

050723 "Stephen filled with the Holy Spirit" Acts 7:55-60

As the Early Church grew, the number of Christians increased and ministry expanded such that the apostles could not care for it all. In the early days of the Church, Christians pooled their resources and shared the common wealth. Supporting widows and orphans was an important task. To do this, they distributed food daily. This soon led to problems. Some people were getting more than others.

Long story short, to ease their burden, the apostles called seven men of good repute to be chosen as deacons to help the apostles in their work including distributing the food. Just like pastors and laity are working together today. Stephen was one of them. Luke, author of the book of Acts, describes him as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 6:5)

As the number of Christians in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith, opposition arose. Some Jews began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Since they lost their argument with Stephen, they came up with a plan to try to get Stephen in trouble. So, they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. Finally, they seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin (a council of religious leaders).

Taken before the Sanhedrin, Stephen stood before a courtroom full of people determined to end the shock wave of Christ's resurrection. He endured a trial supported by false witnesses and fabricated stories.

The high priest asked Stephen if the things he was being accused of were true. Standing before them, Stephen answered him by giving a history lesson of God's work in the lives of His people. He said that Jews throughout history have rejected God's servants. He began with Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and eventually the idolatry of Israel. They were prone to put their hope in their promised land instead of the God who created it. They were prone to put their hope in their house of worship instead of the intended object of worship. They were prone to put their hope in their law instead of the God who handed it down.

But as you read Stephen's sermon, he mapped out not only Israel's rebellions but also God's remarkable faithfulness. The Israelites may have rejected their human leader as they wandered in the wilderness, but God never did. God never has. God never will.

Stephen goes on to say: Our hope is built on the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ alone – not land, or temple, or laws.

The important thing to remember is that there are temples and synagogues everywhere these days. There is not a Jewish community in the world that doesn't have a synagogue, and many of them are called temples. In this period, however, we should always remember that there was only one Temple and that's the one Temple in Jerusalem.

You probably remember that Jesus said not to turn the temple of God into a den of robbers. At that time, men living throughout Israel had to visit the Jerusalem temple and offer sacrifices three times a year. The pilgrimage to the Jerusalem Temple was also a sacred duty for the Diaspora Jews who lived scattered all over the world. If so, the expense that millions of Jews visit Jerusalem every year to stay there and to offer sacrifices was truly enormous. It was the income of the people of Jerusalem. At that time, many people had their interests intertwined through the temple. The meaning of sacrifice in the temple had long since disappeared.

The Jewish leaders may have covered their ears and tried not to listen, but they could not change the truth that Stephen died telling. God is faithful. God was with Stephen that day, and God is with us now.

Jesus himself declared that the kingdom of God is at hand. When people were concerned only with the land, the temple, and the law, Jesus emphasized the true meaning behind them: God and the kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God comes in simple ways. Once Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). The people of the day were expecting some great event

where God would break through into the world, but Jesus told them it was much simpler than that. The kingdom of God was within them. It was also all around them, but they couldn't see it.

A definition for the kingdom of God would be, "The place where God reigns." So when you allow God to reign and rule in your life, the kingdom of God is within you. Sometimes when you can only think of the Kingdom of God coming in a dramatic/holy/mystical way, you miss the simple ways that God is at work. When you only think of what God is going to do in the future, you miss what God is doing in the present moment. If you only think about Jesus' second coming, you miss the fact that he has already come, **and he is here now**. If you only think about being with God in heaven, you miss being with him now. If you only think about heaven being "out there," or "up there," you miss experiencing heaven on earth.

C. H. Spurgeon...said: "When God forgives our sins, there's more forgiveness to follow. He justifies us in the righteousness of Christ, but there's more to follow. He adopts us into His family, but there's more to follow. He prepares us for heaven, but there's more to follow. He gives us grace, but there's more to follow. He helps us to old age, but there's still more to follow...Even when we arrive in the world to come, there will still be **more to follow**."

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16) Looking back, we see God's grace and forgiveness. There will still be more to follow. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, with your family, with your business, with your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.