

ACTS 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60
HOLY FAITHFULNESS

Imagine seeing this add: “Help wanted: You’ll be required to take care of widows by bringing them food and meeting other needs. You must have a good reputation, be full of the Holy Spirit and be wise.” Would you be interested in such a job? Would you qualify for such a job? Do people think you have a good character? Do you know if you’re full of the Holy Spirit? If you’re wise you know the answer to that question.

Today we look at a man who met the job requirements, was given the job, and he went above and beyond the call of duty. His name was Stephen. Maybe you don’t know of him, or know much about him, and that’s understandable. Not much is known about any of these seven men. Honestly, I’d like to have the role of Philip rather than that of Stephen. God miraculously transported Philip from place to place so that he could preach God’s good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. You can read about that in Acts chapter eight. Stephen was stoned to death for preaching about Jesus.

The job has an opening now! Are you interested in applying for it? If you just take care of the widows, keep your head down and mouth shut things might go well for you, at least better than they did for Stephen. Do you think Stephen or any of those other men were sitting there, thinking, “Pick me, pick me!”? Likely not. If they were of that good character, they were likely humble and didn’t think they would be picked.

Maybe you have that humble character and you think that no one would ask you to do something in the church. Yet, the Holy Spirit just needs to lead us to ask you, and then you would feel honoured to do that thing that you were asked to do. So, let’s think of Stephen today, and as I do you can think of yourself, and if you’re being called by the Holy Spirit to do something for God.

Stephen was full of grace and power, along with being full of the Holy Spirit and having a good reputation. Being full of the Holy Spirit like he was he not only helped the widows, but he also performed miracles.

Think of how well that would go for you if you went around town performing miracles. Think about how well that went for Jesus. It went about as well for Stephen. You might think that performing miracles would lead to praises, but it didn’t. Stephen went from the honour of being picked to be one of the seven to help the apostles, to the glory of performing miracles, to people becoming jealous of him.

Like with Jesus, some people in the synagogue didn’t like that someone outside of the synagogue was getting more praises than them. It was like they were saying, ‘Don’t outshine your pastor!’ But if you want to outshine your

pastor you go right ahead. But of course, if you're going to be speaking about the Christian faith what you say has to be true.

We're told as Christians that we're to speak well of others, and put the best construction on the situation. So, maybe they were just checking Stephen out to see if he was speaking the truth, and it wasn't all about jealousy. It would be like if you decided to teach a Bible study in your home. I might ask about what you're teaching. That's what I'm supposed to do, to make sure that what we teach as a church is all good and right. It doesn't mean that I feel threatened by you teaching, even if you get more people to come to your Bible study than mine. At least people are hearing and learning about God.

Yet this meeting in the synagogue went beyond just checking Stephen out. There were accusations. It was a full out dispute. There was trouble for Stephen because he was teaching about Jesus and doing good works. We reflected on this sort of situation last week. What do you do when as a faithful Christian problems happen in your life precisely because of your faithfulness? You might try to do the right thing, but that doesn't mean life will go well for you. In fact, it might go badly for you. But that's not the end. God is sustaining you, and preparing you for a better life.

So, Stephen kept living his life faithfully. He didn't run away from his troubles. He didn't tell the people in the synagogue that they were right and he was wrong. He didn't tell them that he would stop teaching and stop doing the things he was doing. We don't hear today all of what Stephen said, skipping more than fifty verses of this trial. That's what it turned out to be, a trial. So, to grasp what's happening you should go back and read those missing verses.

Do you do that when I tell you, you should really read more of the text to understand things about God better? Maybe you do. I don't know. So to wet your appetite I'll read to the end of chapter six, and then maybe you'll be enticed to read the beginning of chapter seven to see what you missed.

"But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which [Stephen] 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." (Acts 6:10-14).

Do you hear how the people are attacking him for speaking the Word of God? Now we pick up fifty verses later in the seventh chapter, and Stephen full of the Holy Spirit tells the people in the synagogue that they have always

resisted the Holy Spirit. Now, while we might like to be used by God like Philip was being miraculously transported around to preach about Jesus, some of us have to be used by God like Stephen was used, and encounter people who don't want to hear about Jesus.

This wasn't a fight between men. This was a fight against the Holy Spirit and God almighty. So, Stephen speaks boldly against these church men accusing them of resisting of the Holy Spirit. Do you have that kind of courage to tell your pastor that something he said in the sermon is wrong? Do you have the courage to challenge the correctness of church doctrine. Many Christians lack that courage these days, and thus many denominations are slipping away from God, doing their own resisting of the Holy Spirit.

These churchmen didn't feel Stephen was right in what he said about Jesus. They didn't believe Jesus was the Son of God. They didn't believe that they had killed their Messiah. They didn't believe they were breaking God's laws. They believed Stephen was breaking God's laws. So they mocked and ridiculed Stephen as he spoke. Our text says they ground their teeth at him, which basically means they mocked Stephen.

So, Stephen gets a vision of heaven while he's being mocked, and instead of protecting himself by keeping this sight to himself he tells them. I wonder if I would tell people if they weren't listening to a word I said. Would you have the courage to speak up if you saw something miraculous? I still tell people about the time I hit a moose dead on doing 90 KM/HR, and there was barely a dent in my vehicle. That miracle I have the courage to speak of, but what if speaking up could cost you your job, your family or your life?

That vision of heaven strengthened Stephen for what was to come. He was taken out and stoned to death. We might think of the horror of dying this way, but rather our focus should be on Stephen remaining faithful unto death. He dies with forgiveness on his breath. Just imagine if that moose came through my window. I might lie there dying cursing that stupid moose for running out in front of me. Now imagine what you might say to people who are killing you because you told them about Jesus. Would you curse them too?

Stephen forgave them. How could you possibly utter words of forgiveness to such people unless what you were saying about Jesus was true. Jesus really did die on the cross to pay for the sins of the world, including those who killed Stephen, including those who cause problems in your life or threaten you. Can you forgive them? Only by the grace of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit can we bring ourselves to forgive anyone who has hurt us, because we know that Jesus not only died to pay the penalty for our sins, but He also died for their sins, and He rose from the dead. This Easter resurrection changes everything in our lives and enables us to live our lives faithfully no matter what God may call us to do for Him or others. Amen.