

The First Martyr in Church History, part 1

(Acts 6:8-15)

10/23/19; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

In the late 1940s, Mr Potato Head was born.

The toy was the invention George Lerner, who came up with idea by watching his nephew put sticks into potatoes in the family garden.

So Lerner came up with the great idea of creating a variety of plastic inserts to be put into real potatoes.

The idea was wildly successful with kids that Lerner knew, but the problem was taking his idea to a larger market.

So Lerner approached a few cereal companies to see if they would buy his products and include them in kid's cereals.

The cereal were not too impressed but purchased the idea for \$5000.

However, Lerner did not stop trying to get the idea to a larger market.

In 1951, Lerner approached a small toy company named Hasbro, who had never seen such an idea.

Hasbro went and bought the idea from the cereal companies and offered Lerner a small royalty from every sale of Mr Potato Head.

Then Hasbro faced the same dilemma of how to get Mr Potato Head to a larger market.

And then came a great idea.

They would advertise the toy on television.

Now that may seem obvious today, but in 1952, no toy had ever been marketed through television.

In fact, no commercial had ever been made with kids in mind.

All that changed on April 30, 1952 with the first TV ad for a toy called Mr Potato Head.

Needless to say, the ad was wildly successful.

In fact, 1 million Mr Potato Heads were sold in 8 remaining months of 1952, and the rest is history.

Hasbro would go on to say that TV changed the toy industry forever.

Because it brought the promise of fun into every household.

In 30 AD, the church faced the same problem that the toy industry faced in the 1950s.

And that problem was how would the church get the gospel to the world.

They had a product much better than any toy.

They had the words of life and death found in the gospel of Christ, but how were they going to spread that message to every person in the world.

Well, it won't happen through TV.

In fact, it won't happen through anything that pleasant.

The truth is that the gospel is going to spread through persecution.

It is going to spread as the Christians in Jerusalem are attacked for their faith.

Now we have already seen a little persecution from the enemies of the gospel.

John and Peter and all the apostles have been arrested in the first 5 chapters of the book of Acts, but things are about to get much worse.

In Acts 7, we will see the first Christian killed for his faith, and that will be a man named Stephen.

And his death will be the event that catapults the gospel into the world.

His death will be the seed that grows the tree of the church that still stands in the world today..

So let's begin to take a closer look at the life of the church's first martyr.

Now we met Stephen last week in Acts 6:1-7.

He was one of the 7 chosen by the church to oversee the ministry of food distribution to the Jewish widows.

And he was the first name on the list of those 7 men, and he was also the only one in the list that was described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

But even that description of Stephen may be an understatement of what an incredible man he was.

So let's begin to examine a life that was cut short in human terms but lived to the max in terms of usefulness...

And through the testimony of Stephen, may we be reminded of what a joy it is to live in such a way to do all we can for the Christ who has saved us..

Let me read the text for us to get us started, and I will include a few verses that we looked at last week..

So Acts 6, verse 5..

5 The statement found approval with the whole [e]congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and [f]Nicolas, a [g]proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and [h]signs among the people. 9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and [i]Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him [j]before the [k]Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the [l]Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

What I want to do tonight is simply pull out 3 characteristics of Stephen's life from these verses 3 that we should copy as we seek to live for God's glory in this life..

The first characteristic is this..

I. Stephen had a Godly Reputation (5-7)

Let's look back at the beginning of verse 5 for a moment..

5 The statement found approval with the whole [e]congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,

As the early church needed some trustworthy men to do the work of widow ministry, they chose Stephen and 6 others to handle it.

Now why would they choose Stephen and these 6 among the 1000s of men in the church?

Well, look back at verse 2..

2 So the twelve summoned the [c]congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

3 Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

Simply put, they chose Stephen and 6 others because they had a good reputation and were full of the Spirit and of wisdom.

Look, the simple lesson for us all is that reputation matters in life.

And it matters in the church.

We know that outward appearance is not everything.

We know God is the ultimate judge of all hearts.

We know that we can be fooled by what we see on the outside.

But we also should know that outward appearance is important.

In fact, the qualifications for elders and deacons focus on observable traits.

Needless to say, the outside matters.

And Stephen was a man with an impeccable outward appearance.

He was wise and it showed.

He was man of faith and it showed.

He was full of the Spirit and it showed.

And all those qualities stood out among the 1000s of men that were in the church.

Look, there is equality and inequality in the church.

In one sense, we are all equal before the cross.

We are sinners all equally guilty before God.

All equally deserving of hell.

But all equally rescued by our repentance and faith in Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile in the church.

Neither slave nor free.

Neither rich nor poor.

But inequality also exists as some people are called to lead in the church.

Some are called to serve.

Some are called to preach and teach.

Some are called to oversee ministries and serve the needs of others.

And all of that creates some inequality but not in a bad way.

Stephen and those 6 men weren't more special than any of the the other men, but they were set apart by God for that ministry due to their incredible reputations and wisdom.

And church, that is fine.

We should be grateful for those men who rise up and set themselves apart for service in the church.

We should grateful for any who have a reputation in the church that makes them qualified to serve in special ways.

It is a cause for jealousy but a cause for joy and thankfulness.

May we all aspire to be Stephen's in our church.

May we all seek good reputations among our brothers and sisters in the Lord in our churches.

And may Stephen's reputation be a motivation for all of us..

Now a quick note on what it means to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit...

In a sense, all believers are full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

We wouldn't be saved unless we had faith and we wouldn't be believers unless we had been given the Holy Spirit..

He is the mark of salvation in our lives.

But even though we possess both faith and the Spirit, we also recognize that we can frustrate the work of the Spirit in our lives through sin and disobedience.

We also know that our faith can waver at times.

But Stephen was operating at full capacity in terms of faith and the Spirit in Acts 6.

His life was controlled by those realities.

Every thought, every action, every decision was centered on his faith and dependence upon the Spirit.

And that is what it means to be filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.

It is not an issue of quantity.

It is an issue of control.

And Stephen was that man.

And a man like that can do incredible things for the Lord.

But he can also have some incredibly evil things done to him by the world..

So, let's look at that in verses 8-10...

We will call this characteristic of Stephen a godly resistance.

II. Stephen had a Godly Reliance (8-10)

Verse 8..

As we have said before, signs and wonders served one purpose in the early church..

They validated the words of the messenger.

And Stephen was going to be an incredible messenger for the Lord, so the Lord gives him the power to do signs and wonders to precede his preaching.

Now this phenomenon of God using believers to do signs and wonders will fade away throughout the book of Acts.

And by the time the first book of the NT is written, there is no instruction or expectation of believers doing these things..

But the apostles did them for a time and so did Stephen, but such displays of power through a man caught the attention of unbelievers.

Verse 9..

9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and [i]Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

Now, Jerusalem is where all the action of the first 7 chapters of the book of Acts takes place..

Because the gospel is going to stop in Jerusalem first.

Then it will travel to Judea, to Samaria and then to the rest of the world..

So the Peter and John and the apostles are preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem first.

But Stephen is not a Jew native to Israel.

He has a Greek name and makes his home outside of Jerusalem.

He is simply there for Pentecost, but he gets saved by the preaching of Peter.

And now God equips him to preach to other non-native Jews in Jerusalem.

So Stephen heads into a Jewish synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen.

And we know this is synagogue of non-native Jews because of the areas mentioned here.

Cyrene is an African city.

Alexandria is also an African city in Egypt.

Cilicia is a territory northwest of Israel in modern day Turkey.

And Asia Minor is also modern day Turkey.

So what you have is a group of Jews from areas around Israel gathered together in a synagogue in Jerusalem where they could meet.

And this makes sense.

There would times that they would be in Israel for various festival or trips there and they would want to gather with Jews from their native countries..

And since Stephen is a Jew from outside Israel, it would make sense for him to go and preach to Jews that he had something in common with.

But that preaching and teaching is not received well by the Jews in that synagogue..

The end of verse 9 says that they rose up and argued with Stephen.

Now Jews have a reputation of arguing and spirited debate, so this is nothing unusual.

In fact, it is highly likely that our beloved Paul is in this synagogue on this day as an unconverted Jew.

You see, Cilicia's main city is Tarsus.

And we know that Paul was originally from Tarsus.

In fact, the first time we meet Paul, he is simply called Saul from Tarsus.

And though we can't be sure, he was in the synagogue because the Bible doesn't say that, we know he was in Jerusalem because he watches as Stephen is stoned.

So it is likely that he was part of the arguing happening in that synagogue on that day.

And what an argument that must have been since Paul was an outstanding Jew and very intelligent in the OT.

But as an unbeliever, he was no match for Stephen.

Notice verse 10..

Verse 10..

10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

You see, the man of God equipped with the Spirit of God and full of faith in God is no match for the wisdom of the world.

We have no indication that Stephen was well trained as a debater.

He may have been.

He may not have been.

We have no idea if Stephen was well spoken or not.

He may have been.

He may not have been.

But we do know this.

He was fully reliant on the Spirit and the faith that he possessed.

And any believer who lives like that can silence the worst of critics..

Now what was Stephen preaching and debating with these Jews?

Obviously, he was preaching what Peter preached in his first 2 sermons.

Stephen was preaching that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah that had been murdered by the Jews.

He was preaching that salvation had come in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I think we can safely say that Stephen was preaching the truth about the law of Moses.

That it did not save but that it did condemn.

And the reality is that no one could answer his preaching and teaching and wisdom.

He was an example of Romans 3:19-20 even before it was written by Paul.

19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are [h]under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; 20 because by the works [i]of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for [j]through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

And in the end, the only mouth moving in that synagogue was the mouth of Stephen because it was the only mouth speaking truth.

And the reason he was speaking truth is because he was relying on the wisdom of God that came through the Spirit of God.

May we be just as reliant upon Him as well.

We don't argue in our own wisdom by man's standards.

We speak the wisdom of God found in the Bible.

We speak the truth of God found in His Word.

You will never be a man like Stephen by relying upon your own human wisdom.

You will only be a man like Stephen when you hide the word of God in your heart.

You will only be a man like Stephen when you study to show yourself an approved workman of the Word of God.

You will only be like Stephen when you rely on God's truth and not your own opinion.

May God give us grace to be reliant upon Him only.

And then a final characteristic of Stephen's life for us to copy is found in verses 11-15..

We will call this..

III. Stephan had a Godly Resistance (11-15)

Once the Jews run out of answers for Stephen, they do what all even men do.

They lie and seek to silence the messenger..

Verse 11..

11 Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him [j]before the [k]Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

So false witnesses and fabricated stories sound familiar to you?

They should.

WE have been in the end of John’s gospel and this is exactly what the Jews did to Jesus.

They couldn't answer him so they lied about him and bribed others to do the same.

You see, the truth is powerful and undefeated in world history.

And people either submit to it or suppress it.

In the case of Jesus and Stephen and countless others, the choice is to suppress it through death.

And that is coming to Stephen by the end of the next chapter..

But what is the attitude of Stephen?

Is he going down with a fight?

Is he going out guns ablazing?

Well, we will see next week, but for a preview of that, let's look at verse 15..

15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the [l]Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

Long story short, as Stephen sat there listening to false accusations and false witnesses, his appearance was like the appearance of an angel.

Now what does that mean?

Well, it doesn't mean that he became an angel.

The text doesn't say that at all.

It simply that he looked like an angel to his accusers.

Now, the word angel is way overused today, but an angel is a created being whose sole purpose is to serve the Lord.

Angels offer constant worship to God in heaven.

Angels serve as God's messengers on earth.

But angels are not weak looking creatures.

They have the appearance of mighty warriors.

They scared the daylight of our Balaam's donkey and the shepherds in the field on the night that Jesus was born.

But here, the appearance of an angel is simply a picture of someone reflecting the glory of God.

Do you remember when Moses came down from a mountain conversation with God in the book of Exodus?

The text said that Moses face shined after speaking with God.

It is same glow that Jesus demonstrated in the transfiguration.

Here, Stephen is simply reflecting the glory of God to these unbelieving Jews as he preaches truth and puts his life on the line with calmness and confidence.

And that is a result of him being filled with faith and the Spirit.

People who live that that can look death in the face and still reflect peace instead of terror..

How did you resist the advances of evil people?

Fully rely on the Spirit of God and put all your trust in Him.

And you will show a residence to eve that looks like the face of an angel instead of the face of the devil.

Sadly, Christians who rely on their own wisdom and fight like the world fights end up looking more like the enemy than looking like the Lord.

May God give us that kind of resistance.

Next week, we will see what Stephen rises and says to these Jews.

And it becomes one of the greatest summaries of the OT that has ever been preached..

For tonight, let's end with this..

Conclusion

Archiblad Edward Glover left a successful business in the late 1896 to serve as missionary in China.

Sadly, his wife and one daughter were killed as the Boxer Rebellion broke out in 1899.

However, the 3 years he spent ministering there brought much fruit and salvation to the China.

You see, Glover did evangelism on foot.

He often walked 50-60 miles per day sharing the gospel of Christ with those he met.

However, what set him apart in his ministry to the Chinese was the countenance of his face.

Many converts say that Glover's pleasant and almost glowing appearance caused them to stop and listen to his message.

And many were saved simply because peace seemed to radiate from his presence.

Therefore, it is no wonder that he was known as Mr Glory Face of China.

Look, an appearance like this isn't something supernatural.

In fact, Stephen would not have noticed any difference if he looked in a mirror.

But that's not the point.

The point is that a person living fully in the Spirit and with total trust in God stands out in a world filled with distrust and confusion.

May we aim to be like Stephen in our culture.

May we have his reputation.

May we have his total reliance upon the Lord.

And may we resist the enemies of God by demonstrating a supernatural peace and calmness in all situations.

Let's pray.

I have lately returned from a visit to China, and it has been, not an occasional thing, but quite the usual thing, to find the missionaries full of blessing and boiling over.

One who reached China about a year ago was not there very long before the natives gave him a name

— "Mr. Glory-face" — because his face was always shining for the Lord.

He left a large business in which over two thousand hands were employed. He left a very precious work for God, in which he had been happy and much blessed. But what was his testimony? "The Lord promised me," he said, "a hundredfold more than all I left for Him. He has given me a very large hundredfold. It has been the best investment I have ever made."