

Acts 6, 7

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, the separation of ministry and administration, and the history of man's rebellion against God.

Scripture: Acts 6:1

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Faithfulness in Trials"

Description

John Nelson Darby discusses the challenges faced by the early church as the flesh manifests itself among Christians, particularly in larger groups. He emphasizes the importance of separating the preaching of the word from the care of the poor, as the apostles appointed deacons to manage these responsibilities. The sermon highlights Stephen's powerful testimony and defense before the council, showcasing the work of the Holy Spirit in his life and the rejection of God's message by the Jewish leaders. Darby illustrates the historical context of Israel's resistance to God's dealings, culminating in the stoning of Stephen, who exemplifies faith and forgiveness even in the face of death. Ultimately, the sermon reflects on the transformative power of seeing Jesus in glory and the call to embody His likeness in our lives.

Transcript

But the flesh manifests itself in Christians, and the more so if their number be large. Now we find a new event happening; in the multitude the power of faith and the fruits of the Spirit begin to grow feebler. Love and confidence - love's constant companion - diminish; but at the same time the strength of the Spirit found in the apostles takes its stand against difficulty. And not only this, but an opportunity is given for securing greater regularity in the daily ministration of the assembly. The preaching of the word is separated from the care of the poor. In this case the apostles desired that the people should choose those who might care for the widows. We shall see farther on that the apostle Paul himself, with Barnabas, appointed elders, but, when it was a question of money, neither the twelve nor Paul would take any part in it, nor confound the divine service of the word with the administration of the money furnished by the faithful; 1 Corinthians 16.

The twelve desired to be occupied only with the word, and Paul would not charge himself with the money for the poor at Jerusalem, unless brethren appointed for this purpose were with him. But, although the flesh shewed itself, the Spirit was enough to overrule circumstances. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira this power and the presence of the Spirit was manifested in judgment against hypocrisy; here we find it seeking to make its way in the assembly, producing order and right where danger of disunion was

manifested in the midst of the disciples.

343 But another principle respecting the Holy Ghost, easy to believe but often forgotten, is now made evident - His full liberty: as we read in 1 Corinthians 12, "dividing to every man severally as he will." We have seen up to this moment the activity of the apostles, established in their office by the Lord Himself, if we except Matthias. We find now seven men, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom, chosen by the people to serve at the tables where the distributions were made to the poor widows; and among these were two specially used by the Holy Ghost in the preaching of the gospel; and, at this moment, Stephen. In 1 Timothy 3:13, we find, "For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good decree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Stephen was already a man full of the Holy Ghost and of faith, but now his gift is unfolded. He does signs and wonders; even his adversaries could not resist the power and wisdom with which he spoke. The Holy Ghost here works freely as in Philip. He also was obliged to give up his office for the work of evangelisation, for he went to Samaria. By the liberty given by the Spirit he is a minister of the word, and not of the tables. It is a new phase of the work of grace and of the Spirit. We shall find still other proofs. It is a very important principle, the truth and force of which extend to the present day. They are not sent by the apostles but directly by God. It is the strength of the Holy Ghost that urges them to the work, consecration to Christ, and love of souls.

It seems also that Stephen had said more, and spoken more openly, than Peter. The latter ever bore testimony to Israel's open opposition to God, for they had crucified Him whom God had exalted to His own right hand. We know not how Stephen spoke; but at all events he gave rise to the accusation of having said that Jesus would destroy Jerusalem, and change the customs which Moses had established. Evidently he always preached Christ and His glory, as did Peter; but he said more - he warned the people of the consequences of their sin. Peter laid down the fundamental truth that shewed the state of the Jews before God. Stephen, taking lower ground and speaking more familiarly, announces the consequences of non-repentance. Both testimonies were fully of God, and inspired, but differed in character.

344 The accusations being brought before the council, Stephen is seized and forced to appear before the high priest and his accusers. To these there only remained enmity against God, and the power of death, for God allowed them to fulfil their purposes. But the occasion produces the magnificent defence of Stephen, indicating the position of the Jews with the utmost precision, and closing the history of humanity, of man before God here below. Before the flood God bore testimony, but He established no institution. We have perhaps Adam, Abel, Enoch and Noah, godly men, but not one of them was the head of a race according to God; but after the flood God began in the new world to found institutions for the government of the world, for the blessing of man, and to unfold truth and His ways.

At first no promise was made to man. In the judgment pronounced on Satan we find a prophecy of the final work of Christ, the object, by grace, of Adam's faith, and also of ours, the everlasting gospel; but God made no promises to the first man. After the flood God began to unfold His ways. In Noah He established government in order to restrain violence. Then, when man fell into idolatry (Josh. 24), not only was he wicked, but he chose demons as the power of the world in place of God; and God called Abraham to be for Himself, and the father of a race that He might on earth recognise as His, whether after the flesh or after the Spirit. The great principles of election, of calling, or of the promises are established. Then the law is given on Mount Sinai, by which man is put to the proof in a still more definite manner. Then, after long patience, in which prophets were sent to recall the people chosen according to the flesh to the obedience

of the law, and sustain the trust of the few faithful by the promise of the Messiah, God sent His only-begotten Son, His well-beloved, saying, in the words of the parable, "They will reverence my Son"; but we know what happened. The history of man was finished on the cross. Not only had he sinned, but he had rejected grace when the Saviour had come.

Now they reject the testimony that spoke of a glorified Saviour, sent in virtue of His intercession on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." As we have seen, God replied to this intercession in the testimony of Peter and of the apostles; and in the announcement of the Holy Ghost of a glorified Saviour, Him whom they had rejected; but, as we have again seen, they refused the testimony of the Holy Ghost by the mouth of the apostles.

345 And here we have a kind of resume, an explanation of their state, their history from the time of Abraham till that day. It is the history of man from the moment that God began His dealings with him - in the beginning, in giving the promise, whether to Israel or to Christ, the true offspring; then in the law, in the prophets, and, finally, in Christ Himself. All this time the Spirit was working, and now especially, after Christ had been glorified in heaven, as we have seen. Stephen recounted this history; grace in the call of Abraham; what happened to Joseph and to Moses, wherein the Spirit worked and had been rejected by Israel; then the law violated at the outset in the calf of gold; then the prophets; then Christ Himself; and, finally, the testimony of the Holy Ghost. They had broken the law, persecuted and put to death the prophets who had spoken of the coming of the Just One, of whom now they had become the betrayers and murderers. And more than this, they still resisted the Holy Ghost, as their fathers had always done.

All the dealings of God pass before our eyes; the law, the prophets, Christ, the Spirit. In all, the people are found in enmity against God. Meanwhile they confided in the temple, of which God had declared by the prophet that the Most High dwelt not in temples made with hands. Such is the history of Israel - of man. Conscience is hardened, will is unchanged in the Sanhedrim, and nothing but hate and opposition to the testimony of the Holy Ghost is revealed; their hearts are goaded to resistance, and put the witness himself to death. They were unable to answer him; it was indeed their history of which they so loudly boasted - and what a history! Man always resists the testimony of the Spirit; and, if the conscience be stung, hatred breaks out violently against the witness.

On the other hand we see a man, a Christian, full of the Holy Ghost, doubtless here manifested in a very special way; but that which was visible to Stephen is the object of faith for us. Mark first the perfect tranquillity of the servant of Christ. With beautiful simplicity he tells a story familiar to all - a story, however, which carried with it the condemnation of the Jews. To reason with him was needless, for they could not deny the facts. Then, kneeling down quietly amid the stones which fell on him, he prays for his enemies. What moral power! How entirely it overcomes all circumstances, and displays the man of God in the presence of the fury of his adversaries!

346 But let us examine not only the character of Stephen's testimony against his enemies, but his own state. He is the embodiment of a man full of the Holy Ghost, and his enemies are the embodiment of men who resist the Spirit. First, heaven is opened to him; he is enabled to keep his eyes fixed on the heavens - touch-stone of the state of the soul - and sees the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. He saw indeed the glory of God, but does not speak of it; the new and blessed thing was, that Man, in the person of the Son of God, stood there.

I believe that here He does not sit, because, until the Jews had refused the testimony of His glory, the Saviour was expecting to come back according to the address of Peter. As soon as Stephen is slain this testimony is at end; and, a single soul in heaven, the gathering of the spirits of the redeemed begins, which will continue till the Lord comes to re-unite the bodies and spirits of His own, and bring them into heavenly glory. Thus, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is said that Jesus is set down at the right hand of God, expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. He sits down on the throne of the Father, and not yet on His own. This is what rouses the hatred and fury of the Jews. They cry out "blasphemy!" and stone the witness of God, of the glory of Jesus.

For Stephen heaven is opened, and Jesus is seen in divine glory; and this is what forms his soul in such a beautiful way into the likeness of Jesus. As He prayed for enemies, so also Stephen prays for his; and as the Lord Jesus commended His spirit to His Father, so Stephen exclaims, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Not only does he pardon his enemies, but quietly kneels down to do so. The view of Jesus transforms the heart into His likeness. That which was seen by Stephen is the object of faith for us, made clearer by what happened to him.

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