

March 24, 2024

“Living in Faith”
Lesson 4

Acts 6:7-15

Intro

Last week’s study from 1 Peter 3:8-17 discussed the challenges believers face and how to behave in the face of those challenges. That idea connects to this week’s passage from Acts 6. The early church is growing, and as always happens when God’s word is proclaimed, there is opposition. Today we look at what one instance of opposition looked like, why it occurred, and how a man named Stephen responded to it.

Read Acts 6:7-15

1. vs. 7: This verse says that the church grew because “the word of God spread”
The church “increased rapidly”
Many were coming to knowledge and faith quickly as the Gospel spread
Among these believers were many priests
Jewish historian Josephus estimated there were a total of 20,000 priests then
It’s likely that the number of priests referred to here is in the hundreds
Most of these priests were the ones who served in the temple
They were not the elite ruling class, but rather relatively poor
2. vs. 8: Stephen here is one of the men selected in Acts 6 to fulfill non-preaching tasks
He is described here as “a man full of God’s grace and power”
He also performs “great wonders and signs among the people”
This is the same description of Jesus and the other apostles
They did signs and wonders as confirmation of God’s working through them
Acts does not mention any specific miraculous signs done by Stephen
Other apostles healed and restored people, both physically and spiritually
Their works were beyond the usual for this world; Stephen likely did so also
3. vs. 9: Opposition begins here, coming from those Jews unwilling to hear about Jesus
It is unclear if only one synagogue is referred to here, or many
The Freedmen are those who either were formerly enslaved, or descendants of slaves
Cyrene is in north Africa, Alexandria is in Egypt
Cilicia and Asia are sections of what is now Turkey
They are arguing with Stephen...but why?
It’s unlikely they were upset by his miracles or by meeting people’s food needs
They must have been upset with what he said
Like other apostles, he was no doubt preaching salvation through Christ
4. vs. 10: This verse shows that they were unable to answer (to argue against) what Stephen said
The Spirit empowered Stephen and gave him words to speak
He was “full of the wisdom of the Spirit”
The opposition refuses to hear the truth

5. vs. 11: The previous verse says they were unable to answer Stephen's wisdom
This verse shows their response: they convince some men to lie about him
They say they he spoke blasphemy against Moses and against God
The punishment is death for speaking blasphemy
This "blasphemy" may be based on their understanding of what Stephen said
6. vs. 12: Stephen is taken before the Sanhedrin
This is a 70-member "supreme court" for dealing with matters of Jewish law
The group consists of chief priests, elders, and teachers of the law
It is likely that some Pharisees and Sadducees were also members
This group had power to enforce consequences for breaking the law
The fact that the people and the religious leaders are "stirred up" is significant
7. vs. 13: Here, false witnesses are brought to speak untruths about Stephen
They say he spoke against the temple ("this holy place") and against Mosaic law
These are both serious charges
However, the witnesses are called "false" witnesses by Luke
One of the 10 Commandments is to not bear false witness against anyone
These false witnesses are doing the very thing they are accusing Stephen of doing
They are speaking against God's revealed commands
8. vs. 14: The charges in this verse against Stephen's teachings have a basis in truth
Jesus did not say he would destroy the temple
He said that when the temple was destroyed, He would raise it up again in 3 days
He didn't say He himself would destroy it
The Romans did that in 70 AD, so Jesus' words were prophetic
He did change one law of Moses, the one regarding what is eaten
The two big areas of identification for Jews were circumcision and dietary
Changing either of these changed their identity as Jews, God's chosen
Jesus said that what a person ate didn't defile him (Matt. 15:17-20)
In all other areas, Jesus fulfilled the writings of Moses, the prophets, and the wisdom
All of these writings pointed to Jesus as the Messiah
Jesus' life, death, and resurrection fulfilled all these writings, didn't destroy them
Stephen's teaching of Jesus' words threatened the Sanhedrin
Some benefitted from the wealth developed through the temple
Some were interested in keeping the traditions established about the Law
9. vs. 15: Stephen's reaction here is significant
Angels are sometimes said to look like men in the NT
Nowhere but here is a person said to resemble an angel
His supernatural expression should be a clue to God's approval of him
Stephen was intimate with God
He began this speech by referring to "the God of glory" (Acts 7:2)
He concludes by saying that he saw God and Jesus next to Him (7:55)
This vision drove the Sanhedrin to stone him to death

Application: What should a Christian's response be to attacks and insults to the faith? We are not likely to suffer death as Stephen did, but name-calling, harsh remarks, and judging of our use of time, energy, and resources likely will happen. His manner of living and responding can and should inform our behavior.

Stephen knew Scripture, and was able to confidently explain the reason for His hope and belief in Jesus. His goal was to explain away error and see them believe in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. He faced this extremely negative set of circumstances with peace and poise. These came from a knowledge of God's will and power. He trusted God, regardless of what was occurring to him.

When we practice and display these same qualities, we will be both better able to serve God and to face any criticism or attacks we receive from the world.

Prayer: Father God, give us Your wisdom to be able to deal with a world that rejects and despises You. We pray that the power of the Holy Spirit will work in us and through us. Fill us with Your peace to face every circumstance that comes our way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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