



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for October 7, 2012

Released on Wednesday, October 3, 2012

"Stephen Defends His Faith"

Lesson Text: Acts 6:8-15; 7:1, 2a

Background Scripture: Acts 6:1-7:53

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 8:1-11

Acts 6:8-15 (KJV)

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15 And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Acts 7:1, 2a (KJV)

1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

2a And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken.

TODAY'S LESSON AIMS

Learning Fact: To understand that our faith will be challenged when we boldly speak for Jesus.

Biblical Principle: To examine Stephen's courage to speak about Christ.

Daily Application: To know that the life-changing power of Jesus enables us to be bold in our witness.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 32

Place: Jerusalem

For the past several weeks, we've focused on the book of Hebrews to define faith and to consider ways that faith can empower the Christian life. For the next eight weeks, we'll turn to the book of Acts for illustrations of ways that God uses faithful people.

Our next two studies highlight the ministry of Stephen, who is widely remembered as the first Christian martyr. Stephen probably was a Hellenist, meaning a Jewish person who lived outside of Palestine and spoke the Greek language. Stephen seems to have migrated to Judea and, while there, was converted to Christianity by the preaching of the apostles.

We first see Stephen mentioned in his ministry of benevolence in Acts 6. Believers were sharing resources in a time of need, and this benevolent care extended to widows. The Hellenists (Grecians) complained that their widows were not receiving a fair share of the daily distribution (6:1). The apostles acknowledged the dilemma, and invited the church to select seven men to oversee the distribution of aid so that the apostles could devote themselves to praying and preaching the Word of God. One of these seven chosen was Stephen (Acts 6:5).

The emphasis in Stephen's life is on fullness: he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10), full of faith (Acts 6:5), and full of power (Acts 6:8). In Scripture, to be "full of" means "to be controlled by." This man was controlled by the Spirit, faith, wisdom, and power. He was a God-controlled man yielded to the Holy Spirit, a man who sought to lead people to Christ.

What was the result of the ministry of Stephen and the six other believers? The blessing of God continued and increased! The church was still unified (Acts 6:5), multiplied (Acts 6:7).

This Spirit-filled man did not limit his ministry to the serving of tables; he also won the lost and even did miracles. Up to this point, it was the apostles who performed the miracles (Acts 2:43; 5:12), but now God gave this power to Stephen also. This was part of His plan to use Stephen to bear witness to the leaders of Israel. Stephen's powerful testimony would be the climax of the church's witness to the Jews. Then the message would go out to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles.

Miracles Performed by Stephen's (Acts 6:8)

1. Why does the author of Acts introduce Stephen as a man “full of faith” (Acts 6:5, 8)?

Luke (the author of Acts) introduces Stephen in Acts 6:5 as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost” to explain why he was chosen as one of the seven mentioned in the Lesson Background. The fact that Stephen is able to do great wonders and miracles is evidence of empowerment by the Holy Spirit. The miracles Stephen performs most likely include healings and prophecies. Miraculous works are performed in the name of Jesus to verify the truth of the gospel message.

Stephen’s Opponents (Acts 6:9, 10)

2. Who were some of Stephen’s opponents, and where were they from (vs. 9, 10)?

As Stephen entered the synagogue to preach in the name of Jesus Christ, he encountered opposition. There is a difference of opinion regarding how many identifiable groups of opponents, in terms of numbers of synagogues, are in view here. The strongest view is that there is only one: it is the synagogue of the Libertines, which consists of Jews from the other four places noted. The Libertines are former slaves. These liberated Jews have migrated from various places to Jerusalem, where they have established their own synagogue.

Some of these Jews are from Cyrene, which is the capital of the Roman province of Cyrenaica in North Africa (modern Libya; compare Acts 2:10; 11:20; 13:1). Alexandria is a large city in Egypt and home to a substantial Jewish population; the city is renowned as a center of learning (compare Acts 18:24). Cilicia is a Roman province in what is now southeastern Turkey. The province of Asia is a significant population center in southwestern Turkey. It includes the cities mentioned in Revelation 1 and 2.

As a side note, we recall that Cilicia includes the city of Tarsus (Acts 21:39), which is the hometown of Saul (later renamed Paul). He has come to Jerusalem to study under the great rabbi Gamaliel (22:3). We will see Saul’s part in the opposition to Stephen in next week’s lesson. It is possible that Saul heard Stephen in the synagogue and may have debated with him. However, nobody could match or resist Stephen’s wisdom and power (6:10). This is a fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction in Luke 21:15.

Falsely Accused and Arrested (Acts 6:11-15)

3. What charges did Stephen’s opponents bring against him (vs. 11, 12)?

Unable to defeat Stephen in debate, Stephen’s opponents “suborned men” (indicates bribery) to testify that he had spoken slanderously against *Moses* and *God* (Acts 6:11). There are two charges, but they are closely related. To speak blasphemous words against Moses means to advocate that Jews not follow the Law of Moses. To speak against God reflects a charge that Stephen is speaking against the temple (see v. 13, below). Teaching against the law or the temple is tantamount to blasphemy, which calls for the death penalty (Leviticus 24:14, 16, 23).

“Naturally, what the false witnesses claimed alarmed the Jewish people and their rulers in Jerusalem. This prompted the religious elite—namely, the elders and scribes (that is, experts

in the Mosaic law) to authorize Stephen's arrest and appearance before the "Sanhedrin" (Acts 6:12). The latter was the Jewish supreme court of the day." (Cook)

This is the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body that had declared Jesus worthy of death. The Romans allow this council to pass judgment on religious and social concerns for Jews. This authority includes the right to inflict certain punishments, which include expulsion from the synagogue (John 9:22) and public beatings. Shortly before the incident we are examining now, the Sanhedrin had ordered some apostles to be flogged (Acts 5:17-40). Stephen must realize that he is in for a similar fate—or worse.

4. What specific message did the "false witnesses" accuse Stephen of continually preaching (vs. 13, 14)?

Verses 13 and 14 repeat the two charges mentioned in verse 11, with more detail. Since blasphemy carries the death sentence (see comments on v. 11, above), the implication is that some want Stephen silenced permanently (compare Jeremiah 26:11).

While it is impossible to know what Stephen actually has said that provides grounds for the accusations, verse 14 echoes themes from Jesus' teaching. Perhaps Stephen has quoted Christ's words in the course of his own preaching. The claim "Jesus of Nazareth shall R-will destroy this place" echoes the accusation that Jesus had threatened to tear down the temple and replace it with a new one (Mark 14:57, 58; compare John 2:19-21). Many Jews understand any challenge to the temple as blasphemy against God himself.

The charge that Jesus of Nazareth... shall change the customs which Moses delivered us perhaps means that Stephen has been promoting Jesus' teachings about the Sabbath, contact with unclean people and things, kosher food laws, etc. Jesus had aroused the ire of the Pharisees by violating their understanding of the Sabbath (see Luke 6:1-11). Jesus had no qualms about associating with unclean people (see Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 19:1-10). He even went so far as to declare all foods to be clean (the meaning of "purging all meats" in Mark 7:19).

The Pharisees see all these as violations of the Law of Moses. Stephen's proclamation of Christ easily stirs up memories of Jesus' controversial teachings and actions. These provide ready fuel for the fire of controversy.

5. What was Stephen's demeanor in the midst of his persecutors (v. 15)?

Commentators often note parallels between the trials of Jesus and Stephen. Both are falsely accused of blasphemy (Luke 22:66-71). Jesus said nothing when false witnesses spoke against Him before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:55-61; compare Matthew 27:14), and Stephen apparently does not respond as his enemies rehearse their charges. Neither Jesus nor Stephen yield to the arguments of the Jewish authorities. Ironically, Saul, who is on the side of those authorities at this point (Acts 8:1), will later find himself on the receiving end of the same charges that Stephen now faces (21:27-32; 25:8).

"As Stephen stood before the seated members of the high council, all of them stared at him "steadfastly" (Acts 6:15). The reason for their fixed gaze is that the face of Stephen beamed as bright as that of an "angel." This suggests that the Spirit of God was uniquely manifesting His presence in Stephen's life at that moment. The author wishes to stress that God is with Stephen during his time of trial." (Cook) The Spirit will empower Stephen to witness on Christ's behalf (compare Luke 12:11, 12). Angel is the normal Greek word for "messenger." Stephen is about to speak as a messenger of God's truth.

What Do You Think?

How do people know that you belong to Christ? What “marks” you most in that regard?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Speech patterns (James 1:26) | Spending priorities (James 4:3)

Behavior (Romans 13:13) | Business practices (1 Timothy 6:10)

Kindness to others (Ephesians 4:32)

Stephen’s Speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1, 2a)

6. How did Stephen respond when questioned by the high priest (Acts 7:1, 2a)?

We have reached Stephen’s moment of decision. The charges have been presented, and the high priest now asks him to confirm or deny what the witnesses have said. Stephen is faced with a choice: (1) compromise and recant or (2) restate his beliefs boldly in the face of opposition. The speech that follows makes Stephen’s decision plain.

Stephen began by respectfully addressing his listeners as “brethren and fathers” (v. 2) and enjoining them to heed what he had to say. Here we see that Stephen took seriously the charges that were brought against him and grounded his defense on the teaching of the Old Testament. (Cook)

In Acts 7:2b-21 (not in today’s text), Stephen summarizes the history of the Israelites from the time of Abraham’s call (about 2092 B.C.) to the birth of Moses (about 1525 B.C.). Stephen knows history! What follows is Stephen’s response to the charge that he has spoken against the Law of Moses.

Stephen’s address was more than a recitation of familiar facts; it was also a refutation of their indictments against Stephen and a revelation of their own national sins. Stephen proved from their own Scriptures that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those they had accused him of committing. What were these sins?

They misunderstood their own spiritual roots (Acts 7:2-8).

They rejected their God-sent deliverers (vs. 9-36).

They disobeyed their Law (vs. 37-42).

They despised their temple with idols (vs. 43-50).

They stubbornly resisted their God and His truth (vs. 51-53).

This is the climax of Stephen's speech, the personal application that cut his hearers to the heart. Throughout the centuries, Israel had refused to submit to God and obey the truths He had revealed to them. Their ears did not hear the truth, their hearts did not receive the truth, and their necks did not bow to the truth. As a result, they killed their own Messiah!

CONCLUSION

The Death of Cheap Grace

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a brilliant German theologian and minister, having earned his doctorate at age 21. He found himself deeply opposed to the Nazis, who had come to power in 1933. Within a year he had organized the underground "Confessing Church," which refused to cooperate with the state church of Germany due to its relationship with the Nazi government.

Bonhoeffer left Germany in 1939 to take a teaching position in New York City. He soon began to feel ashamed at his unwillingness to stay and fight for truth. So he returned to his homeland on the last ship to sail from the U.S. to Germany before the start of World War II. Bonhoeffer eventually was arrested, sent first to prison and then to two concentration camps, and executed just three weeks before allied forces captured Berlin.

Along with his legacy as a martyr, Bonhoeffer is famous for his attack on "cheap grace"—the notion that it is possible to be a Christian simply by consent and not by action. Bonhoeffer's "costly grace" approach called believers to imitate Christ's willingness to stand for truth. Stephen did not take a "cheap grace" approach. For him, God's truth had to be defended at all cost. Stephen's responses to the charges of blasphemy reveal no sense of backtracking, no sense of "What I really meant when I said _____ was _____." The result of Stephen's strategy is the subject of next week's lesson.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Do your very best (for God) in the ministry He has given you! (Acts 6:8; Colossians 3:23)
2. The life-changing power of Jesus enables us to be bold in our witness (Acts 6:9, 10).
3. Being a fully devoted follower of Jesus requires different degrees of suffering and self-denial (Acts 6:11-14; Matthew 16:24).
4. No need to whine when persecuted (Acts 6:15), Jesus said "rejoice" (Matt. 5:11, 12).
5. Make known the gospel with holy boldness! (Acts 7:1, 2; Ephesians 6:19).

PRAYER

Father, we know that You have called us to stand up for what is right, but many times it's difficult to do so. Please give us the courage to stand for truth. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Take a stand for truth.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Our next lesson continues from the book of Acts, where we find Stephen maintaining a courageous witness. Study Acts 7:51-8:1 "**Stephen is Faithful to Death.**"

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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