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WE INTRODUCE STEPHEN--A MAN FULL OF GRACE AND POWER

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 22
ACTS 6:8-15

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We have already studied the selection of the first seven deacons. We have learned that the Pastor is to be the Teacher-Preacher and the deacons are to administer the affairs of the church program. In this early church the deacons were called forth as church administrators, and in this instance, the distribution of funds to the needy widows in the church. Now we turn to a study of Stephen and his amazing ministry.

ACTS 6:8 "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." Instead of the word "faith" the correct translation is "grace". "Stephen was full of grace." This is one of the greatest testimonies ever given any man in the whole Word of God. This emphasizes his character. He understood God's plan and he knew the secret of his life was his relationship to God. He was orientated to the Grace of God. Stephen had no illusions about his life. He knew he was nothing and God was everything. Stephen knew that "Grace" means that you can't earn salvation, you can't buy it and you can't deserve it. Everything depends upon who and what God is. As a result of grace there is power. The plan of God actually has three phases.

Phase 1--This is the cross. Here Christ did all the work. Since Christ did all the work, Christ gets all the credit.

Phase 2--This refers to the believer. God does his work in and through us by the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. Acts 1:8

Phase 3--This refers to eternity and is executed by God the Father.

So in all three phases God does the doing and God gets all the credit. In legalism or religion man does the work and God is supposed to receive what man does and man gets all the credit. Thus you see Madison Ave. techniques have gotten into our work and instead of emphasizing what God does for us, we emphasize what we do for God.

But Stephen knew what the grace of God was and what it meant. As a result of this, he was filled with power. Because of this amazing power he just kept on doing great wonders and miracles among the people. This was the consistent pattern of his daily living. He utilized divine rather than human power. Power, for the Christian, is not that which is done in the energy of the flesh. In order to be filled with the spirit, we must understand 1 JOHN 1:9 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Not only must we understand it, but we must use it. The word for confess here (Omologia) doesn't mean you are to cry over your sins, or feel sorry over your sins, or try to work hard and make up to God for something you have failed to do. It simply means that you are to NAME your sins to God. You are to place them before God. Your sins are forgiven because God is God and not because you are good and sincere and have become sorry for your sins. Sincerity doesn't count with God. It is rather what you know about the Word of God that counts. It is so easy to be sincere, and be sincerely wrong. Sincerity is human works and human works cannot please God. But if we know God's word, our living will produce sincerity. But you see, it is what God's Word produces in us and not what we produce in the energy of the flesh. Confession of sin takes us right back to the cross where every sin has already been judged. Sin can't be judged twice. You can't be filled with the Spirit and walk in the Spirit apart from 1 John 1:9. Apart from the apostle Paul, Stephen had the clearest understanding of the Grace of God of any man that ever lived.

Some people look at prayer as work. Some think prayer is the work we do to get God's work done. This is incorrect. Prayer is God working in you.

ROMANS 8:26-27 "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." We get to a place where we can't do it for ourselves and then God takes over and through his Spirit he does the work for us. Man's plans are temporal and come to nothing and man's plans are no better than the man who designs them.

Illustration--Some believe in falling from grace, or losing salvation after being saved. Think of a man believing that you can commit a sin which can nullify God's salvation! No sin is too great for the plan of God. A person is really showing his egotism when he says he has a sin or sickness which God cannot handle.

So Stephen knew how to minimize human power and how to magnify divine power. Stephen's power came from the Grace of God.

"Did great wonders" is production that is pleasing to God. Wonders and miracles are not the same. Wonders refer to astounding things in witnessing and counseling and lifting the spiritual burdens of others. Wonders emphasize the learning of God's Word and putting it into practice. Miracles were done to focus attention on Jesus Christ as the Messiah. But notice that miracles are secondary here to wonders. There is nothing that is as important as the Word of God.

"Among the people" refers to unbelievers, not brethren who are already Christians. So Stephen had a real impact for Christ among unbelievers.

ACTS 6:9-10 "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." So immediately opposition arose to Stephen. The people involved in this opposition were all Jews. These are Jews who had been scattered over the earth but have now moved back to Jerusalem.

Libertines This comes from the Latin word "Libertinus" which means a liberated slave. In 63 B.C. their grandparents had been captured by Pompey the Great and had been taken to Rome. But they didn't make good slaves. For one thing, they wouldn't work on Saturday. They were heavy on brain but not much on brawn. They made good secretaries or good teachers for children. So the Romans liberated them and they established a banking system in Rome and set up successful businesses as merchants. These bright hard-working Jews added much to the prosperity of the Roman Empire. Now their children and grandchildren had come back to Jerusalem and were called "The liberated" or the Libertines.

Cyrenians These are Jews from a very interesting Greek city called Cyrene in North Africa. Trade was developed between Greece and this North African town and many Jews settled in this place. They were called Cyrenians.

Alexandrians These were Jews from Alexandria, Egypt. Here was the largest settlement of Jews in the world.

Cilicia is that area in Asia Minor from which Saul of Tarsus came. So here you have Jews who had been born in all these foreign centers, they have come back to Jerusalem, and though they were pure Jews they were regarded as a foreign group. They had to have their own synagogues, sort of a foreign synagogue. The influence of the Roman Empire had rubbed off on them and their views came into conflict with Christianity. This is the first warning that there will be a conflict between Rome and Christianity.

Rome will eventually seek to destroy Christianity. Ten Roman emperors will do their best to drive Christianity from the earth. But they will fail, and later will adopt Christianity as a state religion. From this will come the Roman Church. This is how Romanism is built on the union of church and state.

All these foreign groups found themselves violently opposed to the teaching of Stephen and they were constantly disputing with him. They kept on doing this. But Stephen was very strong in doctrine and was capable of handling the message of Christ. They just simply couldn't contradict his arguments. This explains why Saul of Tarsus was so delighted over the death of Stephen. Saul of Tarsus couldn't disprove the arguments of Stephen. Saul of Tarsus was a genius and never lost a debate until he confronted Stephen. This is why Paul wanted to get rid of Stephen. This led Paul to lead out in the persecution of all Christians. Stephen simply stated the doctrinal position and left it there. They just didn't have any answer to him. The reason we are having this "God Is Dead" crowd and all groups like them is because people aren't getting Bible doctrine, but instead of Bible doctrine, they are getting the Social Gospel and a toned down kind of soft religion.

These Jews in our story have no idea of what real Christianity is. They think religion is a do-good system. You see people have the misconception that if people are good, they will make good Christians. So many say, "He would make a wonderful Christian". And when you ask them why they will reply, "Because he is so good. I just know he wouldn't do anything wrong". But so many times their goodness causes them to depend on that goodness and this is the very thing that keeps them from Christ. The only people who are really good are those who know they are nothing and God is everything and this constitutes real inner goodness. Live your own life as unto the Lord and let other people do the same. Keep out of other people's business and live relaxed.

Verse 10 says, "They were not able". This word for able is "Ischuo" and means all their talent, genius, and ability was not able to stand up against the clear plain Word of God given them by Stephen. It simply means they didn't have the knowledge or mental capacity or Bible truth to confront Stephen. "To resist" comes from the Greek word "Anti-histimi" and means "To stand against". This is the word from which we get the word "Antihistimine", and means a medicine that is able to stand against infection.

These Jews didn't have any medicine strong enough to stand against the teaching of Stephen. So we learn from this that these Jews were really out of fellowship with God and though Stephen won the argument, he didn't win them. Saul of Tarsus was one of those who approved Stephen's death for he couldn't answer his arguments. But soon after this Saul will be converted and all the rest of the book of the Acts will be about Saul, who became Paul the Apostle. But at this point Saul is blinded. This principle is explained in 2 Cor. 4:3-4 "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." Saul was a religious zealot and it almost ruined him--save for the grace of God.

In verse 10 it says, "He spake" and it refers to speaking extemporaneously. Stephen didn't have to have notes. It came from his heart. He knew what he believed and why.

ACTS 6:11 "Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God." "Suborned" is a word which means to bribe. "Then they bribed men". They paid them to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."

ACTS 6:12 "And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council" While they were taking Stephen to the Sanhedrin they beat him and did violence to him.

ACTS 6:13 "And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:" Again we have the record here of false witnesses paid to tell untruths on Stephen. This time they say he spoke against the Holy Temple and the law.

ACTS 6:14 "For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us." Stephen had emphasized that Jesus brought an advanced way and an advanced life. Let us remember that Jesus didn't come to destroy the law, but he didn't stop where the law stopped. Jesus went on and gave the answer to sin while all the law could do was to define sin.

ACTS 6:15 "And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." The reason they couldn't take their eyes off Stephen is that he looked like an angel. In Exodus 34:30 this same thing is said of Moses. Moses had the glory of God in his face. But even though Stephen looked like an angel, they are going to stone him because he will say to them "Jesus Christ is the God of Israel".