



Acts – Can I get a Witness? Wk. 21 What Effective Ministry Looks Like By Pastor Jody May 02/19/2023

Acts 6:8-15 ESV

Stephen Is Seized

⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹²And 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, ¹³and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

[INTRODUCTION]

What we get a chance to do every Halloween (**Reformation Day**) – we get to pretend to be someone else, we get to be like a person we secretly want to be, **our hero**.

[ILLUSTRATION] – Spiderman Costume.

2,000 years ago, with the birth of the church, and the Reformation of all God-centered religion, Stephen would get a chance to represent His favorite Hero, the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

Stephen ³..., *full of the Spirit and of wisdom,* ⁵... *and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*¹ – was quite a fellow. Last week he was one of the seven they picked to oversee the physical side of things for the

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 6:2–5). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.



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new church, but in the listing of those men, Luke points out that he was prominent among them, there was something different about Stephen.

We don't know if he was one of the 150 or so disciples that had been traveling with Jesus before Jerusalem, or if he was a recent Jewish convert, I am led to believe the second option because this is the first and only time that Luke mentions him. So. Most likely he may have never even seen the resurrected Lord, but here's a man that is full of belief/ **faith (v.5)** in Jesus, he is full of the HS, and the Spirit has ignited whatever knowledge Stephen had into full blown Godly **wisdom (v.3)**.

BTW that is how it happens, more often than not, for people raised in the church. They grow up hearing the stories of Jesus, they are preached about the Gospel of Jesus, and they come to believe in their own inadequacies. Usually in a person's young adult life God will take that spiritual kindling, the HS will ignite it, making a personal connection and call to that person, and in return biblical knowledge is reformed into a working wisdom. That is one of the signs of conversion.

So now Stephen, fresh out of conversion and awakening, he gets a chance to do what we all want to do, **he got to be like his hero**. Not only that, but he also didn't have to wear a cheap imitation of that which he admired, no. He was dressed by God Himself, to represent to the world the very best of all men and the very best of heaven. This was Stephen's day to portray Christ His Savior, to offer the example of Jesus' worthiness to an unworthy world. And the HS would not let him fall. This is a scenario that would be replayed many times throughout the history of the church.

This story brought back to my mind the early years of the Reformation and the story of Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer who in 1555 under the persecution of The Queen know as *Bloody Mary* had their day in history as well. When Ridley was asked if he believed the pope was heir to the authority of Peter as the foundation of the Church, he replied *that the church was not built on any man but on the truth Peter confessed -- that Christ was the Son of God*. For this answer both he and Latimer were burned at the stake, whereby Latimer made his bold and last proclamation which has stuck with me ever



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since I heard this story. "Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and **play the man!** We shall this day light such a candle by God's **grace**, in England, as I trust never shall be put out."²

Christian today, right now we don't have the same fears of persecution as the first century church nor even the 14th century church, but it does not mean it will always be that way. In looking at Stephen's life there is something to be gained, not necessarily the lesson of how we are preparing ourselves for our day of testing but how **God is preparing us** for that day.

Our day may or may not come in the form of public slander, accusations, and death threats but there are many other days were God calls on us to *play the man* to this world.

- The day a spouse decides that marriage is not for them, they cheat, they slander, and they steal – *play the man*.
- The day you go to the Dr. office to get the results of an MRI/CT scan, and they tell you must have surgery, you have a life -long ailment, or worst make final preparations – *play the man*.
- The day a child tells you they don't want your faith and they are stepping into the world to embrace what the world offers them – *play the man*.

You see family, it doesn't matter what time you live in, every Christian will get their day to **play the man**. That's why I want you to see on the day it was Stephen's day to *play the man*, **God that did not fail Him**, it was **God that was his strength**, and this same **God** loves you like He loved Stephen and instead of getting him out of trouble **brought him through the middle of it**. He did that so Stephen would know the joy of getting to represent his biggest hero, and Jesus would be glorified even more.

Today, I have 4 things that Stephen has that were just like Jesus. You see Jesus endured all the same things Stephen endured, He had gone through the trials first. That's why the author of Hebrews tells us:

² <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1501-1600/bishops-ridley-and-latimer-burned-11629990.html>



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“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” **Hebrews 12:2 ESV**

We keep our eyes on Christ when our day comes to **play the man**, for He was the one that did it perfectly so even in our stumbling through life, our attempts are counted as enough. The things that Jesus needed, the HS gave to Him all that was required, and the things that Stephen needed the HS would give to him as well.

1. Stephen was **empowered** like Jesus.

⁸And Stephen, full of **grace** and **power**, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Stephen was empowered like Jesus that is he too experienced the favor that Jesus had from the Father.

Luke 2:40 & 52 ESV

⁴⁰And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the **favor** of God was upon him.

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in **favor** with God and man.

The word for **favor** is the same word we find in 6:8 as it refers to the **Grace** that Stephen received from God: χάρις (*charis*). n. fem. **grace, good will, favor**. Conveys the sense of a gift of kindness and favor given to a person or persons³

It was Grace! Nothing, no nothing, empowers a man like the miracle of God's Grace. It is one of the war cries of the Reformation, *Sola Gratia*, by **GRACE ALONE. Grace, getting what you don't deserve**, getting to see that God loved you first that while you and I were still sinners Christ died for us. I never

³ Mathews, J. G. (2014). [Blessing](#). D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.), *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



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did anything for God out of a willing heart until I realized what He had first done for me.

Ephesians 2:8 ESV

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Stephen was walking around as a changed man, he was a loved man by the church, he was a redeemed man, he was a man with a new lease on life, he was a man that had saw all the things about the law that he believed in, tried to live by, tried to follow so he could somehow show he was worthy, was all a sham.

He saw that all the things he had done didn't add up in God's eyes as salvific. He saw that God loved Him anyway and went around his vain attempts and instead put Jesus forth in Stephen's attempts at righteousness. Stephen saw that he had needed God's plan his was worthless, and now he lived free from the world's hold. The way this poured out of him now was he was given the charge to love those in the church the best he could, and he led the way now in caring for the widows.

Here's the thing that Stephen knew, and that Paul would come to know:

Galatians 2:20 ESV

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]

Stephen was full of Grace and Grace is what was pouring out of Him. A person **that knows not** the Grace of God will have a **hard time showing grace** to others. Is that you family? Do you have a hard time showing unconditional love to others? Do you love with the expectation to be noticed for what you do, or do you love others because it is the physical manifestation of your changed soul? That is something worth you praying over today.



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2. Stephen spoke with wisdom like Jesus.

⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

It is worth to note here, how the ministry of the church was playing out in Jerusalem. A synagogue is a place where Jews would go to teach, hear, and practice the Torah/OT. It is different than the temple because sacrifices were not offered there and neither did a High Priest need to run it. It is more than a religious school though because it offered social privileges especially to Jews, like a country club, who were living outside the holy land for a synagogue was strictly a Jewish thing.

Some people believed this passage tells of 5 different parties belonging to three different synagogues or perhaps they all belonged to one synagogue for all these people were from outside of Palestine or the direct control of the temple. These were Jews from North Africa (Cyrenians and Alexandrians), from Modern day Turkey (Cilicia and Asia) and Jews known as "Freedmen". Freedmen are Jews moved around by Romans after they conquered a certain province where Jews had been dispersed but had acquired a Roman citizenship with all rights and privileges.

This is where we think Stephen might have come from, for these guys knew him. He was trying to help out with the Greek and Jewish widows, and likely got in argument with Hellenistic Jews. We can only fathom what that was over, but we do know the nature of the argument was biblically based for it was a proclaimed wisdom by Stephen empowered by the HS that means the explanation of the Gospel to a people who were still trying to save themselves by their good works. These Jews could not deal with it. That means in the text they had no answer to his arguments, they could not withstand his intellectual and spiritual onslaught.



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It is also interesting to point out that the one group hailed from Cilicia, of which the **capital is Tarsus**. That means, most likely one of the men Stephen is arguing with and infuriating is Saul of Tarsus, the top student of Gamaliel, who eventually becomes the Apostle Paul.⁴ Which now we understand better the image, or why Luke makes it thus, when Saul stands triumphantly over Stephen and receives the homage of his killers in chapter 7. The killing of Stephen was a vengeful and sadistic act most likely conceived by Paul himself.

All of this gets Stephen in hot water because he is speaking with the same wisdom that Jesus spoke with. This is so empowering to Stephen because it is PROOF of who is giving Him this wisdom:

Luke 21:15 ESV

for **I will give** you a mouth and **WISDOM**, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

[THE GOAL] The sign that you're actually accomplishing, portraying the hero of your faith well (**playing the man**), doing what God put you on earth to do, is not necessarily how quietly you can get in and out of it without making a splash but by **how much of a wake** you actually leave.

Although sometimes we have a reluctance to speak boldly for Christ not because we are necessarily afraid to say something, but because we have spent way too much time filling our hearts and minds with stuff other than God. Of which Paul warns Christians in the depraved culture of Rome you have to take heed because to do God's will, one must refrain from filling one's heart with the will of the world.

Romans 12:2 ESV

⁴ *Cilicia*. This was a province of Asia Minor, on the sea-coast, at the north of Cyprus. The capital of this province was Tarsus, the native place of Paul, ch. 9:11. As Paul was of this place, and belonged doubtless to this synagogue, it is probable that he was one who was engaged in this dispute with Stephen. Comp. ch. 7:58. - Barnes, A. (1884-1885). [Notes on the New Testament: Acts](#). (R. Frew, Ed.)(p. 117). London: Blackie & Son.



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Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]

[EXAMPLE] I am giving up Social-Media for a while because I have come under the conviction of that which we are putting in our minds is that which is shaping us. I have made up my mind to get off about 80% of my social media over the next few months for I am getting tired of being controlled by things outside of God. Whether it comes in the form of adds that have been delivered to me by algorithms, or because I saw someone getting notoriety because of a post on Instagram, or I see a friend of mine who's child gets kudos for achieving something that I know my kid can do better! I am just tired of playing that game aren't you yet? Some of you may have no problems with this as all, God bless you, not me. Nope, I am too much like the Apostle Paul, I have a contemptuous envy in me, that if I don't keep in check will get me in trouble.

I mean I go back and forth about social media, and I get tricked into thinking it may be different this time, but I have got to tell you a secret. People really don't care what you do on social media, I believe our posts are used by people to compare lives so they can judge how they are doing. That might not be you, just know though that the positive intentions behind your posts may actually be causing people to resent you more than like you. And if that's your goal, to egg people on, then you need to repent and get of Social-Media forever!

BTW if you want to encourage me, take the time to write me a note, tell me how you like something about me as it portrays Christ well, and don't worry telling me about yourself. See, that is loving people selflessly not being concerned about what you get out of it. I challenge you to do that this week, for a friend or a family member.

If I want to encourage God to grant me more wisdom or at least foster the growth of that which He gave me, then I am called to renew my mind with His



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will, which is found in His Word. If we are spending our first hour in the morning going through posts then we have already lost. Spend that first time in the morning perhaps even on the way to work and take back from the world what belongs to God, your **HEART!** That is your calling, and it is a command.

2 Corinthians 10:5 ESV

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

The world is constantly trying to get you to be like it, they want you to make it the hero in your life BUT again we have been given the opportunity to be like Christ, just like Stephen. Are you using the **Wisdom** He has given you to bring Him glory? I hope so, because that is where you will find true joy and it prepares you for this next way in which God will make you like Jesus.

3. Stephen endured trials and slander like Jesus.

¹¹Then they **secretly instigated** men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹²And 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, ¹³and they set up **false witnesses** who said,

They have gone from simply disputing with Stephen to blatantly lying about him. They secretly instigated; they got paid informants/false witnesses to tell lies about him. Then they went dark, had gotten dirty, these outside pharisee types, who had to stir up the elders and the scribes for they had their fill of trying to deal with this new religion. The Sanhedrin didn’t know what to do with the Apostles, but this new group of out of town Jews, they are attacking from a different direction. They are claiming that Stephen is a threat to the Jewish way of life, by threatening the law and temple itself.

¹³ ...“This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”



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What Jesus had actually said was, *not a stone would remain standing*, but He never said He would do it (Luke 21:6). That would be done by the Romans in 70 AD. As well Jesus said He came to fulfill the law not take it away (Mat. 5:17). He certified the law and what it was to do, and then gave to us the fruit of His certification, eternal life. That is, He did the commands and earned His eternal life by law living and gave us the fruit of His labor as our Kingly representative.

No by this point there is only one explanation that would make sense, of which Stephen would already know.

John 15:18-26 ESV

The Hatred of the World

¹⁸“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. ²²If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³Whoever hates me hates my Father also. ²⁴If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. ²⁵But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’

²⁶“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]

Stephen is hated because Jesus was hated. **It is the proof that what you are doing is right, that you’re ‘Playing the Man’.** By standing for what Jesus believed in you stand for the Father as He did, you stand for Him as He stood



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for you, and you stand by the effort of the HS of which Jesus has sent you. Our lives, of bold declaration, is evidence of a bold Trinitarian love for us.

The goal is not to make it out of this life unscarred, it is to have some battle wounds to talk about with each other in eternity. Will yours be the testimony of timidness or will it be the story of HS empowered tenacity? If you do choose the second, I want you to see here what that brings you.

4. Stephen **responds** like Jesus.

¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Gazing at Stephen, it is more than a passing look, in the Greek it means they all stopped and gawked. It means whatever Stephen was doing caused the whole council to stop and stare at him for an ongoing length of time. By the time Stephen had gotten to the court something has changed.

It wasn't anything Stephen was doing, it wasn't even anything Stephen was saying, it was all in his appearance. The only time this happens in our culture is when the bride comes down the aisle and everything else stops. Everyone stops whispering, the music changes to let you know to stand and cast your stare to the back of the room. Stephen has entered into his accuser's headquarters, but he's not scared, he's not angry, he's quiet, all eyes are on him. I think this is how we all will look one day as the bride of Christ is presented in front of this world as we reflect the beauty of our king. What a moment!

Stephen's countenance is that of the face of an angel. In the OT⁵ when someone had the appearance of an angel (as David in 2 Sam 14:17 or Moses in

⁵ *The face of an angel.* This expression is one evidently denoting that he manifested evidence of sincerity, gravity, fearlessness, confidence in God. It is used in the Old Testament to denote peculiar wisdom, 2 Sa. 14:17; 19:27. In Ge. 33:10, it is used to denote peculiar majesty and glory, as if it were the face of God. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, it is said that the skin of his face shone so that the children of Israel were afraid to come nigh to him, Ex. 34:29, 30; 2 Co. 3:7, 13. Comp. Re. 1:16; Mat. 17:2. The expression is used to denote the impression produced on the countenance by communion with God; the calm serenity and composure which follow a confident committing of all into his hands. It is not meant that there was anything *miraculous* in the case of Stephen, but it is language that denotes calmness, dignity, and



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Gen. 33:10) it was used to denote a peculiar wisdom a God given wisdom and a particular authority that comes not from man but from God. Both David and Moses had that, and now Stephen is wearing that same look for all to see. It is God-given calmness that can't be shaken because one knows that whatever happens is solely in God's sovereign control.

Jesus had this look when he came from the mount of transfiguration. His plan had been solidified, HE knew what He was about to do, He would walk of His own volition to His death. Jesus is with Stephen now, He gives to Stephen His calm, His reserve, **He is going to go with Stephen to his cross.** AND Jesus gives us all the same gift of Grace if we will take up our cross:

John 16:33 ESV

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

[CHALLENGE + APPLICATION]

Christian, family, friend, in this world you will not have a peace contrived by your own work, but you can have a peace that is given to you by God. When we embrace our calling, when we love God for the Grace we have been given, it will naturally lead us to odds with this world.

I pray that like Stephen we will all feel the empowerment of the HS in our lives, and that we would find the joy that can only be found in standing for our Lord. For when we stand for Him, only then will we come to know what it feels like to have Him stand with us. And that is what we really what we all want isn't it?

[PRAYER]

[COMMUNION]

confidence in God, all of which were so marked on his countenance that it impressed them with clear proofs of his innocence and piety. The language is very common in the Jewish writings. It is not unusual for deep feeling, sincerity, and confidence in God, to impress themselves on the countenance. Any deep emotion will do this; and it is to be expected that religious feeling, the most tender and solemn of all feeling, will diffuse seriousness, serenity, calmness, and peace, not affected sanctimoniousness, over the countenance



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[BENEDICTION]

Go in the name of the Father, who gave His Son to stand for us to bring us into the family of God.

Go in the name of the Son, who is the author and perfecter of our faith and who constantly stands between us and this world.

Go in the name and power of the Holy Spirit, who stands with us so that in our time of testing we too would have the countenance of an angel.