

A LAUDABLE LAYMAN

Acts 6:7-15.

The word, "laudable", means "commendable", coming from the verb, "laud", meaning to praise highly.

Among the seven who were chosen out of the group to serve as deacons, in order that the apostles might give themselves to the study of the Word of God and to prayer, Stephen had the first place.

Stephen is one of the most beautiful characters and charming personalities mentioned in the Bible. He was not a superhuman character, but he embodied in himself the high qualities of Christian manhood. He was remarkable because of the grace and power of God. His soul charged and surcharged with the power of God. God gave him the ability to work miracles, which power he used to relieve suffering humanity and to point men to the Lord Jesus Christ.

From verse 7 we learn that the Word of God increased. In what sense did the Word of God increase? It became the talk of the town, and people understood these Old Testament prophecies for the first time, and were thrilled by their new understanding of them. The predictions of the prophets became living realities that were being fulfilled right before the eyes of the people.

What were the agencies that increased the popularity of the Word of God? There were the thrilling experiences in the Person, life, miracles, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus--experiences to which the disciples were testifying daily. Then, the band of new deacons who had just been ordained to help in this work were good men and very effective in their testimony. In addition, the opposition of the Jews, particularly the priests, only scattered the movement instead of smothering it. Every time they struck it, they made it break out in a new way and place, until it was beyond their control.

"And the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." This was a natural consequence of a healthy church. They not only increased in number, but in boldness and effectiveness. Let it be observed that there was an increase of disciples and not merely members of the church. Some churches add new members without increasing the number of real disciples.

Their boldness became alarming. They could no longer be intimidated by threat of laws, prisons, or death. They laughed at the sneers of their superiors. They testified everywhere they went. They were no longer confined to secret places, but went boldly into the open streets. They became invincible witnesses.

"And a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." The winning of the priests was the fruit of the holy boldness of the disciples, and is a fine example for us. It must have been a glorious day when these arch-enemies of Christ began to yield, confessing their sins, making public their love for Christ, and swearing allegiance to Him. Try to imagine what the turning of these priests meant to the little band of disciples. It greatly heartened them; it reenforced them; it strengthened their courage.

Also, try to imagine what it cost these priests to turn away and to become Christians. It was no easy matter. They had been schooled to hate Christianity, but now they find themselves defending it and propagating it. To do so meant the loss of their friends, the loss of their social standing, and the loss of their official position. In many instances, it meant the loss of their lives; yet they turned and became disciples of the Christ Whom they had killed.

We are impressed with the fulness of Stephen's life. In what did his fulness consist?

1. He was full of wisdom. Acts 6:3.
Though young in years he was wise. Those with perplexities and problems with which they did not know how to cope freely talked with Stephen about them. They consulted him about the difficult things in connection with the administration of the church affairs. His suggestions revealed the keen insight of genius.
2. He was full of faith. Acts 6:5.
Because of his faith there was a fine intimacy between God and him. They delighted in each other. He also had faith in men. How do we know that he believed in and trusted people? People believed in him. They had absolute confidence in him. Faith begets faith. If you put a question after the names of others, you may rest assured that they will put the same kind of a mark after your name.
3. He was full of power. Acts 6:8.
Where Stephen went things happened. He had a tremendous influence. It is said that "they were not able to resist the spirit and the wisdom by which he spake."
4. He was full of courage. Acts 7:51.
He was filled with holy boldness, so that he spoke the Word of God fearlessly.
5. He was full of the Word of God. Acts 7:2-54.
6. He was full of the Holy Spirit. Acts 7:55.
His numerous graces and excellent qualities were the result of the fact that he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
7. He was full of trust. Acts 7:59.
8. He was full of compassionate love. Acts 7:60.

In describing Stephen, Luke mentioned first that he was "full of faith." Some of us have but a drop of faith and conclude that we are full of it, but here was a man whose whole life was literally saturated with it. Faith was the driving force of his life. Faith had filled him with courage and zeal and a deathless conviction. He preferred death to cowardice.

Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit." He was completely given over to His direction. Every drop of his blood, every fiber of his being, and every ambition of his heart were wholly dedicated to God. He was charged with the power of God. And the world will always hear from such a man. If you put him in prison, he can pray the walls down. If he is dragged into court, he can make the judge on the bench tremble and plead for more time. If you kill him, he will do more in his death than he did in his lifetime.

Faith made Stephen see the hand of God in history. He saw the hand of God guide the affairs of men. The history of the Jews had not been a series of haphazard events. It had been divinely guided.

Faith is not just something to talk about. It is more than a theory, and more than a dogma. It is a living stream that flows through one's whole life and finds many outlets. It can not be hid. It expresses itself in attitudes, in words, in lives, and in services.

Stephen's faith led him to inform himself about the kingdom of God. No preacher could have delivered a sermon packed with more information, filled with saner appeals, and marked with greater love for his fellows than did this deacon of that first church. Stephen knew his Bible. How he had mastered it in his early life! Perhaps one of the greatest trained in the great truths of the Word of God.

Stephen's faith overcame his difficulties. It opened the heavens in the time of his greatest need. It revealed God in fuller light. It filled his soul with joy in times of sorrow. It made him pray for the men who killed him. It sustained him in the hour

of death. Faith will sustain any Christian when he comes to die. It can penetrate the blackest clouds that hang over us. One can see further through faith than he can through a telescope. Faith links us to God, who is invisible to the physical eye. It fills one's soul and life with compassion for others. Who can evaluate the faith of Stephen to his own life--in his work, in his suffering, in his hope of better times, in his compassion for sinning men, in his darkest hours?

Stephen's preaching created a great sensation in Jerusalem. It had stirred the whole city. The Jews had combined their efforts to answer and to defeat him, but they were powerless before him. "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." He had a divine enlightenment--something beyond anything this world has to offer. Even in the realm of the intellect, Stephen was more than a match for all his opponents. Their chatter was like the talk of an infant in comparison with his keen insight and Spirit-taught wisdom.

Stephen was not only a wise man, but he was also strong. "He was full of the Holy Spirit." What power this indicates! It leaves nothing to be desired, and no human power is comparable with that of the divine power--"The power of the Holy Spirit."

Stephen's sermons are not recorded for us. The one in chapter 7 came after this encounter. But the ones before that evidently contained some very heavy blows against the sins and hypocrisy of the Jews, and had also contained some very strong arguments in defense of Christ. They had been packed with wisdom. They were not the mere oratorical flights of a shallow sentimentalist. There was greater wisdom in them than the Jews had been accustomed to, and more than even their fathers could answer and refute. Many found their hearts broken, and consciences probed, and their shame exposed, but they were not able to defend themselves. His sermons had stirred up the foe.

Stephen's critics were filled with prejudice. Prejudice is blind to reason; it will not recognize truths nor facts. Prejudice would smite those it can not answer. Anger is its weapon. Physical force and violence are its main defenses. Prejudice is willing to support its cause by falsehoods, and is willing to hire false witnesses to defend it.

Stephen's critics were filled with hypocrisy. They were characterized by littleness. Little men are the ones who "sell out." Little men resort to stirring up public sentiment among the lower element. Little men stoop to low and vicious means of defense. Little men get mad when they are unable to answer arguments. Little men make false charges against their opponents.

Stephen was fully conscious of the grave danger he faced. The same spirit of hate and murder that sent Christ to the cross was manifested in the men who had laid their hands upon him. Was he ready to pay the price of the faith he had preached and claimed?

What did that glowing face of Stephen's reflect from within? It reflected sincerity. He was unconscious that his face shone. It reflected his faith in God. It reflected his attitude toward the men who were putting him to death. How do we know what he thought about them? No man's face can shine like an angel's if his heart is filled with bitterness and hate. This angelic face was a revelation of what was in his heart. Gentleness and ugliness will write themselves into the lines of one's face. It reflected the hope and vision that filled his soul.

What did his glowing face project outwardly? It was a proof of the reality of the gospel he had preached. That look on Stephen's face so reflected the cause of God that the high priests were afraid to go further with their murderous blow until they had given him a chance to defend himself. And what a defense it was! Not one word about himself, but all for his Lord; not a defense for himself, but a defense for Christ, even though he knew it would cost him his life.