the one hand, it was the practical administration, that waiting on tables, that serving that you see at the start of chapter 6 for the benefit of those who needed such help. But then, notice too, as we progressed through that chapter, it wasn't just the practical element that Stephen needed wisdom for.

There he is, later in the chapter, disputing with his Jewish accusers. So, obviously, Stephen has displayed such wisdom, such maturity and wisdom, dealing with so many issues.

I mean, as one of the seven, he's dealing with the troubles about the distribution over provisions for the needy. He's going to need wisdom to deal with the various tensions that that situation brought about.

But he's also going to need wisdom to proclaim the Lord Jesus before a hostile crowd. And we pray, surely, that we'll see in our church and our congregation, as well as the larger churches, the churches across our land, that we'll see the more evidence of wisdom in every aspect of the Lord's work and every area of work that God has given us to do, whether it's in the administration of our resources, whether it's in dealing with sensitive issues that do crop up from time to time in any congregation, whether it's in the preaching the good news of salvation, whether it's for you and I to say a word for Jesus to outsiders who might only hear the gospel proclaimed to them now and again.

No, you and I need that wisdom, godly wisdom in the church today. Not, of course, the wisdom of the world because the wisdom of the world seeks to place man at the centre.

[17 : 31] But no, we have the wisdom that God gives. Wisdom to heal wounds. Wisdom to encourage the downhearted. Wisdom to build up one another.

Wisdom to comfort the afflicted. Wisdom to tell others the gospel of the Lord Jesus. We pray even now that God will raise up men and women in our congregation to be people of wisdom, full of wisdom, to be wise ambassadors for the Lord Jesus and to go where God sends us with wisdom.

Why? Not for our own sakes, but for his glory, for the furtherance of his kingdom. So, we've noticed here Stephen's full of the Holy Spirit and being full of the Holy Spirit, he's a man full of faith, he's full of wisdom, but what else?

There's more. See in verse 8, he's full of grace and power. I think we should actually keep these two together. Look at these characteristics together and the context in which Stephen is showing grace and power.

Take the fullness of grace. I mean, there's Stephen's gracious character. Of course, it's come from the God of all grace. You can see his grace in action.

[18 : 50] There he's performing these signs and wonders that point to the God of miracles. Stephen's performing these actions. He's not doing it to draw attention to himself.

He's directing others to God. I mean, Stephen's grace wouldn't allow him to take center stage. His grace wouldn't, you know, want others to be praising him.

No, his grace is exercised to draw others to see and know the God of all grace. And being full of power, he's able to perform these miracles.

Now, what these miracles were, we're not told. But God, the Holy Spirit, obviously enabling Stephen to do remarkable signs, external signs, telling of the reality of God's presence.

Here's Stephen this channel for such miracles. Now, miracles in themselves were not common in the early church. In fact, very few individuals were actually given the gift of miracles.

[19 : 52] This is a transitional period in the church. But the point surely is this. Here's this combination of grace and power showing that Stephen is truly a man of God and he's equipped for the work that God had given him to do, equipped through grace and power.

And look at that combination, grace and power. Isn't that the combination that should characterize a Christian who's earnest about his witness, her witness for the Lord Jesus?

Lord Jesus himself, full of grace and power. Now, you might think these two characteristics are opposite, opposite qualities. But in fact, they're actually complementary because the Christian surely should be at the same time gracious and effective.

when Jesus was instructing his disciples to go out into the world and go out into the world to face vicious hostility. And Jesus said, you have to have complementary qualities.

Behold, I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be as wise as a serpent and as innocent as doves. So wisdom, wisdom to live out the message of the gospel.

[21 : 10] Do that before a world that hates the Savior. but combined with an innocent, certainly an innocent that's far from naive, far from gullible. See, the Christian who's empowered by God with grace and power, anything but the caricature of the naive, soft, rather gormless individual that the media like to portray of Christian.

Look at Stephen here and we'll see this I think more clearly as we progress through looking at his life. Stephen was anything but gullible. He's anything but immature. He's not the pathetic individual that the world would like to portray Christians as being.

Here's a man of power, a man of strength. Here's a man who combined the qualities of wisdom and faith and grace and power. He's revealing his godly character through his being full of the Holy Spirit.

and would that the church, whether ourselves here in our little congregation, believers up and down the land, believers across the world, that we exhibit these qualities.

These are gifts from God to use. It's for you and I to seek to be strong in the Lord and the power of his might. It's for you and I to take our stand for truth. It's for you and I to confine the foolishness of the world with its wisdom and to bring before the world the wisdom of the cross as Stephen obviously did there before his accusers.

[22 : 48] So we've seen the godly character of Stephen. But secondly, what about the godly witness of Stephen? Here's this man of God. Here's this man full of the Holy Spirit.

Full of wisdom and faith and grace and power and yet despite or maybe we should say because of these qualities he provokes the most intense opposition to his witness to the Lord Jesus.

I mean I don't think we can read into what we read here as Stephen looking to confront those who were hostile to him. No, they confronted him. I mean evidently it was his preaching the Lord Jesus that drew those who were opposed to him through the dispute with him.

And as we can work it out from verse 9 there, these are men who were free Jewish slaves, men from North Africa and modern day Turkey, men who are now living in Jerusalem.

So these individuals they've all combined together to object to Stephen's preaching preaching the word of God. But Stephen doesn't retaliate with unrestrained anger.

[24 : 03] He certainly doesn't back off from engaging with those who are against him and his message. No, what do we notice? He stands his ground. Even though obviously he's vastly outnumbered, but it's his godly character that you see as being foundational to his courageous witness.

You see that in verse 10 is wisdom, wisdom through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. It's too much for his disputers. And so much so they bring in rogues, rogues to twist Stephen's words, words about the Lord Jesus.

These false witnesses that are brought in to stir up the people. So much so that Stephen is dragged before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and he's accused there of speaking against the temple, speaking against the law of Moses.

And they're charging Stephen with claiming that Jesus would destroy the temple and get rid of the customs that Moses had handed down. And of course that's going back to what Jesus in his earthly ministry hadn't spoken about when Jesus said destroy this temple in three days he'll raise it up.

Of course Jesus was speaking of himself as the temple that would be destroyed by death and then raised up three days later. But remember in Jesus a few years before Jesus accusers were twisting his words to make out that Jesus had spoken against the physical temple that they said he was going to destroy in three days raise it up.

[25 : 36] And then we've on a few years and you're seeing the same twisting of Jesus' words. Anything to discredit the Lord Jesus. Anything to discredit the testimony of those who are taking their stand for truth.

And there's several things we can note here. And the first thing surely is this, that true godliness will attract opposition and so often from those who are religious without the Lord Jesus.

Because if you observe, where do you see so much hostility against the gospel of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, in Christ alone, by faith alone, through grace alone.

Could you see that opposition so often, so intense, from those who masquerade us, fine religious individuals, who are preaching a morality of works, but devoid of the spirit, devoid of true faith, devoid of true saving wisdom, devoid of saving grace.

The false teachers who will proclaim a prosperity gospel to the vulnerable. The false teachers who will seek to rewrite scripture according to present day morality.

[26 : 54] And as with Stephen, so for the man or the woman of God, for whom the pack of religious rules will surround, but surround not with love, but with hate.

But then, there's this amazing statement that we find at the conclusion of this section. Verse 15, And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

This remarkable statement about the appearance of Stephen. Let's just look at this carefully. The hostility that Stephen was facing from the highest religious leaders in Jerusalem, and together with these false witnesses, far from depressing Stephen, actually had the opposite effect.

Stephen didn't appear downtrodden. He didn't appear dejected in spirit because of the hatred that he was facing. No, what do we find? We find his face is shining.

Now, those who are hostile to him, they must have been absolutely transfixed of what they're seeing. We're told, actually, they're gazing at him. They're staring at him.

[28 : 09] They notice something in Stephen's face that stopped them in their tracks. Here's the shining face of a human being that, look, the author of this book, refers to the face of an angel.

I have no idea what the face of an angel looks like. Stephen certainly had a radiance in his facial appearance that certainly was no ordinary appearance. We have to go back to other parts of Scripture where we see a human being having a radiance beyond the normal.

Remember when Moses came down from Mount Sinai after having met with God. You read there in Exodus 34 that his face shone. Now, we're told there in Exodus 34, 29, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he'd been talking with God.

So using Scripture to interpret Scripture, I think we can deduce this, that as Stephen was so close to God in the fullness of the Spirit, the fullness of his faith, the fullness of his wisdom, the fullness of his grace and power.

So Stephen there is reflecting the glory of God as he's standing against his accusers. And of course we have to say that the description of a believer is unusual.

[29 : 25] We surely have to say this at the same time that Christian, you, Christian, must shine for God. For you and I to show the evidence of your love for God, my love for God, to be shown even in your very face, a face that's reflecting God.

Just a few days ago, just two or three days ago I was reading something that some of you might, some individual you might know, some of you know anyway. And it was concerning the members of a congregation about a particular fellowship event.

And she wrote this, there's a lot more she wrote, but she said this, I saw something on their faces. I saw something, literally she said, on their countenances, something on their faces.

She was referring to the joy of being with fellow believers, coming together to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus, and that joy of being together, one with another, impacted these godly Christians.

And they were revealing something of the joy of the Lord, even in their very countenances, even in their very faces. And that you and I are those who shine for the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 44] That you and I have that godly character, the character that Stephen had, so that you and I might shine as lights in the world for the Lord Jesus. That you and I will be courageous witnesses for for him.

And that the face, the shining face of the Saviour, that that face would be shining on you. But if you don't yet know the Lord Jesus, there's still hope. There's still hope.

Because as we'll notice as you go progressively through the long chapter, chapter 7, and yep, at the very end of chapter 7, into the start of chapter 8, you'll notice that there was an individual there who was witnessing Stephen's testimony.

And that individual was Saul who would become the Apostle Paul. After Paul's conversion, some time after, he wrote to the church in Philippi. These words in Philippians 2, verse 14 to 15, do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation among whom you shine.

as light in the world, among whom you shine as light in the world. I'll say that you are those who are shining, witnesses, that you shine as light in the world.

[32 : 12] You and I have work to do in this dark, dark world. It's for you and I to shine, to reflect the light of the Lord Jesus. Shine for Him as you await that moment, that time and you will behold the glory of God.

The glory that will be that light in the new Jerusalem. We read there of the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, who will be that lamp that shines eternally. Even before that great occasion, that great time, for you and I, to shine as light in this dark world, not for our own glory, but for the glory of God, for His sake, for His cause.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord, forgive us for the many times when we don't shine for you. Forgive us for the many times when we are not lights in this world as we ought to be, when we hide our light, we ought to shine for you.

Help us, Lord, to show forth the Lord Jesus Christ by a shining witness, so that others might be attracted to the light within us, to the spirit within us, to the Lord Jesus, our Savior.

So help us, we pray, even this week, to shine for you wherever you send us, wherever you place us. Lord, help us to be your witnesses, and not to be ashamed of the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

[33 : 50] So hear us as we again wait upon you, as we sing our praise before you. Go before us, we pray, and all these things we ask, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, let's close in Psalm 9b.