

A LIFE OF POWER Acts 6,7

The life of Stephen as an exemplary Christian and a consecrated servant in the early church is an inspiration for our holiest living and our heroism in the discharge of duty. We should note well the record of his noble qualities of mind and heart.

During the busy and eventful weeks immediately following the day of Pentecost, people separated by wide chasms were brought into the fold of the Christian brotherhood. Among this number were foreign-born Jews and home-born Jews. These had hated each other in the past, but now they were being welded together by the bonds of their common faith in Jesus Christ. This growing spirit of brotherliness, however, was not permitted to continue without hindrance. The cause of this unfortunate situation was this: many of the recent converts to Christianity were not allowed to return home. They were cut off from all financial support. They stood face to face with pinching poverty. To meet the demand for immediate help, big-hearted men came forward, such as Barnabas, and gave their all to the support of these needy and homeless converts. The funds thus obtained were put into the hands of the Apostles and were administered by them.

However, the administration of the Twelve did not prove satisfactory. The foreign-born Jews or Hellenists became convinced that they were not getting a square deal. They claimed that their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Thus trouble in the early church came up over the women and money. So the Apostles very wisely decided to overcome their difficulty by a further organization of the Church. Peter said, "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Therefore, look ye out among you seven men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word." That was an exceedingly wise decision. And great is the pity that all ministers have not exercised the same high and holy wisdom.

When the multitude heard this wise suggestion, they greeted it with hearty welcome. Wisely those selected were taken from the Hellenistic group which was the first to complain. Stephen was the first chosen and he was made chairman of the board. He is one of the most charming personalities in all the history of the Church. His whole life story is told in two chapters of the New Testament. We watch him live for one brief day of his life. We see him pass swiftly. But he abides long enough to leave his name written indelibly upon our minds and hearts. He appeals to us as embodying in himself the very highest and kingliest qualities of Christian manhood. He was not chosen because of his social position or scholarship but because he was full of grace and of the Holy Spirit. He was head and shoulders above the average man spiritually. His personal character was beautiful, courageous, and forgiving. His public service was impartial, kind, and loving. The most marked thing about him, however, was the presence of the Holy Ghost in his life. This resulted in his ability to live a life of great power.

I. Power In Practice

With Stephen the presence of the Holy Spirit manifested itself in wonders and miracles. "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." Stephen walked upon an apostolic level. His life was glorious in power because:-----

1. He was victorious over his own desires

He is described by the term "full". But, in what did his fulness consist? That is supremely important question. There are some full folks that we cannot get rid of. We often say, "I could like him, but he is so full of himself. He is so full of irony. He is so full of sarcasm. He is so full of trickery and treachery." But what of Stephen?

(1) He was "full of faith".

He was not a man with a meager and timid and invalid faith. He was a man

full of faith, so full that though doubt came and knocked at his door every morning, noon, and night, Stephen simply smiled and shook his head as if to say "No room. Faith is my guest now."

That means that Stephen was on good terms with God. That means that God delighted in Stephen and he delighted in God. That means that there was a fine intimacy between them. Not only was he full of faith toward God. He was full of faith toward men. It does not take a wise man to see why this is true. How do we know that Stephen trusted people? How do we know that he believed in folks? Here is positive proof: folks believed in him. The whole brotherhood regarded him with firm trust and confidence. Faith begets faith but if you put a question after everybody's name, do not forget that they will put that same kind of mark after yours.

(2) He was "full of wisdom"

He had that faith that could see visions and dream dreams, but he was more than a dreamer. He was a man of common sense. He was a man who brought those faculties that would have made him a leader in the world of finance or of politics and dedicated them fully upon the altar of his Lord. If there was an individual with perplexities and problems with which he did not know how to cope, he came and talked with Stephen about them. If there were hard questions about the administration of the church affairs they consulted Stephen. He was always ready with a suggestion that showed the keen insight of genius. Though young in years he was wise.

(3) He was "full of power"

Where Stephen went, things happened. Changes took place, revolutions were wrought, and it stand written, "they were not able to resist the spirit and the wisdom by which he spake." This young saint was full of moral dynamite. He was a spiritual tornado. He swept things before him with an irresistible force.

(4) He was "full of grace".

That is, he was charming. He was magnetic. He was fascinating. He was attractive. He cast a spell over folks. He was as winsome as springtime, as attractive as sea music. When others were in his presence, they found themselves comforted and helped. The broken-hearted forgot to sob when he was by. The wounded forgot their hurt. The hopeless forgot their despair. He was a gracious man.

(5) He was "full of the Holy Ghost"

Stephen was a greatly gifted young man. Not another man in the Church in his day had as much ability. He was cultured and well-trained. But this does not account for his life of power. What, then, is the secret? All the fine graces that we have mentioned are but the outcome of this last fulness. You can only account for his grace and fine enviable qualities by saying that he was a man in whom Christ dwelt in the person of the Holy Spirit.

2. He was useful in service to others

His time was consumed in doing good for others. He was appointed to a position that looked quite small. He was to help administer the temporal affairs of a semi-pauper Church. But he made these temporal affairs to administer to the highest spiritual ends. He gave out bread in such a fashion as to make men hunger for the Bread of Life. He worked with his might in his small sphere and God honored him and made him a mighty lay preacher. His spiritual experience was a dynamic that drove him to practical service.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the consecrated Christian should likewise be practical. It should manifest itself in:---

(1) A deep spiritual experience through our possession of conquering power.

(2) High ethics, expressing themselves in right living, benevolence, doctrinal consistency, etc.

(3) Personal Witnessing for Christ.

II. Power in Polemics

How effective he was in his preaching. Jerusalem was a proud and wicked city. It was full of cultured and religious aristocrats. They would have given almost anything to have been able to ignore Stephen. But they could not ignore him. They might as well have tried to ignore a cyclone. Scarcely a man in the city was stupid and sleepy enough not to know that Stephen was in the city on a business trip for his King. As he labored many fell in love with his Lord while others grew bitter in their opposition to him. The Jews could not resist the power by which Stephen spoke. He is a transition man of the New Testament. His speech and death marked the transition of Christianity from its earliest Jewish form to its extension among the Gentiles.

This spirit-filled man had a clear and comprehensive grasp of the purposes and works of God in Old Testament History. He begins his messages by reviewing the history of the Jews from Abraham and the patriarchs. They all listen attentively. Then, he recounts their history from Moses to David. Then, he tells of the building of Solomon's Temple and gives a piece of exegesis on where God is to be worshipped. He said the same thing that Jesus did at Sychar and that aroused their enmity. He plainly taught the spirituality and universality of the Christian faith. He closed with a short but vehement application about their treatment of God's Prophet. He spoke right on though he knew that he was digging his own grave as he spoke. "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye." Thus, he accuses them of resisting the Holy Spirit, perpetuating the spirit of persecution, and betraying and crucifying the Son of God. He noticed the anger in their eyes as they interrupted his speech with strong ejaculations. His message, however, was a speech of sacred eloquence, a witness to the truth of the Old Testament history, a testimony to the sustaining power of religion, a noble vindication of Christ, and the Christian religion.

III. Power in Persecution

The conviction wrought in the hearts of his hearers aroused them to a hatred of him and to active persecution. They were quite proud and it was hard for them to endure public humiliation. So being defeated, they adopted the recourse of slander. They "suborned men" who were willing to perjure themselves for pay in the interest of Jewish orthodoxy. Stephen soon found himself under arrest for blasphemy and heresy and arraigned before the Sanhedrin. The assembly believed the false witnesses and it became a mob and rushed at him in a rage. His keen irony had stung them to the quick. His sarcasm had cut to the bone. His words had cut like a buzz-saw and their teeth clattered like wolves for a victim. There was an uncontrollable outbreak of the mob and Stephen was rushed out of the city. The scene that followed was nothing more than common lynching. They had not been able to resist the inspired logic of Stephen, so in order to get revenge, they pelted him with stones. The "witnesses" began the stoning as was their privilege. It was too dirty a piece of work for the nice young rabbi, Saul of Tarsus. However, he was well pleased with what was going on so he held or guarded the clothes of those who did the job. Stephen's angelic face became bruised and blood stained. As he fell a victim to their hate he died praying for the forgiveness of his persecutors. He prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." This last cry of the dying martyr is a convincing proof of the transforming power of the love of Christ in the heart. This scene, so like unto the crucifixion of Jesus, was forever implanted upon the mind of Paul who watched him. He was never able to banish the picture of the angelic face of this first Christian martyr from his mind and heart. Stephen had left his mark upon Saul and the latter became his real successor. "Si Stephanus non orasset, ecclesia Paulum non habuisset." If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul. Truly, if Stephen had not prayed, Paul would not have preached. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, lived a life of power and was a blessing while he lived. He has been an abiding blessing through all the changing years.

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