



Acts 6: 8-15  
Acts: The Church On Mission  
Grace Under Fire

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This morning we continue our summer series going through Acts, where we see the first Christians carrying out the mission that Jesus gave them to be his witnesses wherever they went...to testify to who Jesus is and what he's done. That's the mission that we still have today in the Church, and these first Christians are an inspiration and a reminder to us about the importance of the mission we have, and the importance of continuing to live into that mission.

Now, we might wonder how Luke got this information and why we should trust what he writes here in Acts. Remember, Luke writes at the beginning of his Gospel account that he investigated carefully...that there were eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus who have handed down the things they've been taught, and Luke set out to investigate verify all of that for his buddy Theophilus. And so with that in mind as he records for us the events of Acts as well, it's important that we remember that Luke spent two years, or more, as a companion of Paul's as he spread the word of Jesus, started house churches, and more. In fact, those two years were probably a big part of Luke's investigation into Jesus.

Regardless, he became an incredible source of information for Luke about these events, and through Paul, Luke came in contact with all kinds of other people who were a part of the early church – some of whom would have known Jesus personally.

And in today's passage we continue the events of last week, where seven people were chosen, and then commissioned by the Apostles, to carry out certain kinds of ministry so the Apostles could do other kinds of ministry. Reverend Jannie preached a great message on that last Sunday, looking at the ministry that Stephen and the other 6 had, and how they cared for people who were not being well-cared for. And then out of those seven, Stephen arises as a particularly vocal evangelist for the cause of Christ, which is where today's passage picks up.

Verse 8 says that: **Stephen was a man full of God's "grace and power"**

**(Acts 6:8).** These two words, “grace” and “power,” are words with deep Biblical meaning. We looked at “power” a few weeks ago. It’s the Greek word, “dunamis” from which we get our word “dynamite.” So this is a strong word that describes a real kind of power and influence to shape people and move people into a place of deeper faith. His ministry is filled with that kind of power, thanks to the Spirit that works in him.

Then the other word used to describe him is “grace.” This is kind of an interesting use of this word. **The word for grace is “charis” and it’s the usual Biblical word to speak of God’s grace: the unmerited, unearned way in which God demonstrates his love.** Primarily, as Christians, we see God’s grace expressed in the cross of Christ through which we’re brought into a right relationship with God. That’s the usual way to think of this word, “charis.” But here, we see that Stephen is full of this “charis.” This word is also the root for our word, “charisma” and “charismatic.” We hear these words and we think of people who have a strong personality, who can really hold the attention of an audience...or in church circles, “charismatic” tends to refer to a particular emphasis in Christianity on the Spiritual gifts, perhaps especially speaking in tongues. Perhaps Stephen was charismatic in that sense...maybe he was a guy with much “charisma” in other ways that our world is familiar with. But mostly he was full of the grace of God.

**That’s the way Stephen was. He was full of “charis”...he exuded a kind of grace that drew people in – not to himself, but to Jesus.** So this charis and dunamis were elements of who Stephen was as the Spirit of God moved in him, that were attractive to people and helped people to appreciate and understand who Jesus is, and move them toward faith. In fact, verse 7 says that the number of Disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and Stephen’s ministry that is described in verse 8 is a part of why that happened.

But in spite of this grace and power and the fruitful ministry that he had, opposition arose to Stephen. From day one of the Church...and before that, in Jesus’ ministry, there has been opposition. Notice, however, that the opposition apparently doesn’t have much ground to stand on...Stephen has done such a good job of witnessing to Jesus Christ...he spoke with such wisdom, he had such grace and power, and the movement of the Spirit was so

strong in what he said, that the opposition has to resort to persuading people to testify against him, even producing false witnesses, and eventually, they have to resort to physical force and violence, with the end result being that end up stoning him to death.

And we might wonder: where is this coming from? Who is behind all this? Well, at the beginning of Acts 8, right after Stephen is killed, we're told that "Saul was there, giving approval to his death." Saul, the leader of the persecution of the first Christians, is the same man we know as Paul, whom Luke traveled with. Saul had a radical transformation and changed his name as a result, and we'll look at his transformation in a couple weeks. But for now, realize that Saul, was right there, observing it all. And I believe – and I'm not at all the only one who thinks this – he was probably the one working behind the scenes to stir up the people against Stephen and produce these false witnesses against him. In fact, I would bet my bottom dollar that Saul was the man behind those efforts.

But in the face of these false witnesses, lies, and so forth, Luke notes at the end of verse 15 that all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin (this was essentially a "religious Supreme Court" – consisting the High Priest and then mostly of Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, and some other Jewish religious leaders)...they all looked intently at Stephen, and saw that "his face was like the face of an angel." And then later, at the end of chapter 7, we read: **While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep (7:59-60).**

We see here that Stephen was the real deal. He didn't just exude grace and power when things were going well and great wonders and miracles were happening through him among people who were eager for God's grace. He exuded grace and power even in the in the most trying of times, in the midst of persecution and losing his own life.

You know, it's been said that one test of a person's character is how they respond in the face of adversity. **What's our response when the heat gets turned up in life, when things aren't going the way we wanted, when**

**there's opposition to what we're doing?** Are we angelic? Do we exude the peace of Christ? Do we pray for those who oppose us? Russell Wilson gives us a great example from the football field on how to handle adversity. If you've watched the Seahawks the last few years, you know the offensive line, whose job is to protect Russell and give him time to throw the ball, has not done a very good job...and he has frequently faced adversity as defenses get through the offensive line and put a lot of pressure on him. And yet Russell continually keeps his cool under pressure. Not only does he evade the defense, and start running for his life, but even as he's doing that, he constantly is looking downfield for his receivers, looking to make a throw, to make a play that will help his team...all while guys who out-weigh him by 30 to 100 pounds are trying to make a "Russell sandwich" out of him. He's known for this. His reputation is one of being a great quarterback when the defense causes the play to break down. He's respected throughout the NFL, by all the opposing players and coaches, for his ability to maintain his composure in the face of this kind of intense opposition.

**And that's what Stephen does, and Luke notes it for us: that Stephen's face was like that of an angel – and the whole Sanhedrin saw it; and that even as they were stoning him to death, he cried out for Jesus to have mercy on them.** Stephen's reputation was one of having grace under fire. When the heat is on, when there's intense pressure from all sides, he stands firmly on his faith and leans into the Spirit of the Lord, and lived with grace and power in a situation where most people would react negatively.

Because of his "grace under fire," everyone noticed his calmness, his serenity...whatever it was exactly that caused them to compare his face to that of an angel. And: **He is a model and an inspiration for us of living so focused on Jesus, so trusting in Him that even the pressures and challenges and downright scary things of the world need not get the best of us, and we can even live as Jesus' witnesses in the midst of them.** Stephen clearly had complete and total faith that this world is not all that there is, and not even the best that there is. That even in the face of adversity and false accusations there is an opportunity to minister to people...to see them as human beings whom God wants to reach through him...that these are people for whom Jesus died. Stephen clearly was able to realize that these

people, even as they were stoning him to death, were not the bad guys. He doesn't demonize them or bash them. He prays for them. He pleads to Jesus on their behalf. What a witness! Talk about living into Jesus' mission to be His witnesses wherever we are.

**And I wonder how we do in regards to that today?** I wouldn't say that the Church (capital "C") is necessarily known for this. The reputation of the Church in the world does not seem to be one of "they have the face of an angel" or "I know the people of the church pray for me and want what's best for me" as Stephen does here. The reputation seems to be more that the Church is constantly condemning the world and harping on certain issues as if those things are all that Christians care about. And that's too bad...and the Church has no one to blame but herself. I realize that some of the world's values are often at odds with the values of the church, and we don't want to compromise our values and our beliefs. I get that. I also realize that not all Christians are that way – including, I believe, the people of Rose Hill. We have our convictions, but we seek to speak the truth with love and grace. But, I believe: **We Christians can be more Stephen-like on the whole, and find ways to be more angelic and full of grace and power so that the world might be drawn to Jesus.**

For instance, about 10 days ago, Gwen and I had dinner with a guy who is the pastor of a house-church in our denomination in Hailey, Idaho, a few miles from Sun Valley. But his main job and calling right now is with an organization called Lifewater. Their mission is to bring clean drinking water into communities in Africa and in Asia where clean water, toilets, and personal hygiene are a foreign concept. 2.4 billion people in the world do not have access to a toilet. 663 million do not have access to clean drinking water. And Lifewater does this in communities where the gospel message does not have a foothold. And so as they set up a well, or a clean water spring, that can serve several hundred people, and as they set up latrines, and as they do education about washing hands, and other health-related things...and all this then impacts health, education, family stability, employment, and so much more...and as they do this, the people come to realize that Christians have their best interest in mind...that Christians care for them...that they're an angelic presence. That there's grace in their words

and deeds, and there's power, too, as people get and stay healthy. And that opens the door to share the gospel message with them, and help get a local church started, and so forth.

What if the reputation of the church here Kirkland, and throughout the U.S. and the rest of the world, was that we were known for coming alongside people and bringing a presence of grace and power even in the face of crises and challenges? **What if the world said, "Wow! The people at that church...the people of "The Church" are angelic. Look at all the good work they do in the community and around the world."** Or what if the people around us knew that we were praying for them? What if they knew we had their best interests in mind, and we wanted to simply bless them, as Stephen does here with his prayer – even as they're stoning him to death. **It's been said that the Church is the only organization in the world that doesn't exist for its own "members."** Do you think the non-Christian world would say that? And it doesn't have to be in the context of solving a world crisis. How about in our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of work...what if we who follow Jesus were known for our angelic presence, of living with grace and power...of praying for others and reaching out to them...even those who might do us harm? I think if we lived that way, the message of Jesus would be received far and wide, and we'd see a movement of God in people's lives like never before.

And so I pray that we would be filled with God's grace and power as Stephen was, to the point that it's evident in our lives. So evident that the people around us would say that we too, are angelic...that our reputation would be one of grace and power, so that the world would know that they are loved deeply by us, and by their Heavenly Father. Let's pray...Amen.