

In our ongoing series of sermons on the book of Acts, we have come to a section that describes a man named Stephen who was the first martyr of the Christian church. The last part of chapter 7 will tell the story of his death at the hands of some of his fellow Jews who had not accepted the message that Jesus was the Saviour promised to the Jews in the OT. The book of Acts tells the story of the birth and growth of the NT church after Jesus had ascended into heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit upon his followers. And one of the things that the story makes clear is that the early church grew faced a lot of opposition. That is not surprising since Jesus' time on earth was marked by opposition which culminated in his death on the cross. Indeed, Jesus had taught his disciples that they would be hated by the world even as he was hated by the world and his call to his hearers to follow him was a call to take up their cross. The book of Acts describes what that looked like for at least some of the members of the early church.

The story told in the book of Acts is told largely by describing some of the leaders during the first years of the early church. Peter and Paul are the most prominent, but the section we are in now features Stephen and pretty soon we will be introduced to Philip. The stories of Stephen and Philip describe how the church began to spread beyond Jerusalem. As a result of the persecution that arose in connection with the martyrdom of Stephen, the believers, including Philip scattered "throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" bringing the gospel with them. The book of Acts describes how the gospel spread from Jerusalem outward until Paul takes it to Rome.

So Stephen. He is one of the seven men of good repute chosen to relieve the apostles of administering the ministry of mercy. Stephen is singled out for special attention. Back in the first paragraph of this chapter when the names of the seven are mentioned, Stephen is described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit and then the other six names are just listed. They all had been chosen because they were "men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" but Stephen alone is described when the list of names is given as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." And then, the next chapter and a half focus on Stephen and his message.

Luke is holding up Stephen as an outstanding example of zeal and knowledge and courage. He is meant to be an inspiration to those who read his story. The church in the years since - up to the present - has continued to tell the story of martyrs and other exceptional Christians as an encouragement and an inspiration for regular believers who did not stand out from their peers in the way that the more exceptional believers did. So what we will do in the first part of this sermon is look at how Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, describes Stephen as an inspiration for us in our lives as followers of Christ.

We will begin back in verse 5 where Luke describes Stephen as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." These two characteristics go together, but they are not exactly the same. Someone who is full of faith will be full of the Holy Spirit and someone who is full of the Holy Spirit will be full of faith. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that a person can be full of faith. But it is important for us to consider each of these characteristics separately.

So first we need to be clear about the meaning of the word “faith” here. What exactly was that faith that Stephen was full of? One helpful definition is that faith includes trust in someone and that it is “a strong confidence in, and reliance upon, someone or something.” (Logos) In the context of the NT it faith usually is faith in Jesus and it has many affects in a person’s life. It is a confidence in Jesus and reliance upon Jesus and trust in Jesus. Those who have this faith have confidence in the forgiveness of sin and acceptance with God that comes through believing in Jesus. They rely on Jesus and the promises of God for their own salvation. But they also rely on Jesus for his care in their lives. They have confidence that taking up our cross and following Jesus will result in blessing even if it also results in persecution. Faith in Jesus means being confident that nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ including persecution and death.

In the case of Stephen, we see how his faith gives him zeal and courage in witnessing about Jesus in a hostile environment. He is described as being in a synagogue in the company of Greek speaking Jews. He must have been teaching the message of Jesus and his resurrection because we are told in verse 9 that some of the Jews in that synagogue “rose up and disputed with Stephen.” The context makes it clear that this was a very hostile environment. Stephen was in a Jewish synagogue trying to show them that Jesus was foretold in the OT – that he was the long awaited Son of David – and most of them were not buying it and were royally upset and offended by what Stephen was teaching them. But he keeps on disputing and we are told in verse 10 that “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.”

Underlying this zeal and courage was the fact that Stephen was full of faith. He was able to be courageous in his witness because his faith in Jesus was strong. He had strong confidence in Jesus trusting that Jesus had called him to do this and trusting that even if that led to his death, Jesus would not abandon him. He was confident that Jesus was loving him in this hostile situation.

Now it will be helpful to compare Stephen being full of faith, with the disciples before Pentecost who are sometimes described by Jesus as having little or weak faith. In Matthew 8:23-27, Matthew tells the story of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus and disciples were in a boat. Jesus was sleeping. The great storm rose up and it looked like the boat was going to sink in the storm. The disciples wake Jesus asking, “Save us Lord; we are perishing?” And Jesus says, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” The disciples were not full of faith at that moment. And as a result they were afraid in the storm even though Jesus was in the boat. If they would have been full of faith in that storm, they would not have been afraid because they would have had strong confidence that Jesus would not let them drown.

So our faith can be stronger or weaker. If it is weaker we have less confidence in Jesus, less confidence in his love and care for us, and so more likely to fear in situations that are intimidating and threatening. With stronger faith the reality of Jesus is much more vivid in your mind and his love and care are very real, while with weaker faith, the reality of Jesus is not so vivid – instead whatever is threatening is more in the foreground of your mind. It’s like the story where Peter was walking on the water with Jesus. As long as Peter was focused

on Jesus his faith was strong and he could stay on top of the water. But when his focus shifted to the wind and the waves, he became afraid and he also began to sink.”

So there is a wide range in the strength of the faith of the followers of Jesus. Stephen is held up before us as a man full of faith. We will probably not be as full of faith as Stephen was. Remember that Stephen was chosen as one of 7 from many because he stood out among them as full of faith among other things. And then he even stands out from the seven who were chosen. We may not be as full of faith as Stephen was. We know that we are not as bold and courageous and as zealous as Stephen was. We are anxious about things that are far less threatening than what Stephen was facing. We can't imagine doing what Stephen did.

Thankfully there is a huge range when it comes to the faith of the people of God. There is strong faith and there is weak faith. There is faith that is expressed by the cry, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” There is faith that looks like a hand reaching out to touch the hem of his garment. A number of times Jesus addresses his disciples as those with little faith, but that little faith was enough to keep them together. They did not abandon him (except Judas, of course) and he did not abandon them. We can have weak faith and still be genuine followers of Jesus.

But the example of Stephen shows us that so much more is possible for believers in Jesus. The Christian life is about growing. Where there is life there is growth. Paul could give thanks for the Thessalonians because their “faith” was “growing abundantly, and the love of every one of [them] for one another was increasing.” (2 Thessalonians 1:3). When we see an example like Stephen it is there to encourage us to press on seeking to become more like him as he reflects the image of Christ. And that growth happens through the means of grace, it happens through following the example of others who are more advanced than we are, it happens through growing in the knowledge of God in Christ, it happens through prayer. When we see Stephen here in this passage it encourages us not to be satisfied with the status quo in our lives, but to seek to grow in becoming more like Stephen which is to become more like Christ.

Stephen is also described by Luke as a man “full ... of the Holy Spirit.” He is also being held up as being fuller of the Holy Spirit than most other people were. It is clear from the Scriptures that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer is dynamic rather than static – that is it is possible to less filled or more filled by the Holy Spirit. That is hinted at in this passage. In verse 3, the apostles told the members of the church to “pick out from among you, seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom....” The assumption there is that it was possible to find seven men who stood out from the rest as being more full of the Spirit than the others.

Every true believer has the Holy Spirit living in him or her. Paul writes in Romans 8:9, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” There is no such thing as genuine believer in Jesus who does not have the Holy Spirit. As the story is told in the Book of Acts, on the day of Pentecost, all the believers were filled with the Spirit, but in subsequent chapters, we read of believers who had been filled with the Spirit,

being filled with the Spirit again. Every time Peter witnesses boldly, it is said that he was filled with the Spirit. In chapter 4:23-31, where the believers gather together and pray for boldness we are told in verse 31, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

So it's not that people are filled with the Spirit and once they are full they stay full and it's not that all believers are equally filled with the Spirit.

Often God's people are filled with the Spirit to equip them to deal with a hardship or trial. That seems to be the case with Peter in earlier passages in Acts. Luke mentions that Peter was filled with the Spirit when he was preaching about Jesus and that he was filled with the Spirit when he spoke boldly to the Jewish leaders who were commanding him to stop preaching about Jesus. So there are these examples of how the Holy Spirit filled the leaders of the early church to be extra bold in situations where it was extra challenging to do so.

But then there is our text where Stephen is singled out as one who was filled with the Spirit and here the meaning is that he was habitually more filled with the Spirit than those around him. The Holy Spirit was active in him in a way that he was not active in many of his fellow Christians so that he stood out among them. And the Bible urges Christians to be more filled with the Spirit than they are at any given moment.

Paul in Ephesians 5:18 tells his readers, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit....” This makes it clear that part of our calling as believers, who have the Spirit, is to be filled with the Spirit more and more. Prayer for the Spirit is an important part of this. Jesus teaches us in Luke 11:13 “If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

The way to be more filled with the Spirit is the same as the way to grow in love and in holiness and in zeal. It involves prayer. It involves diligence and discipline in all of the different ways that God has given us to grow – corporate worship – family worship – personal worship – relationships with other Christians - and also by dwelling on someone like Stephen as he is described here for our encouragement and inspiration. He is an attractive figure in his zeal and his knowledge and his courage. In that attractiveness he is like Jesus and the attractiveness of Jesus draws us to want to be more like him. Huge part of growth in the Christian life is seeing the beauty of Christ reflected in the life of his servants and being drawn to that. So one of the ways to be more filled with the Spirit than we are, is to prayerfully dwell on examples of those who stand out in the degree to which they are filled with the Spirit and seek to imitate them.

So Stephen is described as being full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He is also described in verse 8 as being full of grace and power. “And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.” First we consider what it means that Stephen was full of grace.

Now grace means somewhat different things in different contexts. It's basic meaning is unmerited favor. It can also refer to enabling grace which is the power for godly living. And it can mean graciousness. Some of the commentators believe that it is graciousness that is in view here. John Stott, for instance, writes that "'grace' seems to indicate a gracious, Christ-like character." In Luke 4:22 Luke writes of Jesus, "All spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." Stephen was reflecting that graciousness in his life – in his interaction with other people. He was gracious in the way that he interacted with other people.

In Colossians 4:6 Paul writes, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." In a similar passage Peter writes that we are to "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

So Stephen was fully of grace. He is going to be described as giving an answer to the hope that was in him in a hostile situation, but being full of grace he did that in a gentle and respectful way. He was winsome. He was not arrogant and obnoxious in the way he interacted with those he was trying to convince that Jesus was the Messiah. Like Jesus the words that came out of his mouth were gracious words.

This also is a characteristic for us to admire and to emulate. Stephen had this unusual combination of being bold in a gracious way. As the message recorded in chapter 7 shows he was forceful and direct in exposing the sinfulness of his hearers and calling them to repentance, but he reflected Jesus in that he was not harsh and arrogant in his demeanor. The offence that people took was in the message that he brought and not in the way he brought it.

This is also an important characteristic for us to emulate. Christianity is about truth and it is about graciousness in our interaction with people. We are witnesses to the truth of the gospel and the truth is often despised by those who hear it. But Stephen emulating Jesus and filled with the Spirit was enabled to be both firm and gracious in presenting the truth. And we are called to do the same in our interactions with people.

Stephen was also full of power. He "was doing great wonders and signs among the people." We have seen before that the apostles were enabled to do signs and wonders both to confirm that their message was from God and to point to the blessedness of the new creation that God in the gospel is working towards. Here we see that in the early church there were a few others besides the apostles whom God enabled to do signs and wonders.

God has not given us this kind of power. God still does miracles from time to time, but the kind of miracles that the apostles and Stephen did were part of the foundation of the early church and even as we get to the later books of the Bible we do not read of these signs and wonders any more.

But even though we cannot expect to share in the power to do miracles, the Christian life is still very much about power. When we receive the Holy Spirit he gives us the power to live in a way that we could not otherwise live. And one of the ways that that power is demonstrated is by good deeds towards others. The miracles that Jesus and the apostles and Stephen did were deeds of mercy. People were helped. People were healed. And that same power is at work in us when we do anything in the service of God and our neighbor.

In Ephesians 1:19 Paul prays that the Ephesians by know “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe.” In Colossians 1:11, Paul prays that the Colossians would be “Strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience.” And Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:3 that “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.” So even though we are not given the power to do signs and wonders, the power of God is very much a reality in the lives of the followers of Christ.

And so we see power in one another’s lives when we see zeal and boldness and faith and witness and kindness. When Stephen was doing miracles, he was witnessing to Jesus Christ and he was helping people and he is here as an inspiration for us, not to do miracles but to exhibit the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives by being zealous for the gospel and for acts of kindness to other people. The lives that Christians live, they live by the power of the Holy Spirit and those whose lives show a lot of that power, like Stephen did, inspire us to seek to show more of the transforming power of God in our lives. Again what we see in Stephen reflects Jesus and for those whose hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit, what we see in Stephen and Jesus is attractive and we desire to be more like them.

Finally Luke tells us that Stephen’s opponents in the synagogue “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” This is a fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to his disciples that when they would later be brought before enemies Jesus would give them “a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Again it is wonderful to think of Jesus in action disputing with the Jewish leaders and Stephen doing the same thing in our text passage. It is wonderful to witness some of the gifted apologists in our time refuting the lies of the world with Spirit-given wisdom and knowledge. Perhaps you have seen debates in person or on the internet. For we who love the truth and long to see it advanced it is delightful to see a believer who has been given the wisdom to answer adversaries skillfully.

And that can inspire us to seek to grow in this area as well. We are called to “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in [us].” If we look at Stephen’s message recorded in chapter 7 it is clear that Stephen had prepared – he is very knowledgeable in his understanding of the OT and how it speaks of Christ. And that can be an inspiration for us to do some study to equip ourselves to be speak with more wisdom when we have the opportunity to speak with others about the gospel.

The main application to Luke description of Stephen in this passage is that one of the ways that God grows his people is by examples of others who are more advanced in their walk as believers as they reflect in varying degrees the perfection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord uses many different means to grant growth to his people and this is one of them. The key idea is that Jesus Christ is supremely attractive as the perfect reflection of God and as the perfect human being. That attractiveness is reflected in the lives of his people by the transforming power of the gospel and God uses that to stir up our desire to be more like Christ.

Stephen stood out among his peers in zeal and in courage and in knowledge and in faith. He is described as being full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, full of grace and of power and exceptional in his wisdom so that his opponents could not withstand his wisdom. So let's think about Stephen and how he reflects Jesus. Let us think about others who stand out in love and zeal and courage and faith and be inspired to pray and to seek to reflect the beauty of Christ more and more in our lives.