**Study Notes on Acts 6:8-15**

*By Joshua M. Weidmann*

*Saturday, August 16, 2014*

NOTE: These notes are not intended to read as an article or well-rounded written work. Rather, this is a collage of different research and resources that will assist in the preparation of a sermon.

**Working Title**: When All Else Fails: Obtaining Unfaltering Faith in Christ

**Summary of the Passage**: Stephen is arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin because he is speaking trough about Christ and the fulfillment of the law. This is the scene before he gives his final sermon and is stoned.

**Outline of the passage:**

1. Stephen was doing many signs and wonders in the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 8)
2. The Jewish leaders from all over were upset with what he was doing, so they disputed with him but couldn’t win (vv. 9-10)
3. The leaders tried to falsely accuse him of speaking against the Law and the temple (vv. 11-14)
4. God gave visual proof that Stephen was steadfast on God and God was with him (v. 15)

**The Main Point of the Passage:**

**Exegetical Idea**: Luke is showing Stephen’s steadfastness in the face of opposition and the way that he stays true to God’s word and is vindicated by God.

**Theological Idea**: God never lies and will always allow his truth to prevail; He will give peace in the face of opposition when our faith is firm in his sovereignty.

**Applicational Idea**: “God will fight for you, you need only be still” in Christ and the access we have to God through Him.

**Possible Preaching Outline**:

MAIN: The lord will fight for you, you need only be still. (Ex 14:14)

Sub point 1: When we stand for truth, God is on our side

When we stand for truth, we are on God’s side

Sub point 2: We are granted access to God by having the temple destroyed

Sub point 3: No matter the outcome, God is still God. “But Stephen died, so God didn’t protect him.” No, He did use him greatly and the outcome is God’s to determine.

**CONTEXT BEFORE AND AFTER THIS PASSAGE:**

Before this passage we see the Apostles in over their heads with the care of the people in the early church. They decided to stay dedicated to prayer and the preaching of God’s Word and in doing so they appoint 7 Hellenistic Jews to care for the people.

After this passage we see Stephen’s sermon and then his death and stoning.

**Exegesis and Commentary:**

Introduction:

At this time, the apostles and the early Christians were now challenging the early Christians. Stephen would have been a Greek-speaking Christian, and he was now challenging the Greek-speaking Jews. The Hebrew-Jews would not have been happy with him either. They were accusing him of speaking against Moses and God. They were mad that he was still challenging the Jewish law and saying that Jesus was going to change the law and destroy the temple.

The Greek word for “witness” is *martys*, which came to be associated with witnessing to the point of death, from which the word “martyr” derives. Stephen became the first such “ultimate” witness in the early church (c. a.d. 31/34).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Stephen was the first listed of the seven Hellenists selected to minister to the widows (v. 5). Like the apostles, he not only ministered to the needy but was primarily concerned with the ministry of the Word.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**[8] And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.**

The idea here that he was **full of grace and power** is probably meant to bring a parallel to the Apostle’s power in the Holy Spirit.

There were seven that were appointed by the apostles in verse 3 of chapter 6. These men were in addition to the apostles to do God’s work of building the early church, calling people to faith and taking care of needs. We Stephen fulfilling this calling in this passage.

We are not sure what being “full of grace” meant or looked like by looking at other passages, but we can image that it means that he understood the grace of Christ. Therefore, he was able to be gracious with other people. There was a “Graciousness in the power of God” that he conveyed to others.

The power of God in his life was confirmed by the **great signs and wonders** that he was able to perform. We see that God always used signs as a sort of confirmation to His working in people – both old and New Testament. Stephen was the first person outside of the Apostles to be mentioned as doing signs and wonders in the Holy Spirit’s power.

**But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

**(Acts 1:8 ESV)**

[**9] Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.**

This passage is setting the context that Stephen was experiencing – the “who” and the “Where.” He was teaching in one of the many synagogues in Jerusalem. This particular synagogue was visited by people from several different places:

* **The synagogue of the freedmen** was made up of people from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia.
  + **Freedmen** were former slaves who had been released by their owners.
  + **Freedmen could have also been prisoners** that were free, or their family.
  + **They were captured during Pompey’s conquest to Judea in 63 B.C.** and then were released to live free in Rome or as Greek citizens
  + **They would have been Greek citizens** though from other origins. Their faith would have been Jewish.
* **Cilica** was the synagogue from the city of Cilica. This may have been where Paul (Saul at that time) was from.
* **Asia** was also mentioned here, which mean that it would have been pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem from there.

The teaching that Stephen was doing was posing a lot of question and conflict. We don’t know the exact topic, but it could have been a few things:

* If he had attacked the scribal forms of the law, they would have seen this as an attack on Moses.
* If he was attacking the way they Jews were tying the Temple to the presence of God, he could have been challenging that and how they can now have access to God through Jesus Christ.

Without a doubt, he was probably following the form of the Apostles and expounding on the implications of the Messiah-ship found in Christ.

**[10] But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking**.

No matter the subject, Stephen was making great impact and God was with Him. They were hearing his words and they were articulate, spirit-led and laced with wisdom. Most likely the accepted the premise of what he was presenting (from the OT) but they could not accept his conclusion.

Jesus had promised the help of the Holy Spirit in **Luke 12:11-12, “[11] And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, [12] for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”**

He also promised that they (we) would have wisdom in **Luke 21:12-15, “[12] But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. [13] This will be your opportunity to bear witness. [14] Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, [15] for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”**

There seemed to be no way to win with Stephen. His case was too strong and they could not argue, so the resulted to tools of manipulation and lies to try to accuse him. They did the same thing with Christ.

**[11] Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”**

They had hired or wheeled power to get people to say that he was speaking blasphemy against God and Moses. They probably used this line of attack—that he was against Moses and God—because:

1. An incitement against Moses would be easy to accuse him of if he was speaking about the Law
2. An challenge to the temple order could easily be played off as a challenge to God authority and the order of national worship

**Secretly instigated** (Gk. *hypoballō*) implies putting words in someone’s mouth or making false suggestions.

**Blasphemy** was the profane use of Israel’s God. This could be the utterance of his name on the day of atonement but it was used here in a wider sense. They are saying that he used the language of God as it related to the temple in the wrong way by relating it to Jesus.

**[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,**

The instigators did their job well. Now the Sanhedrin was all stirred up and ready to take Stephen out. They moved quickly to arrest him and take him out. This was not going to end well for Stephen.

I have to wonder if he was nervous or scared at this point. I know that he trusted God, but thing were seemingly more heated than they had been before. He knew that they were bring people to speak against him. We are minutes away from him being stoned to death, so the tension was probably so thick you could cut it.

The idea of him challenging the oral and written law was something they all would have agreed was punishable by death.

The idea of his talking about the Temple being destroyed and rebuilt would have been familiar to all present because Jesus had said the same thing. We know how that ended, and certainly the same thing was about to happen to Stephen – punishment of death.

What Stephen was saying was not just a threat to the religious leader’s beliefs, but also their identity and livelihood. The economic life of the city and its residence depended on the temple and those visiting it. The leaders would have known that it was going to be easy to convince everyone that Stephen was wrong because of the way they would be impacted by what he was saying. He was truly speaking counter culturally.

**[13] and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,**

Luke is pointing out that they were “false” witnesses set up against him. He knew that they were false because of what is clear in chapter 7, in Stephen’s next longest speech.

**The witnesses** gave their account that Stephen was threatening both the temple—“The Holy Place”— and the Law (of Moses). He continued to say that Jesus of Nazareth was going to tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days.

What Luke meant when he called the instigators “False witnesses” was that the witnesses were putting a false turn to a true statement. It is true that Stephen was saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change some of the customs of Moses. But it is not true that this was "against this holy place and the law," or, as verse 11 says, that this was "blasphemous words against Moses and God."

What the false witnesses did not grasp at all was that the kind of destroying that Jesus was doing was a fulfilling of everything that God and Moses promised in the law—the forgiveness of sins, a personal priestly advocate with God, the presence and accessibility of his glory. Stephen was not against Moses and God. He was not against the temple and the customs. He was for their fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is a bit confusing as to why Stephen would have mentioned this again, being that the death and resurrection had already happened – meaning that the “temple” was destroyed and rebuilt. But the implications of this already happening would have meant that the temple period was coming to an end. We now have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. He was implying that the actually destroying and rebuilding was done but the dismantling of the temple practices and dependence upon the law was going to be a process. It required embracing Christ and letting go our own efforts of righteousness.

Two weeks ago when Mike talked about “A great many priests were obedient in faith” meant that they had believed and were now out of a job. This was happening as Christianity spread and more of them understood that Jesus was the new high priest.

The use of false witnesses is reminiscent of what happened at Jesus’ trial (Matt. 26:59–60) and confirms Jesus’ prediction that his followers would be persecuted as he was (John 15:18–21).

Jesus himself had said that something greater than the temple had come:

**[1] At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. [2] But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” [3] He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: [4] how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? [5] Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? [6] I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. [7] And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. [8] For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”**

**(Matthew 12:1-8 ESV)**

**[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.”**

*We could easily ask, why does this Jewish debate about the temple really matter to us?* Consider this first:

1. Stephen died for the truth that is in this passage. Think of this as a brother in Christ and if I told you that someone you knew, who was a part of the same church and believed in Christ died for saying something, you would want to hear what that something was. I low how Jonh Piper said, “It is at least 10,000 times more important for your life than NCAA Basketball” and certainly you’ve cared a lot about sports, so you need to care a lot more about this.
   1. He saw the temple and the law as something that was vital to the understanding of the gospel for all men, but especially the Jews in his context.
2. The Jewish leaders of the past killed for this truth. We study WWII a lot and what to know why the Jews were killed – not to mention any other type of conflict, be it in AL or in Iraq. SO understand that there was great conflict over this and the Jewish leaders saw it fit to kill— Jesus and others over this.
3. We can rest assured that God and original writer of this book of Acts, Luke Himself, saw this as a vital thing for us to understand because he give all of chapter 7 to Stephen’s defense of what they were accusing him of. This is the single longest speech recorder for us in the book of Acts. Sermon on the mount is the only longer sermon recorded in Matt.

*Possible Sermon Illustration: Longest sermon ever preached: A vicar has talked his way into the Guinness Book of Records by delivering the longest non-stop sermon.*

*The Reverend Chris Sterry, vicar at Whalley in Lancashire, has broken the previous record for an unscripted speech of 27 hours and 30 minutes.*

*But he intends to carry on with his marathon sermon at the parish church for 36 hours ending at 0630BST on Saturday.*

*He hopes his preaching will raise £2,000 for church funds.*

*The 46-year-old vicar is not allowed to repeat himself, talk nonsense, and is not allowed to pause for more than 10 seconds.*

*He can take a break of 15 minutes every eight hours.*

*Two referees working four-hour shifts are ensuring that the rules are observed.*

*Mr Sterry warned that parishioners might have to turn away while he uses his "pulpit potty".*

***Fatigue fought***

*He has not slept but fights fatigue by drinking caffeine-filled drinks.*

*He also sips orange juice and sucks throat lozenges to soothe his vocal chords.*

*Mr Sterry began preaching on the Book of Genesis.*

*Before the sermon began he said: "As a former lecturer on the Old Testament I am looking forward to unlimited opportunity to talk about one of my great enthusiasms."*

*A spokesman said he was in good spirits.*

*"There were more than 100 people in church when he broke the record and if he looks like he's about to drop off, they heckle him," he said.*

Let’s look for a moment at what Jesus said about tearing down the temple. Matthew 26:61 and Mark 14:58 tell us that at Jesus' trial false witnesses came forward and said, "This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days." When the high priest asked him to make an answer to the charge, Jesus said nothing.

Matthew 27:40 and Mark 15:29 tell us that the crowds who passed by the cross while Jesus was dying mocked Jesus by saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from this cross."

Most importantly, John 2:19 tells us about one situation when Jesus actually spoke words like these. He had just driven the sellers out of the temple. And the Jews asked him, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" And Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They come back, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" And John comments, "But he spoke of the temple of his body" (John 2:21).

Here Jesus says, "You destroy the temple, and I will build it again in three days." But since we know that destroying the temple referred to his death and we also know (from John 10:18) that he was laying down his own life voluntarily, it is very likely that he would also say, "I will destroy this temple, and in three days build it again"—which is what he was accused of saying.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus said these things in the temple, which no doubt would have caused confusion. Most likely, this was for those in the temple but also for those who would make sense of it after his death (like Stephen). He was saying that when he is destroyed and then risen again, he is making a way for God and there is no need for temple sacrifice. He was trying to make it clear that they were no longer saved on their righteous acts, or the sacrifice of animals but purely on the righteousness of Christ and his perfect sacrifice.

Jesus became our one and only high priest who lives forever to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). So the temple priesthood was "destroyed." Jesus offered himself and his own blood once for all to make an eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12, 25–28; 10:10–12). So all the animal sacrifices of the temple are "destroyed."[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Do you remember that the curtain was torn at the crucifixion?** That was a clear sign, or symbol, that there was nothing between God and man any longer. In Christ we are given direct access to God.

John the apostle has a vision of heaven in **Revelation 21:22–23, he says, "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb."**

Piper on Jesus Destroying the Temple:

***“Jesus destroyed the temple the way the rising sun destroys the need for streetlights and headlights. He destroyed the temple the way a descending reality destroys its shadow****.*

*If the Messiah is coming down from heaven, with forgiveness and advocacy and glory, and the light of God shining upon him, then the first thing that will be seen is his shadow on the earth. And so it was in the sacrifices and priestly service of the old temple. But* ***as the reality gets closer the shadow becomes smaller, and when the reality lands on its shadow, it swallows it up entirely and it is no more. But that does not mean that the reality was against the shadow, or that it blasphemed the shadow. It fulfilled the shadow. And in that sense destroyed the shadow.***

*And so today we have the reality. Jesus Christ has come into the world to forgive sins once and for all, to be our go-between forever and ever, and to reveal the glory of God.*

***This is what Stephen died for. May God help us to see it the way he saw it, and cherish Jesus our new temple more than anything in the world.”***

**[15] And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**

**The face of an angel** is a rare phrase in the New Testament. This is the description of a person who is close to God and reflects some of his glory as a result of being in his presence (Ex 34:29).[[6]](#footnote-6)

**[29] When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain; Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. - Exodus 34:29 ESV**

This had happened to Paul too. Imagine these battered and gauntly looking men now having the face of an angel. There are no words to imagine what they really saw.

There was apparently a visible manifestation of the brightness of the glory of God on Stephen’s face, which was a gift of God to show his vindication of uprightness in front of all present.

1. ESV Study Bible [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Piper, John, http://www.esvbible.org/resources/piper-sermons/article-stephen-s-crime-jesus-will-destroy-the-temple-/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Piper, John, http://www.esvbible.org/resources/piper-sermons/article-stephen-s-crime-jesus-will-destroy-the-temple-/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Morris, Leon, “Acts” *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries,* Intervarsity Press, Grand Rapids, 1980 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)