

## FROM DEACON TO PREACHER TO MARTYR

### The story of Stephen

*Act 7:55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,*

*Act 7:56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*

Stephen comes from the Greek *stefanos* and means “crown”. Indeed, when his parents first gave him this name, they had no idea that, as the first Christian martyr, he would be the first to receive the crown of life from the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus told the church of Smyrna, “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). Not many Christians would want to die as martyr for the Lord, and not many Christians have the privilege of being selected for martyrdom by the Lord. However, the life and death of Stephen shows us what a unique blessing it is to be allowed to die as a martyr for the Lord Jesus Christ. In heaven, the voice of the Christian martyrs is honored and their voice reaches the Lord. “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” (Revelation 6:9).

*Act 6:3 Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.*

*Act 6:5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:*

Stephen was selected to be one of the seven deacons. A deacon waited at tables and served the people of God. It was not an exalted position – in fact Peter states that his and the other apostles’ job was to pray and study the word of God so they could preach and bring people to salvation. This was not the job of Stephen. This is the first lesson we learn from Stephen: humbly accept whatever position or job the Lord Jesus gives you in the church. Why did Peter say that deacons must be honest and filled with the Holy Spirit to serve at tables? The answer was simple: they needed to be honest and filled with the Spirit because their job was to be fair in ministering food and other resources to the Hebrew and Greek widows. This problem was threatening the unity of the first church. Honesty is needed when accusations of discrimination arise, and the Holy Spirit imparts wisdom and love for the needy. So right here we see the fantastic qualifications that Stephen had for the work of the Lord. Such qualities will not stop at the table of food and drink.

*Act 6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.*

It wasn't long before the Spirit of the Lord began to use Stephen towards a full-fledged ministry. Humans may select you for specific jobs which they deem to match with your qualities, but the Spirit of the Lord selected Stephen for preaching and mighty works. Stephen could no longer be bound to serving at tables. The Lord promoted him to preacher now; and what a mighty preacher he was! "Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake" (Acts 6:9,10). I mentioned earlier the wisdom of Stephen. Now, this wisdom was in full bloom with the best debaters of the synagogues. Here is the second lesson we learn from Stephen: in the Kingdom of Jesus, it is not titles or natural gifts, but relying on the wisdom of the Holy Spirit which matters.

*Luk 21:12 But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake.*

*Luk 21:13 And it shall turn to you for a testimony.*

*Luk 21:14 Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer:*

*Luk 21:15 For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.*

It is clear that Stephen understood and practiced these words of the Lord better than most Christians. All he did was to stay full of the Holy Spirit and the Lord used him powerfully everywhere. Our job is to stay full of the Holy Spirit and the Lord will use us wonderfully, as he did Stephen. "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be with Jesus. Stephen was so surrendered to the Lord that his brain, tongue and words became those of the Lord. No wonder people around Stephen were astonished and struggled to debate him – they were debating Jesus himself. How can you win? Remember that the Lord was confounding Pharisees and Sadducees since the age of twelve in the Temple. "And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers" (Luke 2:46,47).

*Act 7:55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,*

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Finally, the hour came when a young Stephen, not more than 30 years of age, would fulfil the meaning of his name – “crown”. He was to be crowned a martyr for Jesus. What a fantastic defence he put up for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Where did he get such strength from? Acts 7:55 states that he “looked steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God”. Right hand is a metaphor for the place of God – Jesus is God himself. He was not seeing a Trinity or two Gods, just Jesus in the place of power. What is interesting is that the Lord is normally said to be sitting on the right hand of power, but this time the Lord was standing as if to applaud and honor the testimony of Stephen. God must not stand for man – man must bow down before his God. However, in the case of Stephen, the Lord stood up, encouraged Stephen and waited to receive his spirit into heaven. Can the Lord bestow greater honor than this upon a mere mortal? How could Stephen not be encouraged to continue preaching and testifying when he could look up to heaven and see the Lord standing and applauding him?

This is the last and greatest lesson Stephen taught us. Look steadfastly to heaven and keep testifying for Jesus until we fall down dead. Jesus did not die in vain, and Stephen did not die in vain. Stephen saw the Lord and he knew the Lord rose up from the dead. He knew too that he would rise up from the dead. “But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you” (Romans 8:11). Saint of God, you do not know how you will glorify the Lord Jesus. I pray you be full of the Holy Spirit and steadfastly see the Lord standing on the right hand in heaven applauding and cheering you along the way. May you also inherit your crown of life – may we honor Jesus in life and in death. May we die glorious deaths for the Lord Jesus and seal our testimony for him with our blood by his grace if he so desires.

*Act 7:59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*

*Act 7:60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*