

Risk-Takers: The Adventure of Walking by Faith

Session 6

July 6, 2025

Stephen: A Faith That Advances God's Kingdom

The Point: Bold faith helps advance the kingdom of God.

Session Passage: Acts 6:3-15

Acts 6:3-7

Connection to the Point. Stephen's faith was evident to those around him.

Select from among you (v. 3). In verses 1-2, we learn that the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians felt that "their" widows—presumably the widows who were from their cultural background—were being neglected. The Jerusalem church had apparently taken up the practice of providing food for widows, and there was an imbalance. Whether or not this accusation was true, the Twelve decided they needed to focus on preaching and not be distracted by this duty. We should remember that these men were unique in the history of the church. They had seen and been with Jesus for His entire ministry. The church needed these twelve men to remain vigilant at their task of bearing witness to the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Nothing indicates that the Twelve thought the task of food distribution was less important than their task, but they did see food distribution as potentially something that could pull them away from their duties of "prayer, and . . . the ministry of the word" (v. 4). The solution was for the church itself to select **seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdoms** to carry out this task. The number seven is a number of fulness and wholeness and symbolizes that the job would be done to completion. The sentence construction is interesting here. The seven men were said to be *of good reputation*, and the unpacking of what that meant for them was that they were *full of the Spirit*. Having a good reputation did not mean that they were educated or wealthy or clever or any other quality that the world might recognize. Their good reputation came from the work of the Holy Spirit in and through them.

Whom we can appoint this duty (v. 3). The Twelve did not abdicate leadership in this situation. Instead, they delegated a portion of the task. First, they conceived a solution. Instead of dealing with this particular task themselves, they decided it would be best to find reliable men to carry out the task. Second, they trusted the church community to find men who could carry out this task. Finally, the Twelve would take the responsibility and ownership of the selection the church made by appointing the men themselves. Good leadership neither abdicates nor micromanages. In the church, leaders can trust the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of the entire church; and they can also see that others have been given serious responsibilities for which they will give an account (Heb. 13:17).

Stephen (v. 5). Stephen is the first of the seven to be listed, and he is said to be **full of faith and of the Holy Spirit**. This statement is not necessarily meant to distinguish Stephen from the other men who were also "of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (v. 3). Stephen probably is singled out because of the story of his martyrdom being told immediately following these verses. It should also be noted that all seven of these men had Greek names. This seems to indicate that the church as a whole

and the Twelve in particular must have thought the best way to address the concerns of the Greek-speaking portion of the early church was with Greek believers. As we think about how Stephen's example maps onto our life today, we should note that being full of faith and the Holy Spirit go together. We cannot have one without the other. Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us we are saved by grace through faith and that faith is a gift of God. The same goes for wisdom and the Spirit. God grants wisdom and understanding through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 12:8; 2 Tim. 2:7).

Laid their hands on them (v. 6). Moses transferred his authority to Joshua by laying hands on him (Num. 27:16-23). In the New Testament, the laying on of hands is most often used to designate a person or group of people for a specific task. By laying hands on these seven, the Twelve were appointing them to carry out the task of caring for the Hellenistic widows.

So the word of God spread (v. 7). By choosing Stephen and the other men, the Twelve were able to focus their attention on the preaching of the Word. As a result, *the word of God spread*. Luke gave two concrete examples of the result of the spreading of the Word. First, more people were becoming Jesus's disciples in Jerusalem. Second, Jewish priests were coming to understand that Jesus is the Messiah. By mentioning *Jerusalem*, Luke seems to have been preparing his readers for the next major movement in Acts. While disciples were growing in Jerusalem, they would soon be multiplying beyond Jerusalem and into Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Acts 6:8-10

Connection to the Point. Stephen was bold in sharing His faith in Christ.

Full of God's grace and power (v. 8). By describing Stephen as being *full of God's grace and power*, Luke was describing the result of his being "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" earlier in the narrative (v. 5). Just as Stephen was empowered for evangelism by being full of the Holy Spirit, Christians are full of grace for others and power for evangelism and missions when they are full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Jesus's promise to be with His disciples as they make disciples of all nations in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) as well as His promise they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them (Acts 1:8) were both fulfilled throughout the book of Acts, particularly here in Stephen's bold, risk-taking evangelism. Stephen's dependence on the Holy Spirit for power as well as His reliance on the truthfulness and clarity of God's Word are both examples for missions and evangelism today. We will only be able to make disciples as we are reliant on the power of the Spirit and the Word.

Great wonders and signs (v. 8). The purpose of *signs* and *wonders* is to point people to the truthfulness of the gospel and the power and presence of God. Signs and wonders are miraculous works of God that indicate that the kingdom of God is breaking into the present age. In fact, signs and wonders are, in one sense, the logical result of the Creator coming to dwell with His creation. In 2 Corinthians, Paul described ministry in the new covenant. He wrote, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17-18). The presence

of the Spirit freed Stephen up to boldness in evangelism. The Spirit's working of miracles, signs, and wonders in and through Stephen in this passage also indicates that one day He will free us from all our sin by restoring the world to a new and better Eden where we will dwell in His presence without the presence of sin or even the possibility of sin. The ultimate hope of miracles is not that we will have healing in this life or that we will become wealthy but that one day He will wipe away every tear and that disease and sickness will be gone (Rev. 21:1-4).

Freedmen's Synagogue (v. 9). God had designated the place where His presence dwelled among the Israelites (the tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem) as the only place where sacrifices and offerings were to be made. Consequently, Jewish synagogues were not, strictly speaking, places of worship. Instead, synagogues were Jewish places of community and religious life where Jews could gather for prayer, encouragement, and teaching. This particular synagogue was known as the *Freedmen's Synagogue of the Freedmen*, probably because it was made up of former slaves or their descendants. Whoever made up this synagogue, they were opposed to Stephen and therefore opposed to the gospel. It is highly likely given the context of Acts 6 that this synagogue was a Greek-speaking congregation, which positioned Stephen very well to speak the truth of the gospel to them. While opposition to the preaching and advancement of the gospel will frequently take the form of human opposition, Paul taught that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavensour struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realmswe do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

Unable to stand up against his wisdom (v. 10). In Romans 10:17 Paul addressed the necessity of speaking the gospel in order for people to come to faith: "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ," is a message so clear and simple that a small child can understand it. The gospel is also so deeply and beautifully true that we will never grow weary of plumbing its depths, implications, and applications to our lives. The reason the gospel is both so clear and so deep is because the author of the gospel is God the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is also the one who convicts and applies the gospel to our own lives. The inability to stand up against the wisdom of the Holy Spirit is not surprising. God the Holy Spirit is the author of all knowledge and true wisdom. Seeking to oppose God is always foolish and will ultimately end in failure.

Acts 6:11-15

Connection to the Point. Stephen's bold proclamation of faith in Christ met opposition.

Blasphemous words (v. 11). While Stephen was carrying out the work of God, the men from the Freedmen's Synagogue of the Freedmen accused Stephen of working for God's enemies. They said Stephen had opposed **Moses and . . . God**. This accusation effectively meant they were accusing Stephen of being on the side of evil by speaking *blasphemous words*. Blasphemy is speaking in a

heretical or disrespectful manner about or against God or against the work of God. Ultimately, blasphemy is attributing the work of God to the work of Satan or the reverse—attributing the work of Satan to God. These men accused Stephen of speaking blasphemously against Moses and God. In an ironic twist, these men committed blasphemy themselves by accusing Stephen of being blasphemous. It was they, not Stephen, who were opposing the work of God.

Stirred up the people (v. 12). Every individual who opposes the work of God is responsible for his or own actions—including **the people, the elders, and the scribes** whom Luke mentioned. These three groups represent the whole population, including religious leaders. The *elders* perhaps correspond to the Sadducees, the *scribes of the law* to the Pharisees. The Sadducees and Pharisees were two of the main groups of first-century Jewish religious leaders. Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife. They also believed only the Torah (Gen.–Deut.) to be authoritative. Meanwhile, Pharisees accepted the entire Old Testament, the oral tradition, and believed in the afterlife. These two groups are often pictured in the Gospels as being opposed to the work of Jesus. Here they were stirring up opposition to the work of Jesus’s disciples. The men of the Freedmen’s Synagogue of the Freedmen, however, bore even greater guilt because they not only opposed the work of God but recruited others to oppose it. Not only did they recruit others to oppose the work of God, but they had done so “secretly.” “suborned” the others. The word can mean they bribed them, or more likely, that they recruited them secretly. The secrecy itself indicates a lack of truthfulness and echoes the recruitment of false testimony that stirred up people to crucify Jesus (Matt. 26:59-60). These groups are all distinct from the **Sanhedrin council** who would also bear greater responsibility. The Sanhedrin, made up of a few leaders from these groups, was tasked with leading the Jewish people. In the Gospels, we read that they were the ones who insisted on the crucifixion of Jesus and, thereby, incurred guilt upon themselves (Mark 14:53-65).

The customs that Moses handed down (v. 14). The first five books of the Bible are often referred to as the books of Moses. These five books are also known as the Pentateuch, which means five books. They are also referred to as the Torah, which means Law or teachings. By accusing Stephen of speaking against Moses and God, these men had accused Stephen of contradicting the inerrant and perfect Law of God. In this passage, the mention of *the customs that Moses handed down* seems to include what is known as the Talmud and the Mishnah. The Talmud and the Mishnah are Jewish commentaries on the Torah that were supposed to supplement the Torah and were illegitimately elevated to an equal status with the Torah. By appealing to these two sources and opposing the work of Jesus’s disciples, these men were aligning themselves with false teaching instead of the truth—the Word of God.

Like the face of an angel (v. 15). *Face of an angel* recalls Moses’s radiant face as recorded in Exodus 34:29-35. In both of these cases, the individual’s radiant appearance indicated to others that the individual was in an intimate relationship with God Himself. Having been in the presence of God, both Moses and Stephen were empowered to carry out their heroic testimony in front of those who accused them.

Stephen’s Sermon in Acts 7, his death, and his impact on advancing the kingdom of God. Stephen’s death served to further the kingdom of God. In a brilliant summary of the Old Testament from the call of

Abram through Moses and the exodus, and David and the kingdom of Israel, Stephen adeptly demonstrated that the Jewish people were “always resisting the Holy Spirit” (7:51). The ancient Israelites opposed the work of the Holy Spirit, including persecuting the prophets (v. 52). The prophet Jeremiah accused the people of his day of having uncircumcised hearts (Jer. 4:4; 9:26). The only solution to having uncircumcised hearts was to be given new hearts—something that could not be accomplished through self-discipline and effort. Having a new heart can only be accomplished by the work of God on the lives of individuals (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27). As believers fled Jerusalem because of persecution, they took the gospel with them. In Acts 8:1, Luke said that the persecution following Stephen’s martyrdom caused the gospel to spread throughout Judea and Samaria. Even years later, Paul referenced the martyrdom of Stephen in his own testimony (Acts 22:20).