

Gamma

Acts 6-7

Study 7 Steven presents the gospel

Q1 Acts 6:8 15.What does this passage tell us about why Stephen's ministry was so effective? Which of his characteristics do you lack? What can you do to grow in that area?

The outstanding features of his ministry were:

- A. a) First, he had a firm and clear grasp of the gospel of grace. We can especially see this from the accusation, "*This fellow never stops speaking... against the law.*" (v.13) This shows that he was proclaiming that we are saved by grace, not keeping the law.
- B. b) Second, he had remarkable skill in sharing this gospel. We are told that his opponents "*could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke*" (v.10). This certainly means that in open, public discussions or debate, Stephen always "won" for two reasons. On the one hand his reasoning and answers were compelling ("*the wisdom*"). On the other hand there was a spirit of confidence and power about him that all could see ("*the Spirit by whom he spoke*"). This means that our non-verbal presence (tone of joy, boldness, yet loving sensitivity) is as important as our verbal presentation (logic, illustration, brevity, clarity).
- C. c) Third, there was a unique blend and balance of two seemingly opposite qualities — he was full of both "*grace and power*" (v.8). This is striking because they are characteristics that seem opposed to each other. A person who is very "gracious" or who is said to be marked by "grace" is compassionate, sensitive, and peaceful. On the other hand, a person who is "powerful" is forceful, bold, forthright, direct. How can these two things go together? Stephen has the Spirit

(6:6) of Christ, who is both a Lion and a Lamb (Rev.5:5-6). Only the gospel can produce humble- boldness. Why? If we are saved by our works, we can either be bold, but not humble (if we are living up to our standards) — or we can be humble, but not bold (if we have been failing our standards). But the gospel tells us we are helpless sinners (creating a humility that does not go away) but we are completely accepted in Christ (creating a boldness that does not go away). Thus it produces both grace and power.

In short, Stephen not only knew the gospel, but the unique character that the gospel produces shone out in his very persona and demeanor when he spoke. Thus we see that before his final sermon, *“his face was like the face of an angel”*. (v.15) He was a man who was just overflowing with God. He was “full”. Whenever he spoke, his joy and deep sense of the gospel’s richness was obvious to anyone looking at him.

Q 2. Look at Acts 7:37-43. How do these verses address the place of the law in Israel? 7:51-53 How does this charge follow from his whole speech?

7:39-43. Stephen’s accusers had accused him of “speaking against the law” (6:13), and here we see his defense. He is saying, “I do not disregard the law — it is you who do so.” Here in v.38 Stephen shows that he believes Moses is divinely called and brought God’s words of truth to us. But then Stephen shows that from the very beginning, Israel has failed to obey the law. This happened under Aaron (v.40-42), and continued under the prophets who condemned Israel for their continued disobedience to the law. (In vv.42-43 he quotes Amos.) But Stephen shows from the entire history of Israel that every prophet and leader was persecuted by their own people — Joseph, Moses, David. So there is no way that Israel is going to be saved by obeying the law!

Finally, the devastating charge of vv.51-53 brings the whole argument down to one point, and lays it directly on the heads of the hearers. He says that their concern for external ritual (like circumcision) is vain, because they are uncircumcised in their hearts — they need, therefore, a new birth. And the evidence is that they have rejected and persecuted Jesus just like all the others. This

shows that they cannot possibly obey the law (v.53) unless they get new hearts (v.51). A whole different way of salvation must be found.

It is very possible that the name for Jesus is chosen carefully, in line with the speech's argument. Jesus is called the *Righteous One*, because he is the fulfiller of the law who thus opens the way into God. He is the fulfiller of both the law and the temple.

Q3. 7:54-8:1. What happens to Stephen to prepare him for death so well? Why does it lead to courage and forgiveness (v.60)? How can we know more of this ourselves?

Leader's note: we touched on this experience of Stephen in the project in Week 2. We connected it to Pentacost.

When Stephen was dragged before a human court, he was condemned unjustly and was about to be executed. But he was *"filled with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 7:55). What happened? He saw *"Jesus, standing at the right hand of God"* (v.56). What was the significance of that? There are other places in the Bible where Jesus is seen seated at the right hand of God (Hebrews 1:3), with "sitting" representing a finished work. But here Jesus is standing. The best guess is that this refers to his work as our Intercessor (Heb.7:25). The Bible speaks of his intercessory work as an ongoing work, in which he stands before the Father as our representative, so that we are regarded by God in him. Compare I John 2:1 – *we have an advocate with the Father, one who speaks in our defense — Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins.* F.F. Bruce says, *"Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God."* (Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 168.

Therefore, at the very moment that an earthly court was condemning him, Stephen realized that the heavenly court was commending him. In other words, the "fullness of the Spirit" that he experienced was an experience of the gospel. At that moment, he got an extremely vivid, powerful sight of what he already knew intellectually — that in Christ we are beautiful in God's sight and free from

condemnation (Col.1:23). But the Spirit took that intellectual concept and electrified his entire soul and mind and heart and imagination with it. At that moment, the verdict there (at the throne of God) became so real and overwhelming to him that the verdict here (in the earthly kangaroo court) became inconsequential. He faced his accusers with not just boldness, but even with a calmness and joy (v.56), and forgiveness (v.60).

To the degree we are aware of Jesus' work as our advocate, as our righteousness before the Father, we will have courage, love and power.

How can we know more of this ourselves? There are many answers that will depend on a person's specific circumstances. But Stephen had these conditions. First, he was being daring in witness. God gave him this help because he had stepped out for Christ. Second, he knew the Scripture — he was soaked in it. Third, he "looked" to heaven (v.55). Did he look because he saw something, or did he see something because he had looked?? We have to take time to really cry out to God to send the Spirit so that the things we know intellectually become things that we spiritually "see".

Q 4 Augustine of Hippo said "The quest for happiness consists in attaching ourselves in love to objects of desire that we think will make us happy. But for this to occur, a knowledge of the metaphysical order and value of objects of love is necessary such that love might be properly ordered"

What are the things in life that we love and how do we order them?

How does suffering cause us to reorder our loves in life"

Why should God take first place in our lives ? If this is so why is it difficult to order God as number 1 in our lives