

Stephen's SOTU Speech; Paul's Persecutions

If you take a look at the 6th chapter of the Book of The Acts of the Apostles, you will read of an event where the twelve disciples began a search for **seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.**" (Acts 6:3). They were looking for men they could count on as the business referred to was that of governing the money of the church. It is good and, yes, even essential that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ have reliable, honest and wisdom-filled people to attend to that very important task.

At that place and time, the church itself was much larger than those we see today, as they were so much closer to the original source. With all those people and all that activity, there arose an unpleasant situation where Greeks were murmuring against the Jews over how the widows were being treated. *The words imply something like an organised administration of the common fund: widows and their children being the chief objects of relief.* (Ellicott). That demanding situation – likely a clamorous crowd of applicants besieging the Apostles -- called for help so that the disciples could continue their primary duty of preaching the word of God. So Gill writes: *[B]ecause their widows were neglected in the daily ministration; that is, they had not that distributed which was necessary for them, nor so much as the Hebrew widows; they complained of partiality, as if because the Hebrew widows were the natives of the country, and might be nearly related to many of the community, that therefore they were more regarded and better supplied every day, than their widows were, whose husbands had dwelt in foreign lands, and were not so well known, and had fewer acquaintance and relations; for it seems the ministration or distribution was made every day[.]*

So, against that backdrop, the search began, and according to verse 5 **they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch.** Those seven gentlemen went about to perform their duties, but shortly it became quite obvious that Stephen

stood out from the other six, and he, being **full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.** (Acts 6:8). This would be yet another prime example of how each of God's people has their own talents and abilities, and there will always be some who seem to stand out more than others.

Now, since he stood out from the crowd, Stephen soon became the target of the wise disputers of that day, but they couldn't out smart or out debate him. So what they did, as usual, is commence to stir up the people and suborn men to lying on Stephen, eventually hauling Stephen before the council (government). In that hall of justice, they **set up false witnesses** (Acts 6:13) against Stephen, accusing him of blasphemy and treason. **And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.** (Acts 6:15). This angelic look was probably somewhat like that of Moses when he came down from Mount Sinai; **the skin of his face shone.** (Exodus 34:30). The look suggested gravity, sincerity, fearlessness, confidence in God, majesty and glory; a supernatural luster.

Before moving on from chapter 6, we would be well-served in considering these remarks from Barnes: *In this chapter we have another specimen of the manner in which the church of the Lord Jesus was established. It was from the beginning amidst scenes of persecution, encountering opposition adapted to try the nature and power of religion. If Christianity was an imposture, it had enemies acute and malignant enough to detect the imposition. The learned, the cunning, and the mighty rose up in opposition, and by all the arts of sophistry, all the force of authority, and all the fearfulness of power, attempted to destroy it in the commencement. Yet it lived; it gained new accessions of strength from every new form of opposition; it evinced its genuineness more and more by showing that it was superior to the arts and malice of earth and of hell.*

With that, we now must consider the historical-religious overview Stephen provided before the council defending against charges of blasphemy that ended with his murder, all from Acts chapter 7:

1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

- ² And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,**
- ³ And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.**
- ⁴ Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.**
- ⁵ And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child.**
- ⁶ And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years.**
- ⁷ And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.**
- ⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.**
- ⁹ And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,**
- ¹⁰ And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.**
- ¹¹ Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance.**
- ¹² But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.**

13 And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh.

14 Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to him, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.

15 So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers,

16 And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor the father of Sychem.

17 But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,

18 Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph.

19 The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.

20 In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months:

21 And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son.

22 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.

23 And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel.

24 And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian:

25 For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.

26 And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?

**27 But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying,
Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?**

28 Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?

**29 Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land
of Madian, where he begat two sons.**

**30 And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in
the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of
fire in a bush.**

**31 When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew
near to behold it, the voice of the LORD came unto him,**

**32 Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and
the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Then Moses trembled,
and durst not behold.**

**33 Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for
the place where thou standest is holy ground.**

**34 I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in
Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to
deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.**

**35 This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler
and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer
by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush.**

**36 He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and
signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the
wilderness forty years.**

**37 This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A
prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your
brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.**

**38 This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the
angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our
fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:**

39 To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,

40 Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.

41 And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

42 Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?

43 Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.

44 Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen.

45 Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David;

46 Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.

47 But Solomon built him an house.

48 Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet,

49 Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?

50 Hath not my hand made all these things?

51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:

53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

This concise history is hard to improve upon and of course is confirmed by the relevant Bible passages in all respects.

Note with interest the crowd's reaction beginning at verse 57. Was that reaction in response to Stephen's comments at verse 56 that he saw the heavens opened and Jesus standing on the right hand of God? Or was the reaction to the entirety of Stephen's historical overview? It likely doesn't matter; the point is there was an intense and violent reaction of these Jewish leaders, marking the climax of their rage as they covered their ears to block

out Stephen's words and show their great detestation of what was said, and then rushed to stone him, apparently making Stephen the first Christian martyr. *Being provoked to such a degree that they could not contain themselves, and meaning to drown the voice of Stephen; and stopped their ears* — As if they could not bear to hear such blasphemy as they wished to have it thought he had spoken. *And ran upon him* — Greek, *ωρμησαν*, *rushed on him with one accord*, before any sentence was regularly passed[.] (Benson).

This overall reaction marked a profound rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious establishment, their refusal to hear the truth and the beginning of fierce persecution against early believers. And that situation continues to this day, more or less.

Let's also take a closer look at verse 58. The law required the witnesses to be the first to take part in the stoning. **The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people.** (Deuteronomy 17:7). To do so, they had to have free hands and arms, thus necessitating their laying loose, flowing clothes to the side, in this case at the feet of a young man named Saul (Paul).

At the time, Paul was probably in his early 30s, well-educated and of impeccable Jewish stock.

⁴Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more:

⁵Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;

⁶Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:4-6).

Paul consented to this execution (Acts 8:1) and was presently involved in a **great persecution against the church** (Acts 8:1), indeed, making **havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men**

and women committed them to prison (Acts 8:3) and generally doing **much evil** to the **saints at Jerusalem** (Acts 9:13). A sort of 1-man ICE! What an introduction to this ultimate lion of God. Consider Gill: *Saul of Tarsus; who was now at Jerusalem, and belonged to the synagogue of the Cilicians, that disputed with Stephen, and suborned false witnesses against him. He is called a young man; not that he was properly a youth, for he must be thirty years of age, or more; since about thirty years after this he calls himself Paul the aged, Plm 1:9 when he must be at least sixty years of age, if not more; besides, Ananias calls him a "man", [Acts 9:13](#) nor would the high priests have given letters to a mere youth, investing him with so much power and authority as they did; but he is so called, because he was in the prime of his days, hale, strong, and active.*

Amazingly, but beautifully, Paul ultimately became the Lord's **chosen vessel**, selected, as the Lord says, **to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel**. To this very day, Paul continues to be a bearer of the Lord's name to that 3-pack audience.

But what anguish of heart and soul he must have had all those years, knowing he had so mistreated the Lord's people. He hints at it in his writings. **For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.** (1 Corinthians 15:9, 10). And this: **For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: . . . And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judea which were in Christ: But they had heard only, that he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. And they glorified God in me.** (Galatians 1:13, 22- 24). And in the opening chapter of 1st Timothy, Paul refers to himself as **a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.** (1 Timothy 1:13). He frequently credited his conversion and re-direction to the exceeding abundant, remarkable and amazing grace, mercy

and love of Christ. In a word, he presents as a prime example of Christ's saving power.

But, while Paul displayed his remorse, regret and feelings of unworthiness, he did not let that stop him or interfere with his powerful and unparalleled ministry. That is a good lesson for all of us.

In ultimate irony, we even find Paul later in life warning against the very type person he had been, specifically Alexander the coppersmith who had done Paul **much evil**. (2 Timothy 4:14). Paul went on to warn Timothy and his reading audience to be wary of Alexander and his ilk. (2 Timothy 4:15). This can only be seen as a remarkable turn of events.

Let's close with these words from a hymn Jon sent out a couple months ago:

So faithful Stephen, undismayed, the malice of the Jews surveyed; the holy joy which filled his breast a luster on his face impressed.

Behold! He said, the world of light is opened to my strengthened sight; my glorious Lord appears in view, that Jesus, whom ye lately slew.

With such a friend and witness near, no form of death could make him fear; calm, midst the shower of stones, he kneels, and only for his murderers feels.