

COURAGE TO SPEAK / Sunday School- October 7, 2012

Unifying Topic: STEPHEN'S ARREST AND SPEECH

Lesson Text

I. Stephen's Faith (Acts 6:8)

II. Stephen's Opposition (Acts 6:9-15)

III. Stephen's Courage To Speak (Acts 7:1-2)

The Main Thought: And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. (Acts 6:8, KJV).

Unifying Principle: People need a bold and perceptive leader to articulate truth in times of uncertainty. How can we find courage to speak the truth? Stephen, in the face of opposition, demonstrated the power and wisdom of the Spirit to speak the truth of Christ.

Lesson Aim: To discuss Stephen's courageous act of speaking like a prophet toward his opponents.

Life aim: To reinforce a confidence in Jesus that emboldens students to speak up when others are determined to speak against the truth.

6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

6:9 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.

6:10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

6:11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

6:12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came unto him, and caught him and brought him to the council.

6:13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

6:14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

6:15 And all that say in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

7:1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

7:2 And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran.

HISTORY:

When we read the descriptions of the early church—the miracles, the sharing and generosity—we may wish we could have been a part of this "perfect" church. But in reality, they had problems just as we do today. No church has ever been or will ever be perfect until Christ and His church are united at His Second Coming. All churches have problems. If your church's shortcomings distress you, ask yourself: "*Would a perfect church let me be a member?*" Then, do what you can to make your church better.

The needs of the early church increased. There were Grecian widows being neglected in the daily administration of the food and other needs. The Twelve apostles chose others to administer the food while they continued in prayer and the preaching of the Word of God. Seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost, and wisdom from the Grecian community were chosen and appointed over the business of the widows. If you are not in leadership, you have gifts that can be used by God in various areas of the church's ministry. Offer these gifts in service to Him. These seven men, being Grecian ministers could touch the Gentile world wherever they went—by language, by training, and by culture. God was preparing the church without them knowing it for the day when they were to be scattered all over the world. Believers must be rooted in love and humility so that God may use them in His eternal plan to reach the world for His dear Son. What have you learned in an imperfect church? Before this moment these men were not serving in the capacity with which they were now being charged. It was made official in their ordination service when the apostles prayed and laid hands on them. The result was that the Word of God increased, the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly, and the priests were obedient to the faith.

LESSON:

Acts 6:8 Stephen's Faith

6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. Stephen was one of the chosen from the Grecian community. His name means "*crown*." Three things stand out in this verse.

1. He was full of faith (*grace*).
 - a. God's love, favor, gifts, and blessings.
 - b. A godly, gracious character and behavior.
2. He was full of power (*dunameos*).
 - a. The Holy Spirit is the Divine...
 - i. Presence iv. Might
 - ii. Power v. Strength
 - iii. Force vi. Energy
 - b. ...who lives and acts through the believer. The Holy Spirit is the One Who...
 - i. influences iii. produces
 - ii. controls iv. effects
3. He did great wonders and miracles. Both grace and power (the Holy Spirit) are necessary before a person can serve God effectively.
 - c. ...the work of God both within and through the believer. It is not man, but the Holy Spirit alone who has the power to save and mature, and work miracles among men.

Stephen faith was not in himself but in the grace and power of God that filled him.

Acts 6:9-15 Stephen's Opposition

6:9 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. Stephen was a man who defended the faith. All of the synagogues listed are Grecian names. Note the word "*arose*" (*anestesan*) which means "*stood up*." Five synagogues in particular stood up against Stephen. They opposed what he was preaching because they and their forefathers had been forcibly deported out of their homeland and scattered across the world by the Romans. Christ was a threat to them and their religion. They were concerned about what Stephen was preaching:

- Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of the world. Animal sacrifices were no longer needed.
- Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God and man, and man was now to worship God in spirit and in truth through Christ and Him alone. Earthly priests, therefore, were no longer mediators who stood between God and man. They were the ministers and servants of God to the flock of God, but not mediators.

The Grecians saw that the preaching of Jesus as the supreme sacrifice and mediator went against everything they had been taught and stood for. They did not see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law nor as the Liberator of man, but they saw Him as the destroyer of the Law and of everything they held precious. Therefore, they stood up and argued against Stephen; stood up right in the middle of Stephen's preaching and began to dispute him. They did this several times.

6:10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Although they argued with him several times, they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit of God by which he spoke. They could stand against Stephen but they could not stand against the Holy Spirit who was in him and speaking through him. The Holy Spirit was supplying the answers, the thoughts and the words to say. Your communion with God is very important against the enemies of the Word! And in that communion one must be under the control of the Holy Spirit, just as Stephen was. Men often do stand against believers, but the man who opposes and argues against the Believer's witness is resisting the Holy Spirit, not the Believer.

6:11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. Stephen was a fierce man to be reckoned with. The synagogues were so angered that they bribed men to lie against him, stirring up the people and the leaders against him. Since Stephen had said nothing against Moses or God, they had to introduce false witnesses, a common practice among the Jews. The basic charge was

blasphemy; speaking against Moses (the Law) and against God (that is, against the temple, God's dwelling place vv.13-14). Jesus was accused of the same thing (Mk.14:63-64).

6:12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came unto him, and caught him and brought him to the council.

1. The word "*stirred up*" (*sunekinesan*) means to shake as a volcano; to move and rock together as with a violent shaking. This was the first time the people themselves were aroused against the disciples.
2. The word "*came upon him*" (*epistantes*) mean they rushed at him in fury anger, and violence.
3. The word "*caught*" (*sunerpasan*) means to seize with much violence, the picture is that they seized and literally dragged him to court.

They were determined to take advantage of the moment by arresting Stephen.

6:13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: The charges against Stephen were threefold:

1. Blasphemy against the temple. The Jews had always taught that God dwelt in the Temple. Stephen was preaching that God now dwelt in the hearts and lives of people, and not just in the Temple.
2. Blasphemy against the Law. By Law the Jews meant the "*Scribal Law*" (all the commentaries and interpretations of the Scripture). Stephen was preaching that Christ fulfills the Law. Truth: God's Law is not destroyed, it is fulfilled in Christ. Christ is now the Ideal, the Pattern, and the Standard by which we are to follow. The Law is not erased, nor annulled. The Law is now found embraced in the life of Christ.

6:14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. The point to note is that the charges were false that they so called heard. They heard what they wanted to hear.

3. Preaching the destruction of the temple and of Jewish customs. This is a repeat of the above. The false witnesses alluded to a portion of Stephen's message in which he quoted Jesus' statement about destroying the body, and it being raised again in three days (Mt.26:61; Mk.14:58). As this statement was misunderstood and misinterpreted when Jesus uttered it; now it is misinterpreted by them when Stephen reported it. Stephen was preaching that Christ fulfills man's need for God and for salvation.

6:15 And all that say in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

The council members saw God's presence upon Stephen's face. The words "*face of an angel*" refers to some splendor, glow, shining radiance—a glory that was present. Apparently, God allowed His glory, His presence to be made manifest and visible for all to see. This same experience was seen on Moses and on Christ. Stephen's face showed the great communion he had with the Lord. It was pure, calm, unruffled composure that reflected upon Stephen's face; that peaceful presence of God surrounded him. What an awesome state to be in!

Acts 7:1-2 Stephen's Courage To Speak

7:1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so? This was probably Caiaphas and he's asking the pertinent question: "*Are these accusations true?*"; these charges that had been lodged against Stephen. He was accused of blasphemy of preaching that the sacred institutions of the nation were to be destroyed, that is, the temple, the law, and the customs (6:11-15).

7:2 And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran. Stephen addressed them as men, brethren, and fathers, affirming his oneness with them and addressing them in a polite manner as he asked them to listen to him. He began his speech with the history of Abraham. Abraham was among the earliest people in all the Jewish history. And he was among the most important people in it. He related that it was the God of glory who appeared to their father Abraham and called him. He dwelt in Mesopotamia before he came to Charran (Haran). The point is that

man must get out of his present surroundings and leave the world and its material comforts and corruptions. ¹People who want to obey God must always be willing to leave. They must go wherever God leads them. Stephen showed that God can appear in front of people anywhere. They do not have to be in a special place. This was the call of Abraham, his removal by faith from Ur of the Chaldees to Harran. ²Abraham was a pagan, an idol worshiper, from a foreign country, and God showed up and called him out of a pagan lifestyle. God sovereignly chose Abraham and poured out His grace on him. Stephen wasn't really defending himself, instead, he took the offensive, seizing the opportunity to summarize his teaching about Jesus. And from there he continues to speak to them.

SUMMARY:

Stephen was one of the seven Grecian men of good report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom in which the apostles laid hands on. He began to do great signs and wonders and miracles among the people. However, when those of the synagogues got whiff of it, they rose up with dispute against Stephen. They didn't like what he was saying but, they couldn't withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. So since they couldn't win, they instigated men to lie and say that he blasphemed against Moses and God. With this, they stirred up the people, elders, and scribes and laid hold on Stephen, dragging him before the council where by false accusers testified against him. They accused him of speaking against the Temple and against the laws of Moses; Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the Temple and throw out all of Moses' laws and customs. All of a sudden Stephen's face became as radiant as the face of an angel's. The High Priest then asked Stephen, "*Are these things true*" in which they are saying? In respect unto them he greeted them with politeness and began by referring them to the history of Abraham. The Jews greatly admired Abraham and prided themselves in being his "*children.*" Furthermore, they depended on their nation's heritage rather than their personal faith.

APPLICATION:

If your life depended on it to speak about Jesus, would you have the courage to speak to those who oppose you? You can do it when God's Spirit is in control!

¹ <http://www.easyenglish.info/bible-commentary/acts-lbw.htm>

² http://www.bereanbiblechurch.org/transcripts/acts/7_1-53.htm

<http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sundayschool.html>