



May 31, 2015
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90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit
By the Spirit We Are Unflappable
Acts 7

I've been preaching here for nearly 28 years. I think maybe twice I've had to call for help because I felt too sick on a Sunday. Last week was one of those. I needed help and Pastor Larry stepped up to it on Friday. Then on Saturday, Megan told me that Larry had a fever and HIS throat was getting scratchy. So I started working on my message again. We agreed to compare notes on Sunday morning and whoever was less sick, would preach. Larry won (although he was sick for most of this week!) He did such a great job on short notice. What a bench we have! And a great example of last week's theme: "entrusting" ministry to others.

Do you remember the story? Some of the Greek-speaking widows who had become Christians were being neglected in the distribution of food. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe there was a little favoritism taking place—insiders versus outsiders.

But apostles knew they had to deal with it and couldn't be distracted from their job of preaching the Word. So they appointed seven men, laid hands on them, prayed and entrusted to them this work of hospitality. Luke reports the result in 6:7; the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Of the seven men named, five we never hear from again. They do their job and then disappear into the mists of history. But we do learn more about the other two, Stephen and Philip. Stephen's story isn't very long; but it is powerful. I want to tell it to you.

⁸Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. ⁹Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. ¹¹Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." ¹²So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never

stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

¹Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

So the first deacon, Stephen, is dragged before the same court that killed Jesus because he was such a threat to their power. They assumed that when they killed him, they were done with him. But here was one of his followers teaching with such power and wisdom that no one could refute him. So, just like with Jesus, they came up with false witnesses and trumped charges about blasphemy. The high priest asks him, "Are these charges true?"

In response, Stephen preaches the longest sermon in Acts. He shows how their own scriptures reveal a God who came looking for his people—a God who could not be confined inside any building made by human hands, a God who would not tolerate idolatry, a God who sent prophets to warn his people. Starting with Abraham—and then Joseph, then Moses, and finally David and Solomon—Stephen weaves together the story of God's gracious, loving salvation and the ways that God's people had rejected that love. Then, Stephen delivers the punch line, and it is a doozy:

⁵¹"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—⁵³you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

⁵⁴When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

On the eastern wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, the wall that faces Gethsemane, there is only one open gate that leads into the city. This is called "Lion's Gate" because of the lions engraved on the wall. But it has another more ancient name: Stephen's Gate. Tradition has it that Stephen was led through this gate to the base of the hill where he was stoned to death... the first martyr of the Christian church.

It was the equivalent of a mob-lynching. Jews were not allowed to execute anyone; only Romans could do that. But Stephen's sermon so infuriates them, they lose control. ⁵⁴"When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him." What does it mean to "gnash your teeth at someone"? Isn't that what a wolf does? And when Stephen has a vision of Jesus standing beside God in heaven, they go crazy: ⁵⁷"At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him."

What in the world happened? How did Stephen go from being a waiter of tables to being the first martyr of the Christian Church? Do you think that was his career path of choice? When they selected him as one of the first deacons, did he think, "Goody, this will be the perfect platform for me to get noticed, tick off a lot of powerful people and end up being crushed to death with stones by an enraged mob."

Obviously, Stephen teaches us what it means to be unflappable in the face of persecution and martyrdom. But Stephen didn't set out to die for Christ. He set out to live for Christ. His death inspires us, but it is his life that informs us. I want to point out a few things I learn from Stephen about how to live for Christ.

First, he was filled with the Spirit of Christ. I hate to beat a dead horse here, but it is the recurrent theme of this book. All believers were Spirit-filled. But there was something about Stephen, an openness and emptiness, that allowed him to be especially filled with the Spirit of Jesus. In 6:3 we are told that the first deacons must be men "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." But when we read the list of candidates, Stephen is specifically described as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." No other deacon is described that way. In 6:10, we are told his opponents "could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke." And after his sermon, we read in 7:55 that "Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven..."

I felt so empty these last two weeks. I have never been sick this long. I hate missing a Sunday. It makes me feel guilty. But I was coughing, and the drugs I took fogged my brain and depressed me. And then I was asked to bury Cyndi's sister-in-law, Ann—50 years old, with three kids. Many in that family are not believers and I felt so much pressure and so inadequate that I was paralyzed. I didn't know what to say. Then, as I studied this story it struck me what I needed: the Holy Spirit. Duh! More of the Spirit to fill me—to fill me Stephen-like—to the point of overflowing. This was not about me and clever words. It would be about the Spirit pouring out of me, a mere vessel. In that moment, I just cried out the same prayer I've been urging all of us to pray every day. Fill me Holy Spirit! Fill me up! I need more of you! I cannot do this without you! (By the way, God did something amazing at that graveside service!)

Stephen was one of those persons who was so open, so available, so empty before the Lord that God just poured his Holy Spirit into him. I'll say again what I've said so many times before. Presbyterians who take the Holy Spirit seriously are a force to be reckoned with. Stephen was filled with the Spirit of Christ.

And he served like Christ. He was called to be a table-waiter. There was nothing in that call about doing miracles, preaching before the Sanhedrin; becoming a martyr. Just a servant of tables, nothing impressive—just like Jesus who came to serve, who washed filthy feet at a dinner table—a simple, humble act of service toward the neglected widows. But he said, “Yes” and poured himself into it.

You know, last Sunday when I was sick and Megan was sick and Larry got sick after agreeing to stand in for me... I began to wonder if this was a spiritual attack. I asked the Lord, “Why would this simple text about ordinary spirit-filled believers to doing humble acts of service... why would the devil want to prevent the preaching of such a simple message?” This is what I heard from the Lord. Because our churches numbers are still swelled with those who believe that ministry is done by professionals. Hundreds of us believe that what it means to be a Christian is to show up semi-regularly on Sunday mornings and then go home and leave the “paid Christians” to do the work. But if this church ever grasped the idea that every single one of us is Spirit-filled and gifted to serve the Kingdom in some way—if those of you who make up the 80% in our 80-20 rule ever really understood that the Holy Spirit wants to use you for His purposes—it would revolutionize the ministry of this church.

Too many of us sit back and let too few of us do the work. And I have heard from those who said “No” to a particular job because, candidly, they felt it was beneath them. But Stephen, perhaps the most Spirit-filled man in the early Church, said yes to serving food, and in that context, things exploded. He was supposed to be waiting tables, but we read that he began to do “great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” Imagine: “Here, let me give you some food. Oh, you are sick? Well let me pray for you right now. There, you are healed... and fed!” Up until now, only the Apostles did wonders and signs; suddenly, the Holy Spirit democratized miracles. Plain old table-servers were now serving up Apostle-sized miracles.

When we are filled with the Spirit of Christ—and when we serve like Christ, when we say yes to weeding a church garden or caring for the poor or teaching at Day Camp or any one of a hundred simple, humble, unobtrusive acts of service—God takes that humble service and does extraordinary things.

Stephen teaches me to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, to serve like Christ and finally to look up to Christ. Whatever surrounds you, especially when you find yourself under attack—when your enemies are furious and gnash their teeth and rush at you—do what Stephen did. He looked up! “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” When Peter walked on the water

toward Jesus, it was only when he took his eyes off Christ and put them on the waves around him that he began to sink. We know there will be times of storm and fury and rage... some of that directed at us. Stephen teaches us to live well by looking up!

As our family gathered for the funeral, we heard an update on another tragedy. A year ago, another family member, a high school senior, was killed in an accident. This boy had a daily ritual of driving to Starbucks to get his mom a morning coffee. One April day in 2014 at 7:30 in the morning, he was struck and killed by a drunk traveling at 90 mph. Of course, the whole family was stricken. But the mom especially has been tormented with grief and guilt because it was her coffee he was going for. We found out that every day, still, mom returns to the site of her son's death just to stare at it. She is a believer, yet this loss has paralyzed her and her family.

On one hand, who can blame them? Only those of us who have faced such tragedy can relate to her pain and guilt and grief. Still, as I heard this story, I couldn't help but think of Stephen. How easy, how normal it would have been for him to look down—to look at the faces of his attackers contorted in rage, gnashing their teeth, screaming at him with their hands covering their ears. But somehow, he lifted his eyes above his horrific circumstances and said, "Look, I see Jesus!"

There must come a time when this poor mom lifts her eyes from the site of tragedy and looks to Christ who is the only hope, the only comfort. And how desperately I need to hear this! It is so easy for me to drop my eyes, to stare at my circumstances, to become overwhelmed by what I see. I have fought this all my life. Yet Stephen teaches me—us—that even when we are about to be overrun by the circumstances of life, we lift our chin, we lift our eyes and look to Jesus. Who here today needs desperately to lift their eyes from their struggles and set them upon the Lord? "I see Jesus!"

In some ways, a brutal story of a first-century martyrdom seems so far away, almost irrelevant. But all you need do is remember the pictures we saw in the last two weeks—pictures of ISIS butchers marching 15 Ethiopian Christians along the shoreline of Libya to their execution. All those believers needed to do was deny Christ and they would have lived. But they would not do it. And every one of these—our brothers in Christ—was beheaded. My eyes filled with tears as I looked at the pictures.

And again the question comes to mind: Could I do it? Does the Spirit of Jesus have such a hold on me? I don't know. We don't know. I don't think Stephen knew, either. This is Gig Harbor, not Libya... not Syria. We likely will never find out whether or not we are willing to die for Christ. But the question for us, really, is this: will we live for him? Are we willing to live for Christ in such a way that it prepares us for whatever life might bring?

You know, my favorite verse in this story is a pretty obscure one. Verse 15: "...they saw that his face was like the face of an angel." As he braced himself for what he knew would be a brutal death, they saw, not hatred, not fear... they saw the countenance of Christ. That isn't something you fake. I wonder what the world sees when it looks upon my face—upon yours—especially in times of turmoil? Do they see someone so filled with the Spirit of Jesus that, no matter what we experience, his radiance shines through us?

Holy Spirit, fill me. Make me that kind of man.