

Let's open our Bibles tonight to the book of Acts 6:8 as we continue our journey through this book of the early church.

We have mentioned to you, I think a number of times, this was the second book that Luke wrote. It is also, by volume, the most anyone writes of the New Testament, Paul included. Luke writes the most. But he gives us this report, and really, the book of Acts is the report of about thirty years of the early church's history.

So, the first seven chapters are really the gospel going to Jerusalem and to the Jews, if you will. It is then quickly spread to Samaria before it goes to the uttermost parts of the earth. And, really, we've been looking at this book not only to get a report of how God began to work but also what kind of people does God use. Because it is really the handbook for - here's God's church, and this is as close to the beginning as you can find yourself. And what did the Lord do, and how did it work, and how could it work for us in our generation as well?

So we've looked at a lot of what Peter has done in his ministry - a couple of sermons that he has given, a man that was healed who really caused not only difficulties for the church but got the gospel out and the church grew in leaps and bounds. And then we began last week, as the church began to grow, the organizational part of the church. It is the first organizational step there that we read about in the first seven verses. There was a complaint. We've mentioned to you that when God works, the enemy works. And for a while, all of the pressure came from without - the threats about preaching from the religious community. Then there was this division inside of the church through Ananias and Sapphira trying to be something they weren't. And now, in chapter 6, there were complaints about certain of the Hellenist widows, those who had grown up outside of Jerusalem and brought in Greek cultures (though they were Jewish) that they had brought along with them, and they felt like they were being discriminated against. And so it led to this first organizational structure where the apostles said, "Look, we're supposed to be teaching God's Word, and so we're going to continue to do that. So pick out seven men filled with the Spirit and known amongst the people, and let them be responsible." And they picked seven guys with great reputations.

And they were smart - they picked Hellenist people that knew the cultures, and two of them, Stephen and Philip, rise to the top. And so we began to look at the men that God chose last week and also, for the first time (in verse 7), read that the church was no longer growing by addition. Now they were being "multiplied." And so for the first time, we read (in verse 7) multiplication of the disciples, and a great many of the priests were added.

Tonight we'd like to start in verse 8. We're going to go to the end of the chapter. We're going to reserve next week - communion night - for Stephen's fifty-verse message. We're just going to look at it as a big presentation of the gospel - how would we present the gospel in like situations, if you will. But tonight we'd just like to look at these seven or eight verses, and we've entitled the study "Faithful in the Little."

I don't think Stephen, when he was chosen to be a guy that could go deliver food to the widows, had any possibility of understanding what God might have planned for his life. I think, in that sense, he was just like us. We want to serve the Lord, but we have no, really, idea of what God has planned for us. We can just be faithful in what God gives us, and then we'll see where we end up. And that is kind of, I think, what we can learn from our lesson tonight. The early church was growing up. There were needs in and around Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit was preparing the church for a worldwide mission. In fact, that's what the Lord had said back in chapter 1:8 to them, "You're going to be My witnesses starting here in town and going out to the outlying suburbs, and ultimately you're going to the ends of the earth." But so far the church hasn't moved anywhere. They're stuck in Jerusalem. And other than reading (in the last chapter) that some of the folks were gathering from neighboring cities, that's about as far as they'd gotten; they hadn't left town at all.

God was going to use Paul (you know that) as one of the chief agents, if you will, vessels to expand the work. But he wasn't even saved yet. I mean, he was still a religious guy who is on a vendetta to wipe out the church and this movement of people that believe in Jesus. Stephen is a man that God was going to use to touch the heart of Paul. His testimony, and especially the way that he dies, moves on Paul's heart like maybe nothing else could have, and it haunted Paul for the next days and weeks and months to follow. He couldn't get it out of his psyche, he couldn't remove the hearing, he couldn't erase what he saw, and it just stuck with him. In fact, the Lord will mention that to Paul when the Lord arrests him on his

way to arrest more Christians. And He said, "It's been hard for you to kick against the pricks or the goads of God's Spirit" (Acts 9:5).

So I don't think Stephen would have signed up for this. But I'll tell you what - we like to settle in, don't we, and God would like to get you out. I don't mean get you out of the sanctuary but get you out of your little bubble and get you out of your little comfort zone and get you out of the, "Well, I'm happy where I am, I don't need to do anything else." God wants the church to move, and it would take this suffering of Stephen to push the church out. In fact, they had no plans to leave. They were just happy being settled.

When we started chapter 6, Stephen was just another member of a young church. He was a new believer, at best, because there weren't really any old believers. Everybody had recently come to know the Lord, and it really wasn't until growth produces change that Stephen can step forward and be recognized for the gifts that God has given him. And so this pressure from within, "Let's take care of the widows" and all, "and we haven't been doing that." He was one of the seven men that was chosen, that was recognized by the body as being filled with the Spirit, having godly wisdom, a man who lived in the fellowship well enough to be recognized by everyone. He was a guy that his walk supported his talk. It was as good as it could get. Here's a guy out of the limelight. He's just walking with the Lord, but everybody seems to notice. And he goes from an attendee to attendant. They pick him to go from the pew to the pantry. Right? He's going to go and serve, now, the widows. Daily he would bring food. He would administrate the outreach, especially the Hellenist widows who were feeling prejudiced against. And Stephen begins his ministry to the Lord in a very out-of-sight, humble kind of place. This wasn't going to draw much attention to Stephen, but it was going to meet a lot of needs. And so Stephen begins his ministry just faithful, and probably the only one who saw it besides the body, in terms of taking notice of him, was the Lord. He'd apparently been faithful for quite some time. Verse 7 would tell us that some time passed as the multiplication of the disciples took place, as the prejudice accusations were set aside, as everyone was back on the same page, if you will. And God continued to work through his life, and the results speak for themselves. A great many of the priests were getting saved. The town was being changed. You couldn't even add them up anymore. You just had to do factors of multiplication.

Which brings us tonight to verse 8 where we, I think, learn the lesson "Faithful in the Little." And before we turn, next time, to Stephen's very powerful message

(and the first message in the book of Acts that isn't Peter's), we want to at least see how God brought him to that place. Verse 8 says this, "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." "Full of." "*Pleres*." "*Pleres*" is the Greek word. It means to be replete or dominated or controlled by. Here was a man that wasn't an apostle, who was noticed for his faithfulness, and now God's power began to be moving upon Stephen's life as he served and as he lived for the Lord. We sometimes derogatorily say to somebody, "Oh, he's full of it," and we usually know what that means - someone's lying, someone's exaggerating in grand style. But here's a compliment from the Lord upon a man's life. This man was filled with faith. He was filled with the Spirit of God. He had God's power resting upon his life. He served daily, out of sight, faithfully feeding the widows in need. And maybe the question becomes who does God use? People that are filled with the Spirit.

Let me ask you something. What are you full of? You don't have to answer for each other. You can answer for yourself. What dominates your life? What dominates your outlook? What dominates your pursuits? Is it a self-interest, a gain interest, is it fear? Many people are full of many different things.

But here's a man that was filled with the things of God. He had a singular heart, he was interested in becoming a man that God could use, he had a spiritual priority in his life. You might remember (when we were going through Nehemiah several months ago on Sunday mornings) that one of the ploys of the enemy in seeking to stop Nehemiah's work was he invited him to come to a place where they could have lunch together, and, "Let's stop, let's visit together." And Nehemiah sent back a message, and he said, "I'm doing a really good work now. I can't stop and come down to you. Why should the work cease while I have lunch with you? I don't want to be interrupted. I've got a great thing to do." And that's Stephen. His heart was one of ministry. He was 100% in. There're a lot of 50-50 folks in the church, a lot of 80-20, 20-80. God wants 100%. And Stephen's the guy that gives the Lord 100%. But I want you to notice that he gets here in very small, incremental steps. He goes from sitting in the congregation, learning - because that's what you do when you get saved. You become a disciple, a "*mathetes*" - it means one who learns. For however long he sat there, there came a point where the people began to recognize (in his life) the fruit of God's Spirit, and they called upon him to serve. And they gave him a job, "Come and feed widows." Not exactly a glory position but one that he was called to. And with a small amount of responsibility, he showed himself to be faithful, and that faithfulness became more pronounced

and more evident, and his faith began to grow. And now we find him filled with faith, filled with the power of God, and filled with the hand of God upon his life.

Here's a good news - your faith can grow. I know you look at people that are filled with faith, and you go, "Man, I don't have that." But you can. What does it say in Romans 10:17? "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the Word of God." The more you expose yourself to what God has to say, the more your faith can grow. It's like a muscle. You use it, and it grows. Jesus said, "Learn of Me" (Matthew 11:29). And I find that if you can make time regularly to study God's Word, and you believe what Romans 10:17 says, spending time with the Lord - like you are tonight - strengthens your faith. It puts you in a position where you can believe God for things that folks who never go to church would never believe God or be able to trust God with. Jesus said, there in Matthew 25:21 (about those who had treated His people well), "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord." And that's really the way it goes. If you really want God to use you in a mighty way, then aspire to do much for the Lord from your heart. There's a great verse in Zechariah 4:10 which says, "For who has despised the day of small things?" Or, if you want, be faithful in the little things God has given you. Do it to the best of your ability. Excel in what God sets before you. And in so doing, faithfully, here, waiting on tables, maybe ushering or teaching the children or serving someone else, those are great testing grounds for future ministry. When Jeremiah came along, and he was teaching those around him, he said (in chapter 12:5) to some of them, "If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?" His point being you've got to learn some time to get moving at a pace that God can use you. It takes growth. You don't just start running with horses. First you run with the footmen. First you start in a place where you can bite down and consume what is going on. But faithful and God'll use you. And Stephen's claim to fame here is faithfulness in the little things. That doesn't mean you're going to be called to do a huge thing. I remember when God gave to Moses that counsel through his father-in-law to divide up amongst able men in Israel some of the responsibilities that he was carrying, and he said (in chapter 18 of Exodus), "And so the LORD put some men over thousands and some over hundreds and some over fifties and some over tens." And your conclusion is we all have different capacities that God gives for us, but you'll find your full capacity only when you begin to walk with God.

So here's a guy that comes out of the pack. Here's a young church with five thousand men plus women and children that is multiplying at an exaggerated rate, and standing out in the crowd is a young man who loves the Lord. And he's picked to go wait on tables, and he goes, "I can do that," and he does it as faithfully as he can. And, as a result of his faithfulness, God begins to move upon him, even in greater ways.

I think sometimes we are reluctant to take insignificant places because no one sees us. But you should know that the Lord sees you. Right? Your faithfulness He recognizes. So, if you really want to get where God is going to take you, you'll never get there by trying to make a name for yourself. Just be faithful in what God has given you. Jesus said (in Luke 16:10), "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much." Faithfulness is a character trait. You can be depended upon. And like Jabez, who prayed that the LORD would move his borders (1 Chronicles 4:10), he was faithful in the little. It was the psalmist, who wrote in Psalm 75:6, "For exaltation (promotion) comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. Promotion comes from the Judge, the LORD. He puts down one, and exalts another." So here's a man, faithful (like you are tonight - in church, in fellowship, wanting to walk with God), and yet God, at some point, chooses him and puts him in a position where he can, now, be more faithful.

Up until this point, I guess it is important to notice that only the apostles had been used as vessels through whom signs and wonders went out. There wasn't anyone but an apostle, up to this point. Except here's a different guy. He's just comin' out of the pack. He's just a regular guy, and he's just walking with God, and he joins the group, and he makes himself available. And God begins to do something in Stephen's life that he can't manufacture, he can't demand, he can't practice to get better at it, "Let me see you pray for you like this." (Pastor Jack waves his arms around). "There. Is that workin'? No? All right. I'll try it again." I mean, God gave him power because of his relationship with Him. And the power of the Holy Spirit worked through the life of this man, and it became evident, and it rejoiced the hearts of the apostles, and it rejoiced the heart of the church. When Moses finally had those seventy that the LORD added to him (Numbers 11), and then Joshua came because two guys had stayed in the camp (you remember?) and were prophesying, but they hadn't come to the meeting, Joshua said, "You should tell those guys off." And Moses said, "Tell 'em off? Man, I wish that the LORD would pour His Spirit upon every man!" He was so excited to see that God had begun to do this work. So, Stephen was recognized, and he was looked to, and he went from

attendee to attendant. And now he was about to become an apologist - he was going to be a guy that was going to stand up in front of a lot of naysayers and defend his position and his understanding of who God was.

So, here's a faithful guy, wonderful guy, a guy you would think everyone would admire, but yet you understand that when he is preaching the gospel, he's going to make enemies - from religious people most of the time. And that's exactly what happens here. He becomes an extreme antagonist against those who want religion but don't want God, who don't want to be honest with their position. So he has a testimony, he has wisdom, he has boldness, he has power. God heals through his life. People are prayed for, and they're raised up. I mean, you would just go, "I want to know this guy!" But not everybody did. And he runs into this fierce opposition at, of all places, a synagogue.

Verse 9, "Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen." Notice the word "then." When God is at work, understand the enemy goes right to work as well. And the greater the work, the greater the calling, the greater the opposition. So you should be prepared for that. This is not your home, this is not your world. They hated your Savior, they're going to hate you sometimes. It's just the way it is. No sense gettin' upset. You're operating under enemy territory. Right? And God is with you. Notice the word "synagogue," and it's singular. The synagogue was established as a practice during the Babylonian captivity from 606 to 536 B.C., and it was established by the Jews so that they could meet together and pray together and read the Scriptures together while they were in a foreign land - so they could find places to meet. And eventually the synagogue found its way into Jewish life so that, by the time that Jesus came, there were at least four hundred synagogues just in Jerusalem. I don't know how many churches there are in Whittier. The last time I looked, there were 165. Now they aren't all big churches. Some of them are ten people and twenty people and thirty people. In fact, somebody did a study once that if every church in Whittier had every seat filled, all of Whittier would be saved. In other words, there're plenty of seats. There's just not necessarily someone sitting in them. Four hundred in Jerusalem alone. And sometimes these synagogues in Jerusalem were intended to have those from foreign countries who spoke foreign languages be able to gather there as the social place in town. I was born in Holland. My mother and father, for years, until they died belonged to a Dutch club. There're all kinds of ethnic clubs in our cities. And that's kind of the way that they functioned. But

this Synagogue, notice, this one of the Freedmen, was used primarily for those who came from different lands to the Feast Days in Jerusalem. Cyrenians - North Africa - the country of Libya would be over in that area. Simon, the one who helped carry the cross for Jesus (you remember), was from there. Alexandrians - the capital of Egypt, at the time, was Alexandria. Cilicia and Asia were both districts of Asia Minor which would, today, be modern-day Turkey. In fact, the chief city of Cilicia was Tarsus, which is where Paul came from. So, these were men who somehow were made free from what was the plight of most men - Roman slavery. Paul was a freeborn citizen, if you will, but he very well could have been (and it would seem to have been) a part of this congregation, this synagogue, and might very well have been instrumental in the debating and in the escalating dispute between Stephen (this young man after God's own heart) and this murderer, who wants to do nothing more than to impose his religious will on anyone that gets near him, would have been in this place.

Notice, and we read here, that there was a dispute that came with Stephen. The word "disputing" is a word that speaks about an emotional kind of loud arguing. So imagine. Here's a young guy, a miracle-working waiter, and from all that follows, he fixes his eyes on Jesus, he wants to talk about what Jesus has done, how He died, how He rose, and how that sacrifice relates to the law and to the Temple and to the synagogue, and how it affects those who were living religious lives when they could be living lives that had been saved by the sacrifice of Jesus. So there was lots of yelling.

And we read, in verse 10, "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke" as they were "disputing" with him. Stephen was a young man who knew the Bible. He was able to hold it out with knowledge. Even the keenest minds were stumbled by him. And I thought, if Paul was here, that's an amazing thought - that a guy that is more schooled and has more degrees and is most honored for his wisdom, his mind, that he finds himself at war with a waiter, and he loses the battle because the waiter is filled with the Spirit, and he has the Word of God. That should encourage you and me not to be so intimidated by the world. "Well, I don't know much." You know the Bible! And you know the God of the Bible. You're in good shape. Right? The wisdom that God has given you should put you on solid footing.

So here's a picture of Stephen, filled with the Spirit, filled with wisdom, overflowing in faith, with great enthusiasm. And as he spoke, everyone became

convicted, and they were just angry and more angry. Jesus, when He spoke to the disciples (in chapter 12:11 of Luke), said, "When you get in these positions where you have to answer for yourself, don't worry about what to say. In the very same hour that you are put on the spot, you'll be told or given what to say." He says (in Mark 16:9-11 and John 16:2), "They're going to one day drag you before the counsel. They're going to persecute you. They're going to deliver you up from the synagogues, and they're going to put you into prison. And when they put you to death, they're going to think that they've been doing the Lord's service. But don't worry about that. Don't meditate on what you're going to say. Don't look to defend yourself. You'll be able to answer. God will give you a mouth and wisdom that your adversaries won't be able to contradict or to resist." Exactly the case here. Here's a young man walking with God who's just insulated by God's Word. And I've thought about that oftentimes. If we can just be wise in the Scriptures. I had a guy that was really interested in witnessing to Mormons, and he said, "Which Mormon book should I read?" And I said, "Just read the Bible." "Well, why couldn't I study up?" I go, "Because if you know the Bible, no matter what they bring up, you're good." "Well, what about this?" "Yeah, well the Bible saysyou want to study fifty books or one book? I'd just go with the one." "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32). And it had here. So Jesus said that it would be like this.

And Stephen is made free from the slavery of sin, and he speaks to a synagogue full of men who had been freed from the power of slavery but were still absolutely bound to their sin. It's kind of an interesting picture. "We are freed men. We've got our own synagogue. We're not slaves to Rome. We've bought our freedom. We've worked our way up. Whatever we've got, we're free together. High five. We belong to the group." And here comes Stephen, a man made free of sin, and he confronts a group who is absolutely still bound to sin and death. Stephen was ready - ready to give an answer. Paul said to Timothy in his last letter (2 Timothy 2:15), "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." That's what we should be. Right? Who does God use? Those who are ready, who are ready to share His Word. And Stephen was ready. To all of these angry men, he was going to give an argument, an apology. He was going to be the one that lays out, if you will, the convictions that a daily study in his life had brought to him. So Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians (in 2 Corinthians chapter 4:13), said, "I believed and therefore I spoke." And I think that's what you find in Stephen. And then he says, "We also believe and therefore speak." If you know what you believe, you're

bold when it comes to sharing. You can stand your ground. And obedience will always lead to godly experiences. What did Peter say back in chapter 4:20? "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." Or, in other words, "We can't but share what we've learned now from the Lord." So here's a guy, Stephen, and he's ready to stand before the Lord, and his heart is on fire. It was Jeremiah who said (in chapter 20:9), "I tried to stop speaking" (because it had been so hard - every time he opened his mouth, they'd throw him in prison). "I'm just determined I'm gonna shut up now." And then he writes, "I will not make mention of Him. I was weary of holding it back, but His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I had to speak." Well so did Stephen. He couldn't just walk away. He had to share what was in his heart. And God put him in that position.

So here's a guy from the congregation who now is delivering food and showing up at a place that all of the Hellenists met. He was one of them. He would have had friends and maybe family, and probably some of the folks that were there meeting had gotten saved as a result of his ministry. They probably didn't like him to begin with. And then it very well could be that Paul was there kind of as the ringleader. And, as Stephen shared, all of the wisdom of the room couldn't overcome the wisdom of God's Spirit working in Stephen's life. So, be encouraged, man. God can use you. I know it's easy to get intimidated because people seem smart and all. There's a great verse in Psalm 66:16, and it says, "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will declare what He has done for my soul." And that's what Stephen's going to do. He's just going to tell them what God has done, "Here's what I've learned." And you can lay it out there, and God can begin to use your life. So, here're a bunch of angry men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen who are no match for Stephen, no match for the Word of God, no match for the Holy Spirit. But instead of repenting - and you would think that with a good argument and a good presentation - maybe someone would, "Yeah, he's right, he's absolutely right about me, I need help" - you don't find that at all. What you find is an angry crowd who is angry at the messenger, angry at the message, and so, when they couldn't win verbally, they turned to villainy. "Let's all lie about him, let's slander him." The enemy's tools for generations. Still uses it today. Somebody's mad at you, and they can't win the argument, they're liable to just try to paint a horrible picture of you. That's just the way the world works. Well, it happened here as well.

Verse 11 says this, "Then they" (these men of the Freedmen Synagogue) "secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses

and God.' And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council." When the truth of God hits your heart, and it convicts you, you really only have two choices. One is you can agree that God is right, and you can repent. And those of you that are saved tonight, there came that day when you, hearing the Word of God, realized that you needed His help, and you chose to go forward or raise your hand to pray to accept the Lord. And God was faithful. He does exactly what He promises. That's just the way He works. The other choice is you can begin to try to remove the source of your conviction, and since you can't get at God, you're probably going to go after those who represent Him because they're the closest to you. So they lashed out, now, at Stephen. He's the nearest one at hand. They were thwarted in open debate so they start a lying smear campaign, mudslinging with hired false witnesses. No concern for the truth, mind you. They just wanted to win the argument. They wanted to have things their way. And the victim is this man of God that we admire, this deacon that had been chosen for his faithfulness. And they accuse Stephen (notice in verse 11) of blasphemy. The word "blasphemy" means to speak evil of something that God calls holy or declares to be holy. You speak evil of that which God says is good. Blasphemy. They even go so far as to raise a community group to lobby the Sanhedrin (the spiritual leaders) and to play on the emotions of these men, and they drag him there, and they have him arrested. Now we're a long way from chapter 2:47 where it says "they had favor with all the people." The young church had favor with everyone for a little while, and then they tried to build a building. No, never mind. (Pastor Jack laughs). You know what I'm saying? You get this grace time, I guess. But that time is gone. It's not always easy to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Look. Think about what we've been given here in the book of Acts. This is the third appearance, now, of either a believer or believers before the Sanhedrin, before the ruling body in Israel that had plotted to put Jesus to death, that had testified against Him and worked Pilate over and all. First Peter and John came, and they were warned about preaching, but they couldn't really do much to them because there was this lame man made whole that was standing beside them. Then, a couple of chapters later, it would appear that all of the apostles might very well have been dragged in and arrested. They had been beaten and again warned, even though there was one of their council members who tried to talk them out of it, if you will, talk some sense into them; and Gamaliel tried, but they weren't listening. And now here comes Stephen, a third guy. No longer an apostle, just a member of the early church. And he gets to stand before them, a regular guy who works in

the coffee shop or works in the food delivery bank, and he brings the gospel (again) before this same group of men, and they decide (when they're done listening to him) that they will murder him in cold blood rather than repent of their sins. That's the conflict that the church was facing even early on, the first thirty years. So when you go out, and you share, and people get angry with you, I wouldn't feel too bad for yourself. "Oh, I'm really goin' through it." No. They were goin' through it. Out of the gate, this was the battle. It's still the battle today. And Stephen would be the one to give his life.

Now I want you to notice for next week, and I'll point it out to you now - but you mark it down, their accusation of blasphemy was on four things. In verse 11, he blasphemes Moses, and he blasphemes God. In verse 13, he blasphemes the holy place, and he blasphemes the law. So Moses and God, the Temple, if you will, and the law. Those four things absolutely vital to Jewish practice, if you will. He is accused by false witnesses. They are named false witnesses in verse 13. They are described as such in verse 11. These were liars who showed up to lie, to paint Stephen in a horrible light. And their purpose was very clear - they wanted to have Stephen removed because (over in verses 9 and 10) when they talked to him about faith in Christ, they couldn't win the argument. But rather than repent and admit error, they continued on with it. So, the false witnesses now come forward to falsely testify and to distort Stephen's words in the most damaging way possible.

We read, in verse 13, "They also set up false witnesses who said, 'This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place' " (the Temple) " 'and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.' " Volatile charges, to say the least. And they would be picked up by the high priests. In fact, if you jump ahead to chapter 7:1, you will read that the high priest just says this, "Is that right? Is that so, what they're saying? Did you do that?" I mean, that's his only question. He just wants to work off of those charges that were made against him. I should say to you - if you've been with us for any length of time, especially when we were finishing John - this sounds an awful like Jesus' trial. The gospel truth is rejected. The signs and wonders in Jesus' life are ignored. The trumped-up charges testified by liars are used as a basis for judgment. There is a mob mentality that just wants to see Him destroyed. They twist the words of the One on trial. And it's the same group, in the same building, doing the same thing a year later, two years later, six months later, however long it happened to have been. Peter is the first guy to deal at length (in the New Testament) with the Old

Testament law in the Temple and how it relates to Jesus, how it points to Him, how He fulfilled it, how its function is no longer necessary because it was a sign that said, "Here He is." And once He's there, whatever those other things were are now fulfilled in Him. He hadn't come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Everything is fulfilled in Christ. It is a tough job. Later the book of Hebrews, along with Paul's letter to the Galatians, will fully address the typology of the Old Testament and Jesus and how they fit together. But here's the first guy who has to take them on, and it doesn't go well. Well, it goes fine for Stephen, but it doesn't go well in terms of fruit, at least not initially. But, however, remember God wants the people to be moved out. He wants Paul to get saved. He's got a plan for Paul. He's got a plan. Stephen was faithful to the end.

Whenever someone is asked to defend their religious position and is unable to do so, usually the response is illogical anger. Right? It is fierce. You will say, "Well, why do you believe that?" and they'll say things like this, "Because I do!" And you go, "That's dumb," and now they're even madder. There's no logic now. There's no rationale. Because you've challenged their base. One of the most difficult things for people to do when they come to the Lord is admit that they were wrong. It's so hard to just go, "I'm wrong, I need to get saved." When my dad finally got saved, after a dozen years of first arguing then ignoring me altogether and then finally coming around, I said to him, "What was it that held you back for so long?" And he said, "The worst thing I could say is that I was wrong because I believed I was right, and you were wrong!" I said, "I'm probably wrong most of the time but not in this!" It is such a difficult step to take. Jesus (in Matthew 15) spoke to the Pharisees about them being wrong, about all their religious ways, and how it amounted to nothing, and challenged them. Stephen, in many ways, walks into a powder keg with a match (Pastor Jack makes the sound of a match lighting and then a fire starting), just bringing the gospel. And you might be in that same position sometimes.

To the Jews, the Temple was God's presence with them. "That's where we go to meet with God." The law was the mind of God. His will was revealed. And when properly interpreted (and by this time, they were saying they were the only ones that could do that), it was able to make you holy. Jesus corrected the Pharisees' interpretation of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. Just go read it - three chapters: 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew. He absolutely nails it head-on, these religious folks that were trying to be right with God through their religion. As Stephen shares the gospel (and by the way, his answer in chapter 7 - fifty verses - only

addresses those four things) - "You say I blaspheme Moses, let me tell you about Moses. You say I blaspheme God, let me talk to you about God. You say I blaspheme the Temple, let me tell you what the Bible says about the Temple. You say I blaspheme the Law, let me explain to you what our position is on how we look at the Law as Christians." Even though it's fifty verses long, it's quite a bit smaller in terms of what he's trying to tell them. And, like I said, we'll look at that next week. But suffice it to say that when Stephen shared the gospel, they heard it only as an attack upon the house of God, upon the law of God, and even the servants of God like Moses. What had Jesus said about the Temple? Remember when He came and emptied the Temple out early on in His ministry (actually one of the first things He did in John 2)? They said, "Well, what sign do You show us that You do these things? Who are You? Who do You think You are?" And Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). And they said, "It's taken forty-six years to build the temple. You're going to put it together?" "Yeah, that's right." And John would explain (in chapter 2:21, a couple of verses later). He'll say, "He was speaking about His body." But He was confronting the confidence of the Jews in the building. Right? "What authority do You have?" "I'm going to rise from the dead. How's that for authority?" Well, that would be good authority! Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, would now come to live in every believer, and the new birth would replace the Temple. You would become the Temple. Before, you went to a Temple. Now you become the Temple. You went to a place where God's presence was. Now you become a place of God's dwelling. Jesus spoke to them later (in Matthew 12:6), and He said, "I want you to know that there's One greater than the temple here." He said the same thing. "You're in love with this place? I'm greater than this place, and I'm the One that you should be seeking after. You should know what it means what I say 'I want mercy and not sacrifice.'" And they didn't listen. In the past, the people came to the Temple to meet with God through their sacrifices. Now they could come to God through the one sacrifice of His Son, and they could become the temple. That's the message Stephen has to get across to a room full of very angry and powerful religious people, and it's not going to be easy. That, in times past, they brought sacrifices for their sins; now His sacrifice and His blood would give them access to the throne. The Lamb of God who has come - He fulfills the sacrifice, if you will, He fulfills the priesthood once and for all. The Old Testament covered your sin. "**Kaphar**" is the word. In the New Testament, Jesus removes it. So, the opposition focuses on all the negative. "We've heard him say." And understand that they exaggerate, and they blow it out of proportion. "We've heard him blaspheme, speak evil of Moses and God, the law and the temple," trying to convince those, and have

dragged him before the council, looking for a judgment. And now these men sit together, and they're looking down at Stephen. How is he handling the charges? This is pretty frightening for one guy. I mean, just weeks earlier, a dozen apostles had been on the chopping block, had been beaten, had come back to church with black eyes and bloody backs. And now Stephen is grabbed by himself. And God has been using him. People have been listening. And now he's thrown into this picture.

So here's what we read in verse 15, "All who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel." Don't you think somebody ought to make a good painting out of this? I mean, I see a painting. The liars' contorted, angry faces leaning over the railings, just pointing at Stephen. And Stephen, his face is all aglow, he's been hangin' out with God. Even now, what we are told is he is able to look up and see Jesus. He's standing right in the Lord's presence. Somehow these guys don't frighten him, these seventy powerful men. He's standing before the Lord. The only other person in the Bible who said that his face was glowing was Moses. You remember, in Exodus 34, he came out of the presence of God, down to the people, and they saw his face just aglow because he'd been in God's presence. And now they saw this face of an angel. I think God has a sense of irony, for me, because they're complaining that he blasphemes Moses, but he and Moses have one thing in common - they're both glowing by the time they left God's presence. Spurgeon once told his Bible students, "When you come out here to speak about heaven, I expect to see a glow on your face and a gleam in your eye and a grin on your lips. If you're out here to talk about hell, your normal face will be just fine." (Laughing) But he distinguished the two. If you're going to be representing the Lord, man, it ought to show. According to Paul (in 2 Corinthians 3), he explains to us that the ministry of the law was passing away and that when Moses came down from having received the law from God, and he went into the presence of the people, he had to cover his face. Not because it was so bright but because it was becoming dimmer. In other words, the glow of the law was disappearing. Right? The ability of man to save himself, that wasn't there. That's the ministry of condemnation. The law is to condemn you. And Paul said, "If the ministry of condemnation has such glory, just think what the ministry of righteousness is going to bring to you." Stephen's face was glowing with grace, and he stood before the people. It wasn't that it was passing away like the Old Testament, but it was a veil that was removed in Christ. Now you could glow.

So Stephen stands on the other side of this hearing. Amazing picture to me. And none of it moved these men at all. The life of Stephen didn't move them. The

power of the ministry didn't move them. The irresistible wisdom of his arguments didn't move them. The Word of God, which he so clearly delivered, didn't move them. The conviction of the Spirit upon their hearts didn't move them. The angelic face of a servant of God didn't move them. So don't be so discouraged when you share with your neighbor, and they don't get moved right away. God works. God works. There was no sign of approval amongst the crowd. So they would sit, and they would stare, and they would be captivated by this young man who would deliver the most damaging and yet very clear presentation of the gospel that we have in the book of Acts. The guy is just, he just if your face could get red every time he said something, you'd be glowing like a beet. It's a beat-down bunch of verses. I'm sure he delivered it with joy and with a smile and with hope. But, man, he didn't hold back. It was an amazing deliverance. The Sanhedrin, who had defied God for so long, now grabs one of its own and will soon make Stephen the first martyr of the early church. But not before they get an earful of the grace and the goodness of God and the sinfulness of man. It'll blow your mind. Don't miss next week. And you'll have communion as well. You get two reasons to be here. It's an amazing study. And we'll stop at verse 50 because the last verses, from 51-60, we're going to have to take as a separate kind of unit.

So what do we learn from Stephen in these seven or eight verses? Here're some things we have to carry away. Number one - if you're faithful in what God gives you, God'll give you more. You can go from the pantry to the pulpit. By that, I mean you can just serve, and who knows what God will do with you and what opportunities He will give you. If you're faithful. You just want to find your full potential. You might not be Billy Graham or Greg Laurie. In fact, I don't know if you really want to be Greg Laurie. I ride motorcycles with Greg Laurie sometimes. He scares me. (Laughing) But not everybody's going to stand and preach in stadiums. That's his gig. That's his calling. That's good for him. Not necessarily good for you. But be faithful in what God gives you. Be able to say, when people ask you, "What are you full of?" you can tell them, "I'm full of faith, and I want to be filled with the Spirit." Our personal responsibility to share the hope that lies within us is always going to be an outgrowth of our relationship with God. To the extent that you walk with God, you're going to want to tell others. And, for Stephen, that was a given. He couldn't keep it to himself. Some people see witnessing as an obligation. "Oh, I went to church. They told me I should share." Not a good motivation at all, I wouldn't think. But when you can't contain yourself, when there's an overflowing, then God can begin to use you because then you're going to share with an urgency that only the heart of someone with an overflowing

relationship with God has. Add to that understanding this truth - God has a great plan for your life. He had a great plan. Like I said, Stephen, I don't think he could have figured it out or looked ahead or went to a career counselor and said, "What do you think I'm gonna do?" "I think you're gonna get killed." He just wanted to be faithful. And then you want to be able to know that the wisdom you have and the power that God gives you - I don't care if you went to college or you flunked out of high school - the Word of God is powerful. And it isn't dependent upon the vessel. The content is what matters. Right? We have this truth in earthen vessels so that the glory goes to Him, not to us (2 Corinthians 4:7). You might think, "Well, if I was smarter." You don't have to be smarter. You're going to heaven. Your sins are forgiven. How much smarter do you want to be than that? Be smart in the Word of God. Be smart in the ways that you share it. Be available. And give God's Word out to whoever will listen. And let people see your smiling and angelic, shining face. Don't be intimidated. God uses those who are convinced. Are you convinced? Then God can use you.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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