

## **Stephen's Conflict with the Synagogue of the Freedmen: Acts 6:8-15**

**“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people” (v. 8).**

There is a small textual dispute in this verse. Did Luke write that Stephen was “full of *grace* and power” or “full of *faith* and power.” P. W. Comfort records that our earliest, best copies of Acts preserve the wording, “full of grace and power” (*New Testament Text and Translation Commentary*, 353-354).

What then does it mean to be “full of grace”? D. L. Bock is likely correct when he states that “full of grace” does not simply refer to Stephen’s inherent “charm,” but “the enabling power of grace,” exhibited primarily in the miracles God permits him to perform (*Acts*, 269-270). That is, God’s grace was shown through the miracles Stephen performed by the Spirit’s power.

Once again, we see miracles accompanying the proclamation of the gospel (see especially Acts 4:29-30). Of course, the miracles had the primary benefit of validating the message of the risen Lord. But they were also expressions of God’s grace, that is, his care for the physical needs of humans and not simply their spiritual needs. Although transcendent, spiritual realities are more important than the material, God shows the depth of his care by concerning himself with the entire person.

It is imperative, therefore, that we follow our Father’s example in evangelization. We should not simply see sinners as souls in need of spiritual salvation. We should see them as people with physical, emotional, and financial needs that are often tied to spiritual desires (Health and Wealth Gospel preachers have recognized this and have, sadly, used it to their financial advantage). We need to show our love for the whole person, and in doing so, demonstrate to them what the Father’s love looks like.

### — Words to Ponder —

“It should not surprise us that the people whom God has greatly used throughout the centuries have not just known their Bibles well; they have known other people well, too. And loving both, they have made the Word relevant to others” (P. Little, *How to Give Your Faith Away*, 20).

### — Prayer —

Take a minute and pray that, as a congregation, we would be characterized by a willingness to show love for people—body, mind, and soul.

**“Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he**

**was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for**

**we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (vv. 9-15).**

— Prayer —

Pray for those around the world who are experiencing persecution and false allegations for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ. Ask that they might be given the power to stand strong in times of trouble to proclaim the gospel boldly.

The deacon Stephen, who was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian, became an opponent of the “synagogue of the Freedmen,” the members of which were likely Hellenistic Jews who were descendants of former Jewish slaves in Rome. Thousands of Jews had been taken by General Pompey back to Rome as slaves after the Roman conquest of Israel in 63 BC. The Jewish scholar, Philo, claims that there was a sector of Rome that was home to emancipated Jews who had been given Roman citizenship (*Embassy*, 155). Linguistic and archeological evidence suggest that these Jews established a synagogue in Jerusalem that became known as “the synagogue of the Freedmen.”

In addition to the synagogue of the Roman Jews, Stephen was in conflict with other Hellenistic Jewish groups: the Alexandrian, the Asian (referring to Asia Minor), and the Cilician synagogues. It is likely that Saul, who later became Paul the Apostle, belonged to the later synagogue; even though Paul spent most of his life to this point living in Jerusalem, he was born in Tarsus, the major city in the province of Cilicia. This would explain why Saul’s first appearance in Acts is at Stephen’s impromptu execution (Acts 7:58).

Because the Hellenistic Jews could not withstand Stephen’s Spirit-given wisdom, they decided to suppress Stephen’s teachings by charging him with blasphemy against Moses and the Temple—a similar charge to that which was leveled against Jesus (Mark 14:57-59). It is unlikely that the original intent of this accusation was to open the way for Stephen’s stoning. Yes, stoning was the Old Testament prescription for blasphemy. But with the Roman occupation the right of the Jews to execute blasphemers had been revoked. The “mob justice” that befell Stephen at the end of Acts 7 was a risky move for the Jews; they could have experienced severe punishment from their Roman overlords. The stoning of Stephen was purely an emotional response to the rhetorical “gut punch” at the end of Stephen’s speech (Acts 7:51-53). The initial charge of blasphemy was most assuredly meant to discredit Stephen and nothing more.

But while Stephen might have been dishonored before men, he was honored in the sight of God. Luke records a rather odd note that to the Sanhedrin Stephen’s face appeared to be the “face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). Perhaps, this means that Stephen had come into contact with the glory of God (cf. Ex 34:29-35; Lk 9:29). Or maybe it is simply Luke’s way of showing Stephen to be innocent. Whatever it means, it appears that Stephen met the lies of the council with dignity and grace. There was no anxiousness, bitterness, or anger expressed through his demeanor. He was, by the Spirit, “full of grace and power.”

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Next week we will begin looking at Stephen’s speech, starting with Stephen’s summary of the life of Abraham. In the meantime, I pray you all have a wonderful week and a blessed Easter. Take care, and may God protect you all.