

Stephen is Arrested, Part I

Text: Acts 6:8-15

Introduction:

Last time, we found the Apostles resolving an internal conflict, where Hellenistic (Greek speaking) widows were being neglected in the distribution. This led to the birth of the diaconate, which would enable the Apostles to give most of their attention to the ministry of the Word and prayer. Seven men were set apart by the church; men of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and full of wisdom, to fill this new office, in the life of the church. And with the blessing of God upon her, the church continued to grow, such that even many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

And of the seven men listed, two will be given special attention in the upcoming chapters, beginning with Stephen now (the remainder of Chapter 6 and all of Chapter 7), followed by Philip (in Chapter 8). Both of these men, were uniquely called to be evangelists, as well as deacons. And it is at this point, that a major transition will take place in the Book of Acts, following on the heels of Stephen's death (martyrdom). The church will face heavy persecution, which will lead many to spread out into all of the regions of Judea and into Samaria. Indeed, Stephen's death, is used by God to unravel His will further, as the Kingdom of God begins to make its way out of Jerusalem and toward the rest of the world, in accordance with Christ's command in Chapter 1 (Read Acts 8:1).

This morning, we move on then, to consider a portion of the ministry of Stephen, whose arrest will ultimately, according to the will and design of God, lead to his martyrdom, and home going to glory!

I. Stephen is Arrested

We begin then, by noting that Stephen is the first mentioned of the seven deacons listed in verse 5, and that with additional comment. "And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit..." Stephen was especially noted as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and the evidence of this will bear out brightly, as he fearlessly takes on a crowd of Jewish opposers, beginning in our text. Stephen was a man full of faith; he had a unique and emphasized

confidence in the reality and presence of God. And it led him to boldly take risks, preaching the Gospel in settings, that many (or perhaps even most) would easily avoid. And he was full of the Holy Spirit. His integrity was untainted; he was blameless; the fruit of the Spirit was evident in him, and having a good understanding of the Scriptures (especially in how they related to Christ--remember, he had no NT to work from), he was able to testify to the truth, in the face of great and scholarly opposition.

And furthermore, we are told something additional about Stephen, which we have yet to find displayed in the first 6 Chapters of Acts. Being full of faith and power, Stephen did "great wonders and signs among the people" (vs. 8). Here, we find the first description of signs and wonders being done, by someone other than an Apostle. It is worthy to note that the Apostles "laid hands" on Stephen (as well as Philip, who later performs miracles---Acts 8:6), when they were appointed to the diaconate. But suffice it to say, that Stephen, a deacon and an evangelist, performed great signs and wonders as well, as an accompaniment to the evangelistic message he was preaching. Now, this is significant, because Stephen's audience here, is not identical to the audience the Apostles have been addressing up to this point. Stephen is not speaking to Hebrew/Aramaic speaking Jews.

The attestation to, and authentication of the Gospel by miracles here (in the laying of the foundation of the church) is unto the breaking of further ground, Greek ground, as Philip is speaking in Greek, to Hellenists, who were from the dispersion. That is, Greek speaking Jews, who were scattered beyond Judea, into gentile regions of the world (via the Babylonian exile). [Read verse 9].

We are told that, the Hellenistic group, which challenges Stephen, are from the "Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia)." These are Jews, who had been freed from slavery, and who had joined together to form their own synagogue, where they could communicate together freely, in their own language. Notice, where they are from. Cyrene and Alexandria were in North Africa, Cilicia was a Roman province in the southeast part of Asia Minor, and Asia, was the Roman province in the western part of modern-day Turkey. And so, Stephen is breaking new ground here, as an Evangelist, seeking to extend the Kingdom of God beyond Jerusalem, by preaching to Hellenistic Jews from the dispersion. Likewise, miracles will be wrought through Philip, who evangelizes in Samaria.

[Note on the miraculous sign gifts and their primary *revelatory* purpose---Hebrews 2:1-4 & Ephesians 2:19-22].

And so, these Hellenistic Jews, from the Synagogue of the Freedmen, began disputing with Stephen, regarding the Gospel message he was preaching, of the risen Messiah, Jesus. [Read verse 10]. However, they were unmatched! Though they certainly outnumbered him, and though they ought to have had a good grasp of the Scriptures, we are told that they "were unable to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke." Ultimately, you cannot contend with the Spirit of God, especially as He expounds the meaning of His own Word! Stephen, being filled with the Holy Spirit, had an irrefutable grasp of the Scriptures, and he spoke with great conviction, clarity and power. They could not answer or refute him. For even, as the religious leaders sought to contend with Christ, and found themselves defeated every time, likewise, the Hellenists are incapable of refuting the one, who has the Spirit of Christ in him. And as they resorted to other tactics with the Lord Jesus (deceptive and wicked tactics), we will find these doing the same thing with Stephen here. [Note, Luke 20:40 & Luke 21:14-15].

In other words, brethren, none of this is to emphasize Stephen's natural wisdom or abilities, but rather, the Spirit, who was at work in and through him. Stephen merely accessed that wealth of wisdom and power by his faith (which itself was God-given, of course). Again, who are the enemies of the Gospel really contending with? The risen Christ! And clearly, they are no match for Him! [The Spirit is the power behind all of our evangelistic labors--apply].

Amen!!!