

The Spirit and the Word in Acts

by Michael Haykin

Michael Haykin's sermon explores the significance of the Spirit and the Word in the life of Stephen as depicted in Acts 6 and 7.

Duration: 53:46

Scripture: Acts 6:1 - 8:4

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Martyrdom And Persecution"

Description

In this sermon, Stephen is portrayed as a faithful servant of God who is filled with the Spirit. Despite being rejected by the Sanhedrin, Stephen boldly proclaims the word of God. The sermon emphasizes the theme that what men reject, God exalts. Stephen uses the example of Moses, whom the Israelites initially rejected but whom God ultimately sent as both ruler and redeemer. The sermon concludes with Stephen being stoned to death, but not before he sees the heavens open and witnesses Jesus exalted at the right hand of God.

Transcript

Well, I bring warm greetings from Toronto Baptist Seminary and Jarvis Street Baptist Church, of which the seminary is a ministry, and also my home church, Trinity Baptist Church in Burlington, Ontario. It's about 40 minutes west of Toronto. We were looking at the Book of Acts in the morning session, and we did an overview, really, of the Book of Acts.

In this morning hour, we want to think about two chapters in particular, Acts chapter 6 and 7. And Acts 7 contains the longest sermon in the Book of Acts. And I'm going to read the whole thing. I would like you to turn, though, to Acts 6, and we will read all of Acts 6 and 7, so you have in your mind, at least, an overview of the life and ministry as we have it recorded for us in Holy Scripture.

Beginning in Acts 6, 1, and I will actually read into Acts 8 to verse 4. Acts 6 and verse 1. Now, in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews, because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

For we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyreneans, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen, for they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council. And they set up false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, Are these things so? And Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, hear me.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Aran, and said to him, Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you. Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Aran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.

Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. And God spoke to this effect that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God.

And after that, they shall come out and worship me in this place. And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day.

And Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.

Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there on their first visit. And on the second visit, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.

And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so they would not be kept alive. At this time, Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God's sight.

And he was brought up for three months in his father's house. And when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.

And on the following day, he appeared to them as they were quarreling, and tried to reconcile them, saying, Men, your brothers, why do you wrong each other? But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me, as you killed the Egyptians yesterday? At this retort, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. Now in forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight.

And as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord, I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac and of Jacob. And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are near Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt. This Moses whom they rejected, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge? This man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.

This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt, and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness, where the angel who spoke to him out of Sinai, and with our fathers.

He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside. And in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make for us gods who will go before us.

As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away, and gave them over to the worship of the host of heaven.

As it is written in the book of the prophets, Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the forty years in the wilderness of the house of Israel? You took up the tent of Molech, and the star of your God Rephan, all the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon. Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness. Just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen.

Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was unto the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God, and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says. Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? What is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in hearts and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit.

As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced before in the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered. You who received the laws delivered by angels and did not keep it.

Now when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at Him. But He, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed in heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And He said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

They cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed together at Him. Then they cast Him out of the city and stoned Him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. They were all scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Now those who scattered went about preaching the Word. The book of Acts records the fulfillment of one of the great promises of the Old Testament. A promise that begins with possibly the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied that there was coming a day when God would pour out His Spirit upon Israel, like floods of water upon the dry ground, and the ground would become fruitful.

Or Ezekiel, who prophesied that the dead bones of Israel would be revived and given life by the gift of the Spirit. Or Joel, who predicted there is coming a day in the end times when the Lord will pour out His Spirit. And your young men will see visions, and your old men will see dreams.

And God will pour out His Spirit upon all His people. The book of Acts is the great fulfillment, or at least it begins the great fulfillment of that promise of the Old Testament. That God would come and indwell His people and empower them to live according to His ways.

And be victors over sin. And be witnesses to what He had done, especially in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. As you go through the book of Acts, this gift of the Spirit is described in a number of ways.

It's described as being baptized with the Spirit in Acts 1. It's described as being a recipient, or receiving the Spirit. In other places it's described this way, the Spirit fell upon a group of people. For instance,

Cornelius and his household, the Spirit falls upon them.

But the term that is used most frequently is the fullness of the Spirit. A person being filled with the Spirit, or a person being full of the Spirit. And we want to think today and this morning about one individual who is set before us as an individual who is filled with the Spirit, namely Stephen.

And the big question we really want to ask is, what does Luke tell us about what the fullness of the Spirit looks like? What are the characteristics of it? What is a person like who is filled with the Spirit? This is something that should concern every believer because we are commanded, specifically commanded, in Ephesians 5.18, be filled with the Spirit. It's written to believers. It implies that you can be a Christian indwelt by the Spirit.

We don't believe on the basis of the Word of God that one can lose the Spirit. When the Spirit comes to take up residence within the human heart or life, He comes permanently. However, a person can be indwelt by the Spirit but not filled with the Spirit.

What does it mean then to be filled with the Spirit? This is something that should concern everyone who names the Lord as their Savior and Lord. But we will also see that this is a passage that has a very strong word for those who are not Christians, a very powerful word. I want to first look at the background of the text, which really is given in Acts 6.1-6, where we have the setting for the life of Stephen.

And Luke does a couple of things here that is typical of the way he writes the book of Acts. And then we want to look at the way in which Luke depicts the character of Stephen. And we want to, all the time, be thinking of this question.

What does the fullness of the Spirit look like? What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? In particular, we want to note, before we get into Acts 7, the meaning of Acts 6.15, where it says, when the Sanhedrin, or the council, looked at Stephen, it was like they were looking at the face of an angel. We do not have time to go through Acts 7. It's the longest sermon that Luke records in the book of Acts. It's obviously very significant.

And what we want to do is point out a couple of things that Stephen emphasizes in that sermon, which tie into this overall theme that we're thinking of, the fullness of the Spirit. And then we finally want to come and look at the final days, or final moments of Stephen's life. Again, thinking of this question.

In Acts 6.1-6, a problem has arisen in the church. Never for a moment think that the church's life in this world, there has ever been a golden age in the church's existence. It's all too easy for us to look back and think, Oh, wouldn't it be great to have lived at such a time? I've always been a lover of history, and I can remember growing up as a young boy in England, thinking back, wouldn't it have been great to live in the late Middle Ages when the knights were riding around on their horses? Typical young boy in many respects.

Or, in some of those periods of world history that fascinates a young boy, like the English Civil War of Oliver Cromwell, or a lot of my themes revolve around soldiers, and that's probably typical of boys to some degree. Or with Wellington or Nelson at Trafalgar. And obviously the truth of many of those periods of war is a horrific thing.

But I often found myself wishing I lived in another period of time. And sometimes we as Christians can do the same. Wouldn't it have been great to live in the days of Whitefield and Wesley, the days of revival? Or,

wouldn't it have been fabulous to have been a member of the congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, when Jonathan Edwards was preaching week by week? Wouldn't that have been rich? Well, if you know Edwards' story, you'll know that the church, after 25 years, voted Edwards out of the pastorate.

There's never been a time in the history of the church when there has been a golden age. There is coming a day, that's our great hope, there is coming a day when sadness and division between brothers and sisters will be a thing of the past. And when the church will dwell securely, and there will be no external oppressors, and the devil will be silenced, and there will be no problems within the church.

But that day is not yet. And as you read the early chapters of the book of Acts, you see external attacks, Satan raising up enemies to the church. You see the church within the church, hypocrites.

The horror of these couple, Ananas and Sapphira, who claim to know the Lord, and who have the effrontery to lie to God. That's what Peter says. You haven't lied to men when they claim to have given over all the money that they received from the sale of land.

They lied to God. They lied to the Spirit of God, Peter says. And God did an act of judgment on that day, and the two died.

In the passage we've just read in Acts 6, it's not as devastating as that, but it's the danger of a division in the church. We don't know how it was, but in the church there were a significant number of widows. Some of them are described here as Hebrew widows.

And those who study this portion of God's Word argue that what that is describing, those are those Jewish, Christian, Hebraic or Aramaic speaking widows. These are Jewish Christian widows who spoke Aramaic, the language of the day. Those widows were being taken care of.

But there were other widows. These are the widows of the Hellenists. These are Greek speaking Jewish Christian widows.

And all Jews, there are believers, but some of them only speak Greek, because they were born and raised outside of Palestine. They've obviously come to live in Palestine, in Jerusalem, but they don't speak Aramaic, so they don't worship together. And somehow the Jewish speaking Christian widows received food, and the Greek speaking Christian widows, who were also Jewish, didn't receive food.

And there was a danger of division in the church. And so it was, the apostles suggest a solution. It's a text that tells us a lot about a number of things.

We want to keep our minds focused on the theme of the fullness of the Spirit, but notice it tells us something about the priorities of ministry. The apostles, it is not out of arrogance or pride that they say, it is not for us to wait on tables. These men, I would venture to say, had learned a very important lesson on the night that our Lord was betrayed, when they saw Him get down and wash their feet.

The pride that had gripped them then was no longer part of them. It's not out of pride that they insist that they not wait on tables, but it's because they have priorities in ministry. They know that their calling is to be preachers of the Word and men of prayer.

It's a very important text. It reminds us that when you call a man to be a pastor, or appoint elders in a church, you are appointing them to specific tasks, the preaching of the Word, ministry of prayer. This is a very important issue in our day.

Some churches feel that when they call a pastor, they are calling primarily a CEO. They've kind of got a business model in view. It's very foreign to the New Testament.

What kind of man do you call to be a pastor? You call one who knows the Word, who spends time in the Word, who studies the Word. He is a student of the Word. You also call one who walks with the Lord.

You expect him to be a holy person, who knows God in the context of prayer. So it's not out of pride or anything like that. The apostles emphasize that they can't take time to meet this need, but it's because of their priorities in ministry.

That's a very important point. A second important point is they don't do the choosing. They say, you, you choose the man.

We believe as Baptists in what we call congregationalism. That when an individual is called into leadership in a church, it's the congregational calls. The Spirit of God is being given to all believers in the local church.

They are all to be mature as they guide the church as it were. I mean, obviously leadership is important. This is a very important verse that speaks to us of our Baptist heritage.

And so the apostles say, you choose seven men. It's interesting you notice what kind of men. You choose seven men full of the Spirit, notice in verse 3 there, and wisdom.

They're only going to wait on tables. Notice how important a task it is. Even in this sort of task, taking the food to the widows.

Not just anyone can do it. Oh, it's only running the nursery. No.

Every task within the local church is of importance. What kind of people do you appoint? You appoint people who are full of the Spirit and of wisdom. And so seven are brought forward.

We really know nothing about the seven apart. Well, we know only really much about two of them. Stephen, who we're going to look at, and Philip.

Philip becomes the main figure in chapter 8. Of the other names, we really know nothing except for Nicholas is described here as a proselyte, a Gentile who had become a convert to Judaism and now was a believer at Antioch. Hands are laid on them. Again, that's an important point.

The hands of the apostles are not giving anything. But they are confirming what God has already done. Notice these men are already full of the Spirit and wisdom.

The apostles aren't giving them that. But they are recognizing in a physical symbol what God did in these individuals' lives. And so the seven were set apart.

Now, it's interesting. Stephen begins this way, literally waiting on tables. And the amount of time that passes between verse 7 and verse 8, it wouldn't have been enormous, but it's not clear.

He goes from lowly ministry in the church, and he's faithful in that. Faithful in what is least, maybe. And God gives him greater responsibility.

And he begins to preach. Notice, as you go through that section, verses 1 to 6, notice the association. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? Well, notice the things that Luke associates with it.

First of all, a person of good repute. A person of credibility. A person of character and integrity.

Do not for a moment think that the fullness of the Spirit is some esoteric experience. It's got to do with character, day in, day out. Choose seven men who are full of the Spirit.

How do we know they're full of the Spirit? Well, look at their lives. What are they like in their daily lives? What kind of fruit do you see in their daily lives? In their interaction with other human beings? In their families? What's their character like? Choose seven who are filled with the Spirit, men of good repute. Men who are full of wisdom.

It's probably not practical wisdom, although that might help, but that's probably not what's in view here. It's not the practical know-how of how to cook meals. Because a few verses on in verse 10, Luke says that the wisdom that Stephen had, his opponents could not withstand, and you're probably to think that the wisdom in verse 10 is the same as the wisdom earlier mentioned, so it's spiritual wisdom.

Again, important to think that in the life of the church, who should be involved in leadership and ministry? Individuals filled with the Spirit. Individuals who are gifted with spiritual wisdom. It's not book learning.

I spend a lot of time, obviously, in my calling with books, but I've seen over the years all too many who go through seminary, and they do very well academically. But there's a difference between the learning that comes from that sort of education and the wisdom that this passage is talking about. One hopes they both go together, but sometimes they don't.

And simply because you've got learning and you're educated doesn't mean you have wisdom. And this is the spiritual wisdom, wisdom about the Christian life, wisdom in terms of presenting the Gospel, and so on. And then also, Stephen is described here.

Notice when it comes to Stephen, and Luke, this is typical of what Luke often does, is before he gets into a study of a figure, he'll say a little bit about that person, and when he comes to the seven, he focuses on Stephen. We've already been told that the seven are to be men full of the Spirit and wisdom, so we assume that Stephen's that, but Luke wants us to get the point. Remember, this man, Stephen, notice again he mentions in verse 5, they chose Stephen, what kind of man was he? Full of faith and the Spirit.

He reminds us, this is one of Luke's favorite devices, he tells us the story, for instance, of the conversion of Paul three times, as if we didn't get it the first time. It's a very important issue. And likewise here, if you haven't got this, remember, Stephen is a man full of the Spirit.

You need to keep that in mind as we get into the account that I'm now going to give you about him. So we've got a bit of the background then, and also a bit of the introduction to the character of Stephen. He is a man of character, a man of integrity.

Those are very important words, especially in our day, in which these issues increasingly are not virtues and values in our culture. It's as if our culture, North American culture, has separated character and

integrity from ability to do a job, and the argument is a person can do a job very well despite their character. And our culture used to know differently.

The Scripture reminds us that in God's sight, ministry and service in the house of the Lord is integrally linked to character. You go through 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, the requirements for elders and deacons, and it's very interesting, there's only one that has to do with intellectual ability. An elder has to be able to teach, but the rest of it is character.

What kind of person is he in the home? Is he able to govern his household well? Does he have a good reputation with his neighbors? I've been to a number of ordinations. Frequently, they focus on the theological, what do you believe about the millennium? And what do you believe about the gifts of the Spirit? And what do you believe about this passage and that passage? Those things are not unimportant. I have never heard questions asked, and maybe you wouldn't want to do it in a public setting, but at some point you should be.

What do your neighbors think of you? Or ask his wife, what's he like in the home? Or ask the children, what kind of father is he? Character questions. And service in the house of God is intimately linked to character. And the fullness of the Spirit, I'm emphasizing here, is not some kind of esoteric experiences, deeply rooted in everyday life and how we carry ourselves.

So we come then into the account now of Stephen. And the focus of Luke is on his witness, his verbal witness. We are told in verse 8 that full of grace and power he did great wonders and signs among the people.

That's not where Luke focuses attention. These are things that took place in the apostolic era. It is noteworthy that the wonders and signs don't automatically bring conversion.

Because we are going to see in a minute that Stephen's opponents see something marvelous take place. It doesn't convert them. And this ties in with Luke's great theme in the book of Acts.

What converts sinners is the Word. And so as Stephen begins to preach, bearing witness to Christ, there is opposition. It comes from the synagogue, described here as the synagogue of the freedmen.

These probably were men who had once been slaves, who are now free. Or, some say, sons of slaves who are free. They came from various parts outside of Palestine.

They came from Cyrene and Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. Cilicia was an area that is in southeastern Turkey, if you want to locate it geographically. It's interesting, that's where Saul or Paul comes from.

He is mentioned right at the end of our text. And almost definitely Saul went to that synagogue, the synagogue of the Cilicians. He grew up in Tarsus of Cilicia.

In other words, Saul sat under the preaching of Stephen. He heard him. And he rejected it with enormous vehemence.

So did he reject it that he was willing to be a witness at the stoning of Stephen. But what fruit we will see that witness have. And so Stephen is bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we're told that those who disputed with him could not withstand the Spirit, verse 10, and the wisdom the Spirit gave him. Keep your finger here for a moment and turn back into the Gospel of Luke. Luke 21.

And we'll see that this was happening here as a fulfillment of what Jesus had predicted. Luke 21, verse 10. Then he said to them, nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom.

There will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and pestilences. There will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons.

And you'll be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer.

For I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. It's not Stephen. We're not told how well educated he might have been.

It's not his education that enabled him to withstand the attacks on the faith in that day. It was the Spirit of God. It's the Spirit who is our strength.

This is one of the great themes of Scripture. When we go out to bear witness to the cross and to who the Lord Jesus is, we don't go in our own strength. If we go in our own strength, we will fail.

When some of our Baptist forebearers associated with William Carey formed a society, one of the first missionary societies in recent centuries. I was going to say recent years, but it was the 1790s. In recent centuries, one of the first missionary societies, eventually called the Baptist Missionary Society, they took as their motto Zechariah 4.6. Not by might.

Not by human might. Human eloquence. Not by power.

Not by the power of governments and human institutions. But by Thy Spirit, or by my Spirit, the temple in the Old Testament will be raised. And likewise, the temple will be built for God in this day.

By the Spirit of God. And Stephen's great hope and great strength. It's not his own earthly eloquence.

He may well have been a very eloquent man. But it is the Spirit. And those who opposed him could not withstand the wisdom the Spirit gave him.

Not failing to contradict him, they did what so often is done in the history of the church when the church witnesses and their opponents, they raised up false witnesses. And they accused him of speaking against Moses. And against God.

Presumably against the law. They accused him of speaking against the temple. That's the holy place.

And notice in their minds, to speak against Moses, the Scriptures, and to speak against the temple, God's dwelling place, was to speak against God. Now, is this man guilty of blasphemy? And they do what Jesus said would happen. They will deliver you up to rulers.

And so, Stephen is taken before the Sanhedrin. And he stands where his Lord stood only a few years earlier. And then we have that long speech.

But before the speech, or the sermon, we have Acts 6.15. As those people looked at him, they saw the face, as it were, of an angel. What does an angel look like? There are angels that are the part of God's rational creation. And they are awesome beings.

When we worship, 1 Corinthians 11 tells us, the angels are present. To gaze upon one is to be overcome a time of fear in the Old Testament. To gaze upon one, when John sees an angel in Revelation, he falls at the angel's feet.

He's about to worship the angel. The beauty and the glory that is in the face of unfallen creation. The council, the Sanhedrin were there, and they looked at Stephen, and it looked like they saw a face of an angel.

Why does Luke tell us that? He tells us it's because right before the long speech, they are going to reject Stephen's witness, which means they are even more culpable. They know, they know this is a prophet of God. They know that this one is speaking the Word of God, but they will insist on going their own way.

In some ways, this is a terrifying text. That a person can be under deep conviction, and know what he's hearing is the very Word of God, but his heart or her heart is hardened. And they refuse to hear.

And they choose their own way. And they sin against the Spirit. As you run through the sermon, the great theme of the sermon is, what men reject, God exalts.

What men reject, God has exalted. The key verse is probably verse 35. Then Moses, whom they rejected, saying, who made you a ruler and a judge, this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer.

What men reject, God exalts. He has two examples. Joseph.

Did not the patriarchs reject Joseph, but God was with him and exalted him. Moses is the second example. They've already said, you, Stephen, are speaking against Moses.

And Stephen says, Joseph, no, no. You're doing exactly what was done in that day. Because the people of Israel rejected Moses, but God raised up Moses to be a deliverer for Israel.

And that's the great theme of that long speech. What men reject, God exalts. And now Stephen.

They're quiet all through the sermon, until Stephen applies it. And Stephen begins, as some would say, meddling in their lives. Verse 51.

You stiff-necked people. What are you like? You're uncircumcised in heart and ears. Remember, they're Jews.

Jewish men for whom the mark of the covenant was circumcision. They were in the covenant. What Stephen's saying is, no, you're not in the covenant at all.

You're spiritually dead. And to make sure they don't miss his words, you resist the Spirit of God. You are guilty of the blasphemy against the Spirit, because you refuse to acknowledge that Jesus, the Righteous One, is who He claimed to be, and whom the Scriptures bear witness to.

You, your fathers rejected Joseph, but God raised him up. Your fathers rejected Moses, but God raised him up. And the pattern is repeating itself, because you have rejected the one of whom they spoke.

You have rejected the Righteous One. Now, notice, Stephen does not get time to finish, but God has raised him up, because they start to scream, and stop their ears, and run at him. Before I get to that point, though, it could be the case today that you are in that situation.

You are here among God's people. You have come to heavenly Zionism. Hebrews describes it.

The church of the firstborn, in which there are angels present. But you have not received the Gospel into your heart and life. God speaks to you, and displays your condition.

You are stiff-necked, spiritually dead, resisting the witness of the Spirit. And God's word to you is, do not do what those men did, who presumably died in their sins, outside of Christ. Today is a day of salvation.

And the Gospel freely is offered to you. And the Lord is still a God of mercy. In this day of mercy, lay hold of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cry out to Him. And so find mercy on that great day. Do not be stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart.

And so Stephen is building, as it were, to this climax. You've rejected the righteous one. Before he can talk about his exaltation, they cry out and scream and drag him outside the city and begin to stone him.

But not before he finishes his sermon. Behold, the heavens are open. I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

I see the Lord Jesus Christ exalted to the right hand of the Father. You have rejected Him, but God has highly exalted Him to His right hand and put all things under His feet. And the sermon is finished.

Notice what Luke tells us before that happened. He was full of the Spirit. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? It means to bear witness to Christ verbally.

But especially it means to be a Christ-centered person. He's taken up with Christ. Even at this point when they're about to kill Him, it is Christ before his eyes.

Christ exalted. Not only with word, but deed, as they begin to stone Him. He falls to His knees.

Lord, have mercy on them. Christianity is so different from every other religion in this world. Not only because of the truths we've been talking about, but because when we who are Christians are attacked for our faith, God enables us to love our enemies.

We do what is not natural. We think today of those events in 2001 and their relationship to Islam, which is probably one of our great challenges as Christians today. How different we are than Muslims who believe it is a God-given calling to kill the infidel.

But for us, though they persecute us and slay us for Christ's sake, we pray for them. And we love them. It's been the hallmark of the church.

When the church has been at her best, down through the centuries, she has loved her enemies. And Stephen dies. Not with hatred.

He dies a violent death. But he dies loving his enemies. And the fruit is the conversion of Saul, I suspect.

Saul is mentioned there. And you have to read on into chapter 9 to find out that conversion. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? It means to be a person of character and integrity.

It means to be a person of spiritual wisdom and faith in God. But above all, it means to be a Christ-centered person. A person for whom Christ is all.

Stephen knew the truth of those words of Jim Elliot. He is no fool, or she is no fool, who gives up what he or she cannot keep to gain, what he or she cannot lose. He couldn't keep his life, but oh, to give it for Christ and to have Christ.

He has lost nothing. The same is true for us today. I want to finish with two examples.

The first is a man named William Grimshaw. They're both drawn from the 18th century. Those who know me well know I love that century in many ways.

A lot of great examples from that century. The first is a man named William Grimshaw. He was an Anglican minister called to a little church in Yorkshire, England, northern England.

And he was not a Christian. He became an Anglican minister because it gave him all kinds of free time. And just as it turned up on Sunday, ten minute little homily, and the rest of the week was his.

Played cards, drank, tried to make sure his parish didn't find out about it, but then one day a couple came to his home and asked him for some comfort. They'd had a little child who had died and they had nowhere to turn. And so they came to the minister of the church and it struck him.

He had nothing to say to them. What kind of minister am I? Interesting how God used this. And so he began to search.

And in the providence of God he came across a book by a Puritan named John Owen on justification. And God saved William Grimshaw, the minister of the parish. He was called to another parish, a little place called Haworth.

If you read English literature in the Bronte sisters, you'll know that the Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, they lived in a little village called Haworth about 50 years after William Grimshaw. Grimshaw went there and when he went there, a church could seat 1,200. And he began to preach the gospel and God brought revival to that church so that in the summer times about 2,000 would come to the church.

1,200 inside, about 800 out in the graveyard. And Grimshaw built scaffolding up the inside of the church, a little platform out and scaffolding down so he'd walk back and forth to preach to those inside and those outside. In the week, it's a very hilly part of England, in the week you'd see Grimshaw toiling up and down the hills on foot, going into little villages and hamlets, preaching, often getting beaten up physically.

But going back again and again and again. I was in Haworth, oh, about five, six years ago and I wanted to go there because I wanted to see what evidence there might be of the revival. I went to the church.

There was really nothing there. There was a little sign on the table that said this was William Grimshaw's table, community table. There were some books on the back of the church on, of all people, Benny Hinn.

Nothing about Grimshaw. Nothing about this fabulous revival that had been there. So I went to what was the manse, the home of Grimshaw, which had been turned into a museum, but it was a museum devoted to the Brontes, very important literary figures.

Went through the whole museum, found nothing on Grimshaw, until you come right to the end, the last exhibit, a little glass case, and it's got a black teapot in it, and it says this was William Grimshaw's teapot. I'm so thankful, I don't know whether the person who made up the signs was a Christian, that they also put

a little sign that says on the back of this teapot was Grimshaw's favorite verse. For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

What was it that drove this man, week after week, to go into little villages where people rejected the Gospel? It was that thought. For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. He is no fool who gives up what you cannot keep.

We can keep nothing in this world. All of this world longs for and fights for power and prestige and land and office and wealth. You don't take it with you into the next, but if you have Christ, you go safe into that next world.

Now you might be thinking, well, Stephen, William Grimshaw, they're preachers. That's what preachers should be like. They should be people filled with the Spirit and Christ-centered people.

But I'm not a preacher. It can't be God's calling for me. Well, Ephesians 5.18, it is God's calling for you.

My second example, which I close, illustrates this. It's a woman named Anne Griffiths. She was 29 when she died.

A Welsh wife of a farmer died giving birth to her first child. And she was converted in Wales in the late 1790s. She died in 1805, 200 years ago this year.

After her death, one of her friends wrote down hymns that they used to hear her singing. And here are two of them. Very few translated into English, but here's just two exits from two, which illustrate my point.

Gladly would I leave behind me all the idols I have known, since I bear inscribed the likeness of a more exalted one, worthy of unending worship, love and reverence as he by his precious death were myriads from the jaws of death set free. Or this. Let my days be holy given, Jesus' blood to glorify, calm to rest beneath his shadow, at his feet to live and die.

Love the cross and bear it daily till the cross my Savior bore. Gaze with joy upon his person and unceasingly adore. Christ God has called you as a Christian to be filled with the Spirit.

What does that mean? It means to be a person of integrity and character. A person who grows in spiritual wisdom and in faith. But above all, it means to be a lover of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are a Christian, continue to grow in love with him. It is worth it all. If you are not a Christian today, do not be like the opponents of Stephen.

Stiff-necked, uncircumcised, spiritually dead. This is a day of salvation. A day of mercy.

In this day, call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. Let us pray. Father, we thank you for your holy word.

And we thank you for the Spirit's use of that word to build and extend the church of our dear Lord Jesus Christ. May that word do its work this day and not return as you have promised unto you void, but bear fruit for the glory of our Lord Jesus. We pray this in his name.

Amen.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/11/SID11717.mp3>
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