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Acts: Full of Grace and Power  
Acts 6:7-15

Good Morning! If this is your first time here worshiping with us, I would just like to say welcome! We are so very glad you are here! Coincidently, this is my first time ever speaking here, so you and I are pretty much in the same boat! And that person sitting next you… it’s the first time they’ve ever heard me speak too. So, don’t feel like you are the odd man out here, honestly none of us have any idea what is going to happen in the next 30 minutes!

Let’s go ahead and get started.  
For those of you who haven’t been here before, or for those of you who have been out traveling most of summer, we are in the book of Acts, we have been for almost a year, we are walking through it verse by verse. I would LOVE to recap for you all that we have learned in the last year, but I tend to be pretty wordy, so I think it is best to just dive right in! Today, we find ourselves in the middle of chapter 6. We are going to start with the verse we left off with last week, and take a look at the big picture Luke paints in verse 7 and then we will zero in on verses 8-15. So please stand and read with me Acts 6:7-15

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.  
9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians (sigh-rih-ee-ins), and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia (Si-lee-see-a) and Asia (A-see-a), rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 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, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 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.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Let’s take just a minute here and pray.

We have spent a fair amount of time in Luke’s two writings (4 years in the Gospel of Luke and now a year in the book of Acts) so many of you are familiar with how he writes. It’s no big surprise then, that in verse 7 he gives us this big picture, 20,000 foot view of what is going on in Jerusalem, and then in the following verses he zero’s in on one particular snapshot of what that bigger picture is describing. This is very characteristics of Luke’s writing.
So let’s take a look at the big picture in verse 7. Luke points out three specific things that had been happening in Jerusalem.

1. The word of God increased - The word of God was being preached more and more in Jerusalem. Last week Lewis walked us through how the 12 disciples in the midst of some growing pains in the church dedicated themselves exclusively to the ministry of the word and to prayer and they elected 7 other men to handle the more administrative tasks, such as the distribution of food among the widows. Because others stepped in to care for the needs of the church, the disciples were able to keep preaching, and the word of God increased. And as the word of God increased…

2. The number of disciples multiplied greatly - we have seen this growth in the church since the very beginning of Acts. This wasn’t a slow and steady wins the race kind of growth. This was rapid growth, surprising growth, growth that caught the attention of everyone around them, including those in authority. And what was perhaps the most surprising about these new followers of Christ, was whom they counted among them.

3. Many priests became obedient to the faith - Don’t overlook this. This is a REALLY big deal! It was one thing for peasants, and fisherman, and outcasts to believe Jesus was some kind of Messiah, but quite another for Jewish priests to become obedient to the faith! Scholars estimate it took approximately 18,000 priests and Levites to operate the temple. The majority of these priests lived in the countryside of Judea and Galilee, and came to the temple to serve for one week, two times a year, and then again to help during the 3 annual festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of the Tabernacle). The fact that MANY of the priests were “defecting” from Jewish tradition and becoming obedient to the very man they had killed, was more than alarming to the Jewish leaders. It was a detriment to the very operation of the temple. The Jewish leaders thought they had this all under control when they killed Jesus, but they didn’t. And now, they could no longer constrain what was happening, even priests were converting. This sense of loss, this impending doom, is what was behind the panic and fear that led the Jewish leaders to take such a drastic stand against the followers of Christ. And we see one example of this drastic, fear- based, stand in the rest of chapter 6 and continued in chapter 7.

We first met Stephen last week in the early part of chapter 6, he was one of the seven men elected as a deacon in the new church. We know from verse 3, that he was “of good repute, full of Spirit and wisdom.” Verse 5 tells us, he was “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” and verse 8 describes him as “full of grace and power.” He was the first person who was NOT an apostle to be recorded as “doing great wonders and signs.” Stephen was not an apostle, not an elder in the church, not one of the pastors, he was a newly elected lay leader, someone just like you and me, yet he had the same power and did the same signs and wonders as Christ himself. He was so much more than a simple believer. Stephen was a devoted, obedient, walk-in-the-very-footsteps-of, follower of Christ. He was full of wisdom, grace and power, the type of model disciple we should all aspire to be. How did he become all that?

Now, if you are familiar with the biblical narrative, you know how this ends for Stephen. You know exactly where being this amazing, model, disciple of Christ gets him. And if you are not familiar with this story, ah, spoiler alert: Stephen dies. That is probably, what he is most known for. He is the first Christian martyr. In the very next chapter, which, let’s be honest, will probably take Pastor Jim 3 months to get through, Stephen will give his defense and will almost immediately be murdered. He is stoned for his faith in, devotion to, and explanation of exactly
who Jesus of Nazareth is. His stoning launches huge persecution against Christians in Jerusalem, instigating the church to scatter into Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth just like Jesus said they would in Acts 1:8. In wasn’t just Stephen’s defense and stoning that caused this. That is just a snapshot of all the things that were happening in verse 7. It was the word of God increasing, the number of disciples multiplying greatly, and priests becoming obedient to the faith. All this drove the Jewish leaders to drastic measures and caused the church to scatter. BUT, before we talk about Stephen death, we need to talk about his life.

Today we are looking at how Stephen got to that point. What must have happened inside of him to make him the person we read about in Acts chapter 6, a man full of wisdom, grace and power? Was he just some super-Christian the rest of us could never dream of becoming? Or was there something else going on, something even bigger than a man willing to die for what he believed in? Let’s take a closer look.

As Stephen, a man full of grace and power, goes around doing great wonders and signs, he draws the attention of a lot of people. Some of these people from the synagogue of the Freedman, a group of people who were former slaves and are now independent and free. Real quick, a synagogue, if you remember, is not the same thing as the temple. The temple was the pinnacle of religious life, the very heart of Jewish worship, ritual and emotion. The temple was a symbol of their very identity. They believed the temple was the only place on earth where the very presence of God dwelt, here and ONLY here was forgiveness possible (with the proper sacrifice of course).

A synagogue was the place of instruction, worship, prayer, and the reading of Scripture, but not the dwelling place of God, not a place for sacrifice, and not a place where someone could receive forgiveness. There were lots of synagogues, but only one temple. In Matt 9:35 (and really all over the gospels) it says, “Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues...”. So this synagogue of Freedman was one of many synagogues.

Stephen also drew the attention of people from Cyrene, from Alexandria, from Cilicia and Asia (A-cee-a). Why? These four cities are from four very different areas of the Roman Kingdom (Northern Africa, Egypt, Southeast Asia Minor and western Asia Minor), how is it that all these people from different areas were all in Jerusalem at the same time and even bothered to notice some lay leader in the church named Stephen? The scripture doesn’t explain this directly, however, we can make some educated inferences here. The only reason all these different people would have been in Jerusalem at the same time was if it was during a festival.

According to Donald Kraybill author of the great book *The Upside Down Kingdom*, during festival time, the population in Jerusalem rose from 25,000 up to 180,000 people. The temple called in all 18,000 of their priests to serve, but remember THIS year, that would have looked different, because “a great many of the priests” had become obedient to the faith. These were their friends, their colleagues, their fellow leaders. And all the sudden they were giving up their jobs in the temple to follow some carpenter named Jesus whom they had had killed, and now his followers were performing miracles and healing and preaching all in Jesus name! What was going on! And what was going to happen to the temple? The temple was the center of their very economy, #1 financial industry in all of Israel. It’s treasury was The National Bank of Israel.
What was going on in Jerusalem, that even priest were becoming obedient followers of Jesus? And then there is this guy, in the street, doing great wonders and signs and more and more people are listening and paying attention, and becoming obedient. They couldn’t just stand there and let the very infrastructure of the Jewish faith collapse! They would lose everything!

So they challenged Stephen, and they disputed with him. But there was something about this guy. He spoke with a wisdom and a power and a Spirit they could not withstand. So they did the only thing they could think of. They found some people to lie for them. And they got the elders and scribes and those still devoted to the temple to arrest him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin. A 70 member council which consisted of the high priest as it’s president, the chief priests, scribes and Jewish nobility, The Sanhedrin was the final authority in religious, political and civil matters for the Jewish people. And before this council Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemy against Moses, against God, against the Temple and against the law. These are some very significant accusations.

According to scholar N.T. Wright there were four key symbol of Judaism
The Law
The Holy Land, primarily Jerusalem
The Temple
Their Nationality or ethnic identity
God had given his chosen people, these 4 specific symbols and for centuries they represented the very identity of the Jewish people. And despite whatever the reality of Israels’s faithfulness to God and obedience to these things might be, they were treasures to the Jewish people. To attack them, or speak blasphemy against them, was reprehensible. The accusations against Stephen touched on all 4 of the symbols of Jewish faith.

We have no way of knowing exactly what Stephen said. Verse 13 tells us they set up false witnesses against him, but we also know that the charges probably aren't entirely without substance. Stephen was a devoted and obedient follower of Christ, it is safe to assume he shared a message very similar to Jesus own words. And we know that in Luke 21 Jesus did prophesy the destruction of the Temple, in Matthew 9:6 he claimed the Son of Man had the authority to forgive sins. And in Matthew 16:27 he said the Son of Man would come with his angels in judgement. Jesus had an abundance of "You have heard it said / but I say to you" moments that seemingly run contrary to Mosaic law. So, perhaps, in the strictest sense the charges are valid. But there is no doubt that the truth of the message was buried under false accusations based out of fear of great loss and panic on the part of the leaders.

Whatever Stephen did or did not say, he found himself standing before the Sanhedrin. Remember, Stephen was a relatively new leader in the church, without a whole lot of experience. It would be reasonable to think that Stephen - facing the animosity of the 70 people in the council, watching and listening as people give false testimony against him, in full knowledge that not all that long ago his friends and mentors were imprisoned and flogged - must have assumed he was about to get the same treatment, if not much worse. It would be reasonable to think that Stephen would be terrified! Surely, he was shaking in his sandals. I would be, wouldn’t you? He must have known this wasn’t going to end well for him. Stephen must have known he was about to lose everything Yet, when the council looked at him, he had the face of an angel.
How?
How, in the midst what had to be a terrifying encounter, at the brink of losing his very life, did Stephen stand there, calm and serene with the face of an angel? Do you feel the tension here? The Jewish leaders feared losing everything, so they lied, accused and manipulated. Stephen faced a situation in which that best case scenario was he would be beaten, flogged, and imprisoned. Yet, he wasn’t worried. He didn’t appear scared, he didn’t change his story, retract his statement or even agree to just keep his faith private and to himself.

What are you afraid of losing? What keeps you up at night? What raises your blood pressure or elevates your heart rate? Maybe it’s not death, maybe it’s a sickness or a painful illness. Maybe you live in fear of losing your spouse or a child. Maybe you’re terrified of losing a job, security, position or status. Maybe you’re afraid your retirement will be washed away in the blink of an eye. Maybe you live in fear for what will happen to America in the coming years. How many of you stay up at night thinking, “What if...?” Think of that loss, feel your heart rate increase, and then picture yourself standing before it with the face of an angel. Can you do it? Do you feel the same tension I do. It is SO hard!

How did Stephen do it? How did he get here?

Here is what I think?
I think as Stephen stood in front of the Sanhedrin that day, with the lies and accusations and the animosity all around him, facing what to so many people would be their biggest fear, I think he had no fear what so ever.

I think Stephen had no fear of death or of losing anything.

I think Stephen had already died, long before he ever stepped foot in front of the Sanhedrin, long before the first stone was ever throne.

I don’t think Stephen stories ends with his death, I think his story begins with his death, his spiritual death.

At some point, Stephen, like so many others we read about in the book of Acts, was cut to the heart. And he repented and he died to himself and became a new creation in Christ. That’s what made him a man of repute, full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, grace and power. Do you see the paradox? FIRST he dies, THEN he lives, really lives, with no fear of loss, no panic, no anxiety, and THEN comes his physical death.

It was this spiritual death, this emptying of himself, that allowed Stephen to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that he could let go of any earthly fear and live fully for Christ. It is his spiritual death that led to a life lived so fully for Christ that no fear physical death could ever hold him down.

I don’t know when this spiritual death happened in Stephen, maybe he was there on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came. Maybe, he was one of the 3000 who heard Peter’s first
sermon and was cut to the heart and cried out, “What should I do?” And when Peter said, “repent and be baptized” Stephen did! Whenever it happened, rest assured that it DID happen. You cannot be this full of the Holy Spirit without an emptying of yourself. That is becoming a new creation in Christ.

Don’t think for a second that this was easy. This type of Spiritual death, this dying to self, and to the world, and letting go of all those things that you hold so tightly to (family, security, status, health), it is not easy. It is the hardest, scariest, most difficult thing you will ever do. Spiritual death is far more difficult and far more scary than any physical death. But it is only after THIS kind of death that you can stand tall and declare boldly “whom shall I fear?” Paul tells us in 2 Tim 1:7 “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” But it is only after we can die to ourselves that we are able to receive fully this fearless spirit of grace and power.

Look, if your hope, your very life is in your family, your job, your 401k, or your possessions, if that is what helps you sleep at night, then you are probably feeling a lot of tension right now. Please don’t think I am standing here telling you that God wants to take those things away from you, he doesn’t. Those are all good gifts that God has given us, and he has no desire to take them from you, he simply wants to free you from the fear of losing them. This is not a list of what God wants to take FROM you but what he wants FOR you. He wants you to be free from having any of these things so define you, that the fear of losing them paralyzes you. He wants you to be able to do ALL things for His glory and to further his kingdom without living in fear of the consequences of what might happen if you did. He wants you to have a peace that passes all understanding in all circumstances. He wants to give you HIS peace. He wants you to, in the midst of what for everyone else would be overwhelming situation, to have, like Stephen had, the face of an angel.

Honestly, this kind of death to self and life in the Spirit is not just a choice you make. We simply are not capable of dying to ourselves like this on our own. It can and will ONLY come through the Holy Spirit, being cut to the heart and repenting and the Holy Spirit living inside you. It is only ever through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can become a new creation in Christ.

At some point, we all have to face our worst fears. Everyone of us, at one time or another, will stand at the precipice of great loss, what will you do? Will you like, the Jewish authorities, throw out accusations, manipulate the truth and strike out against others. OR will you, like Stephen, allow the Holy Spirit to fill you full of grace and power so that you can face whatever may come.

If this release from fear of loss is something that you long for, something you desperately desire, then don’t hesitate to ask God for it. He is a good, good father, who gives generously his Spirit and his love. Ask and you will receive. Let yourself be cut to the heart, repent, and ask for His Holy Spirit to come dwell in you. And Scripture tells us he will. For me, this has not been a one time and done prayer. I continually, daily, moment by moment have to empty myself and fill up on the Holy Spirit. I find myself asking over and over again for less of me and more of him. And when that is truly my hearts desire, he is faithful every time.
But if this story, this idea of completely dying to self, so that you can fully live, leaves you with a tension that you just can’t reconcile that’s ok. You need that tension. Sit in that tension. Go home and meditate on that tension. How did Stephen stand there like that? Because that tension will be there until, through the Holy Spirit, you are able to die the kind of Spiritual death Stephen did, the kind of death that leaves you, full of grace and power. Let’s pray.