

The First Christian Martyr

Stephen

Acts 6:6

You will remember that the chapter opened with a problem in the early church. A problem because some of the Hellenistic widows - that is, widows from outside Jerusalem, Jewish widows who had come to faith in Jesus Christ and were now a part of the church but were from Greek countries rather than the land of Israel - were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. There seemed to be great care given to the Jerusalem widows, those that were well-known to everybody. But some of the others were forgotten because they were from outside the normal circle. The Apostles could not serve as deacons and preach the Word. So they decided to select seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom to put in charge of this task. Those men are identified in verse 5. The first men in the list and the only one about whom it says anything is a man named Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit and are the main character in chapter 7. According to verse 5, he was a man in the early church who was a part of the Hellenists. He was a Greek-speaking believer in Jesus Christ who had belonged to a Jewish synagogue, as all the Jews did, but in a foreign land.



Stephen is then the subject of verse 8. “Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedman, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’ And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. They put forward false witnesses who

said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.’ And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel. The high priest said, ‘Are these things so?’” And Stephen gave a very long answer all the way through chapter 7.

In response to his great answer sweeping through the Old Testament, verse 54 says, “When they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” “They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep. Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

“Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.”

What an amazing man was Stephen. He was not a deacon. They didn’t come until later, but he was put in charge of serving tables. He was not an apostle, but he did signs and wonders. The miraculous power granted to the apostles was extended to him and also to another leader by the name of Philip. He was not a prophet, but he was a great

preacher. Not a deacon, but a servant. Not an apostle, but a miracle worker. Not a prophet, but a great preacher. He is a very unique man. He stands between the apostles and the structure of the early church uniquely. The only parallel to him we will meet in chapter 8, and it is Philip who is also named in chapter 6 along with him.

He is a largely overlooked individual. From what we can tell, he had a very short career. The church is very new and very young, and that means he is a very new believer, but the vast grasp that he had of the Old Testament is enough to be laid out in an entire chapter because of its accuracy and its richness. One whom everybody deemed to be a servant, and yet a miracle worker and a preacher and the first Christian martyr. We need to know this man. This is a man who is great by every divine measure. He's full of everything that every believer should be full of.

As we read in chapter 8. It is the very death of Stephen that becomes the catalyst to fulfill the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:8 before His ascension. He is the forerunner of the very man who stood and watched him crushed under the bloody stone: Saul of Tarsus. He is the forerunner of Paul. He is the one who carried the message to Hellenists, who carried the message to the people who lived outside Jerusalem and Judea, confronting congregations in Jewish synagogues, but those who were foreigners. He takes the first step beyond the Jews in the direction of the gentiles. The mantle of Stephen falls strangely on Saul, one of Stephen's most bitter enemies. In fact, it may be that the apostle Paul owes much of his exposure to the gospel to the sermon that Stephen preached. Stephen was a noble personality. He was essential to God's plan for world evangelization. He doesn't seem to have had a very long career. This is the only sermon that we have recorded that he ever preached, and there were no positive results. As far as we can tell, there's no record that anybody was saved or anybody believed, and yet it was the catalyst that caused the church to move in the next step of the Great Commission. Again, it may have been his death that began the career of Saul who became Paul.

His choosing, his choosing. Go back to chapter 6, verse 3. They're looking for, "men of good reputation who are full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Stephen was one of those men. So we know this, he was full of the Spirit, full of wisdom, and verse 5 says he was full of faith and it's implied, full of the Holy Spirit. When they look for the best of men, and they want seven of them out of the thousands of Christians now – the church has exploded, right? Three thousand at Pentecost. Five thousand more men in chapter four. Thousands are coming into the church. They're looking for just seven men. Stephen was one of the seven. What that tell us is the church did hold him in high reputation. If you're looking among thousands and maybe in the twenty thousands of people for seven, that's pretty high criteria when you identify those seven. His name, Stephanos means "victor's crown" and he actually won that in his martyrdom. He was a Jew from outside the land of Israel. The early church would have been careful in its choosing, selecting those only of the highest spiritual quality, and those qualifications would have been defined for them by the apostles.

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