

Prayers

Opening prayer

Dear Lord and Father; You have created the day ahead of me, and surely, You can understand that I cannot do everything that is before me, it is too much! Rescue me, and give meaning to my work. Make all I do worthwhile and pleasurable, make it sensible and make me creative, and may I eventually find that what seemed impossible has been made possible because of my faith and trust in You. Bless me, dear Lord and Father, so that at the days' end, I may find the peace that You alone can give. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CULTURE

1. For yourself

Pray that God will bless everything you do today. If the prayer above speaks to you personally, then use it to reflect prayerfully on your day's work, whether you work for pay or you work at home or elsewhere, for love

2. For your friends and family

Give thanks to God for the health of all your family members. Health can be a difficult thing to speak about, especially within families, for we think we know what others feel but we do not, and many people have very individual beliefs about health and their own bodies. Pray, and ask the Lord to break down those barriers that prevent people from receiving His blessings

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church of God will cross cultural boundaries in its mission to deliver God's Word to all

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray against racial prejudice in all its ugly forms

Meditation

Welcome the day
Let the Word of God sink deeply in
And trust your soul to God this very day
Whatever lies before you

Welcome the day
Let you and God be found together
And all God's people, bound as one
Enjoying all His gifts

Welcome the day
Let heaven be your watchword
And give yourself to God's agenda
Each and every hour

Welcome the day
Let the Holy Spirit breeze around you
And let Him guide your workspace
Determining all before

Welcome the day
Let glory be the souls' temptation
And see in front of you your destiny
The 'rest' of heaven's abode

Welcome the day!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 6:8-15

⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people, ⁹ but some from the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they did not have the resources to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke, ¹¹ so they secretly put forward some men to say,

‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’

¹² Then they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and after stalking him, they arrested him and brought him before the council. ¹³ They put up false witnesses who said,

‘This man keeps on saying things against this holy place and against the Law. ¹⁴ We have even heard him say that Jesus, this Nazarene, will destroy this place and change the traditions Moses handed down to us.’

¹⁵ And while they were looking intently at him, everyone in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Review

The record of Stephen’s martyrdom begins here, as Luke records his remarkable ministry. He was able to preach the Gospel and perform works of power far above his ‘brief’ as a church helper, but the Holy Spirit was at work to do something powerful.

There is something powerful about this passage, because it stands out from the surrounding verses of Acts as an almost saintly portrayal of Stephen. But this is exactly how Luke wants us to react. These verses are not merely a continuation of Acts 6, they are part of the essential build up to Acts 7, the remarkable chapter containing Stephen’s stunning sermon to the Sanhedrin, delivered before his martyrdom by stoning. Now we have just read Acts 5, in which after Gamaliel’s advice, the Sanhedrim refrained from taking action against the apostles. So we should now be asking ourselves what was it about Stephen that changed their mind? What was it that meant that this was the first death penalty commuted against a Christian, making Stephen the first Christian martyr.

We cannot reflect on Stephen’s story without looking back at what happened to Jesus, because there are some significant connections between our passage today and the Gospel records of Jesus’ death. Now when Jesus died at Calvary, he made the supreme sacrifice, which God has used for the salvation of those who repent and have faith. But Jesus had already taught that His followers should be willing to follow Him as far as death itself; He said ‘*take up your Cross and follow me*’ (Matt 10:38, 16:24, Luke 9:23). He did not say that every one of His followers would die, but He did say that they should be willing to go this far. Their death can never do the same as Jesus’ death, but the sacrifice of a Christian martyr is never in vain; it is a pure testimony to the saving love of God.

So when writing about Stephen, Luke had one purpose in mind. He wanted to show his readers that Stephen was worthy to stand as the first martyr, as the first to follow his Lord in the ultimate sacrifice, demonstrating true faith until the end. Our passage today is best read with all this in mind.

What then does this passage say about Stephen? At first, it describes him as ‘*full of grace and power*’ (6:8). I doubt that Luke wanted to portray Stephen in a better light than Peter or the other apostles, but such an accolade is about the highest possible. Stephen, having been given the work of a deacon or ‘helper’ (6:2-4), clearly began to do far more than organise daily rations. His ministry grew naturally from everything he did, and he was soon responsible for powerful ‘*signs and wonders*’ (6:8), things previously done only by the apostles!

But there is no hint of difficulty with Peter or the other apostles. When opposition came it was not from within the church, it came from the Jewish community in Jerusalem, with intellectual help from Jews with wider experience of the Roman world (6:9). They accused him of blasphemy against God, just as the Pharisees had done against Jesus, but they struggled. Luke now adds another accolade to Stephen, saying that his opponents could not stand against his ‘*wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke*’ (6:10). Clearly, Stephen did not need to defer to Peter’s authority, he dealt with those who opposed the faith himself with the ‘wisdom

and Spirit' given him, which drew on him further opposition. Again, the same happened to Jesus, whose ministry of declaring God's Kingdom in word and deed simply drew opposition.

Luke now makes the connections with Jesus even more obvious. Just as Jesus was seized and taken before His accusers, Stephen was stalked by the Jews and then seized, before being put before the 'council', meaning the Sanhedrin, facing trumped up false accusations. It has ever been thus when the truth of God has stood in the dock of human opinion! Luke records the charge in verse 14 that Stephen spoke against the Temple, just as Jesus did (Matt 26:61, Mark 15:29), but to this is added the accusation that Stephen said that he will '*change the traditions of Moses*' (6:14). It would be hard to say which charge was more scandalous in its day, the threat to overturn the Temple or the threat to change the traditions of Moses. The Jews were threatened because Stephen perceived by the Spirit the end of their religious traditions. He had begun to see into the future of the church, and had seen and taught truths that the apostles would eventually write about. The famous letter 'to the Hebrews', for example, is a fuller explanation of Stephen's point about the Laws of Moses being fulfilled by Jesus.

Perhaps it was because of Stephen's powerful prophetic stance and spiritual integrity, but as the Sanhedrin members looked at Stephen, his face changed (6:15). Luke says that his face became like the '*face of an angel*'. This is clearly something remarkable. Miracles like this have happened wherever God has spoken directly through His servants, and they have glowed with the same holiness of God with which Moses shone after he had seen God '*face to face*' (Exodus 34:29). Stephen was demonstrably full of the Holy Spirit as he spoke to the Sanhedrin, but we already know what will happen, and perhaps Stephen did as well. Tomorrow, we will read the story of 'what happened next', and although the end is delayed while Stephen preaches arguably the most remarkable sermon in the New Testament, his martyrdom, when it comes, will be swift.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- 'Full of grace and power' (6:8)
- 'against Moses and God' (6:11)
- Jesus, 'this Nazarene' (6:14)
- 'the face of an angel' (6:15)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V11 'so they secretly put forward some men to say'

Other translations:

'Then they secretly induced men to say' (New American)

'They they secretly instigated some men to say' (NRSV)

The Greek word at the centre of this sentence is 'hypoballō', which means 'to put under', or 'to suggest to the mind', or to 'instigate proceedings', with the idea that what is done is somewhat devious. The last of these might be suitable for a formal court hearing, but not here, which is a far more informal setting. The sentence is a description of the underhand dealings of those who sought to have Stephen convicted on a death penalty, and I suggest this; '*they secretly put forward some men*', which uses simple and straightforward words that do not imply anything more than this.

V12 'after stalking him, they arrested him ...'

Other translations:

'they suddenly confronted him, seized him ...' (NRSV)

'came up to him and dragged him away ...' (New American)

The first word in this phrase is interesting. It is the Greek word 'epistemi', which means 'to place at', or 'to place on', or perhaps 'to place nearby'. The NRSV gives an interesting translation in 'suddenly confronted', which suggests that the translators thought that those attacking Stephen lay in wait and surprised him. Similarly, I think that the Greek verb best fits the idea of 'stalking', prior to Stephen's arrest. Incidentally, the NIV misses out any translation of this word at all, and says 'they seized him ...'.

'Full of grace and power' (6:8)

'against Moses and God' (6:11)

Jesus, 'this Nazarene' (6:14)

'the face of an angel' (6:15)

Discipleship

Application

Works of power and grace amongst God's people today

It is easy to say that Luke glamorises Stephen here, but the reports he brings must have been a fair reflection of the truth for the Sanhedrin to change its mind. But what is most encouraging here is the fact that just when we might be led to thinking that the apostles alone were used by God to do miracles and works of power, we are told that they were performed by a man who appeared almost 'overnight' in Biblical terms. God does the same today, and He is constantly raising up people who will do His work again, authentically, for each new generation. Our duty is surely to have our eyes open for what God will do to 'show His power' amongst His people, yet again.

All the significant feature of Stephen's life and witness are recorded here by Luke so that we might know the authentic work of God. Stephen is full of 'grace and power', he has 'wisdom and the Spirit', and he delivers the Word of God in a way that is recognisable as the Gospel. It is not a new message for those who know the Bible and the history of God's work throughout the generations but it will be completely 'new' for those who nothing of these things. I am also convinced that when God raises up prophets to lead His people they will almost invariably be a threat to the institutionalised church. Stephen's ministry was one step beyond what he was ordained to do in the church and the early church could have complained that he should have waited for his elders, but this is not Luke's message here.

Look for the signs

I remember once when I was a teenager, attending a village service where my father was preaching. As he spoke, I remember being inspired by what he said, and then quite unexpectedly, his face seemed to glow, and I remember moving my head around and blinking to check out what I was seeing. I realised later on that this was God's way of telling me that I was always to listen to what is preached, for God is always there, ready to speak to those who will hear him. It was a message that I needed to hear, and one that we all need to hear. I have to say that what I saw was seen by no one else, but this does not diminish the event in my own eyes.

More than this, however, what happened opened my eyes to the fact that God does indeed do supernatural things in our midst. Now I was brought up in churches that were honest and faithful, but most found the idea that God might do something supernatural somewhat difficult. I reckon that to this day, too many people who call themselves Christians have difficulty believing that God will actually do anything as a consequence to their prayers, for example. They are too used to the idea that God doesn't answer prayer. So it is important that Scripture remind us constantly that God acts through His servants if they will accept it and receive it, as Stephen clearly did. When the whole church of God exercises faith that God will indeed move mountains, then mountains will be moved.

Questions for groups

1. What does the story of Stephen tell us about what God wants of His people today?
2. What are the connections between this passage of Scripture and the Gospel? Make a list of these connections.
3. Discuss whether there are signs and wonders today that are as relevant to today as Stephen's works of great power were for his. What are they and what do they mean?

Discipleship challenges

- *From the list of spiritual qualities possessed by Stephen found in this passage, make a list of those you find challenging because you do not feel worthy of them. Pray that you will have the grace to be someone through whom God works in the world today, in power and grace.*
- *To what extent is the church of today rather like the Jewish community of the first century, unable to respond to the challenge of those who do God's will? If you have some sympathy with this thought, what then can you or should you do about this? Talk about these things with others with whom you can share fellowship*

Final Prayer

Come and bless us Lord Jesus, with Your grace and love. Sometimes, life can be a struggle as we do our best to keep things going, earning money so that we can feed ourselves and live, and organising life's schedules around family events and expectations. So, break into our lives, Lord Jesus, with your power to see things differently, and excite us by the possibilities of your grace! We give You glory, Lord God, for You are our inspiration! AMEN
