

19. The Lord Worked Through New Leadership

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn how to develop priorities in their lives. We saw that the apostles realized that their two most important priorities were prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. Those are the two most important priorities of any godly leader. As a result, we saw that the Twelve delegated the responsibility for distributing the food to the Hellenistic widows to seven men who all had Greek names. We also saw that the church grew as a result of selecting additional leaders. In the next few topics, we will see how the Lord worked through these new leaders as they did much more than just care for the widows.

Acts 6:8-10 says, “And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.” In Acts 6:5, we see that Stephen is described as, “A man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” Here, we are reminded that He was a man full of faith. We also see that He was full of power because of the fact that He was depending on the power of the Holy Spirit and not his own strength.

The Holy Spirit gave Stephen power to do great wonders and signs among the people. In Acts 5:12, we read, “And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch.” This verse shows that the Holy Spirit gave the apostles power to do many signs and wonders among the people. Here, and then in Acts 8, we see that at least two of these seven new leaders who were Greek-speaking Jews were also given power to do wonders and signs. In this chapter, we read about Stephen being given the power to do these signs and wonders. In Acts 8, it will be Philip who does signs and wonders through the Holy Spirit.

The fact that Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew caused the Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen to dispute with Stephen. The word translated “disputed” means *to examine by formal discussion or debate*. Here, we see that the men in this synagogue were trying to examine the teaching of Stephen with questions. Later, Saul (Paul) would come back to this same synagogue to discuss the teaching about the death and resurrection of Christ with these same men. Acts 9:29 says, “And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him.” The Synagogue of the Freedmen was a synagogue where Greek-speaking Jews gathered together to worship God but they rejected the message of the resurrection of Christ.

At this point in time, Saul was one of the men that attended the Synagogue of the Freedmen, as we see in Acts 7:57-58, “Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” However, we see that even with someone like Saul in the synagogue the men of the synagogue could not resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which Stephen spoke. 1 Corinthians 2:13-14 says, “These things we also speak, not in words

which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.” Stephen depended on the wisdom that the Holy Spirit gives and the men could not resist that wisdom.

Since the men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen could not resist the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke, they chose to try and get rid of Stephen. Acts 6:11-12 says, “Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council.” The word translated “secretly induced” means *to instruct a person privately to give false witness in a trial or to commit a crime*. Here, we see that they instructed several men to give false witness and accuse Stephen of blasphemy.

These false witnesses agreed to say that they had heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses (the Old Testament law) and against God. We see that Jezebel had used this same method many hundreds of years earlier to get Naboth stoned to death. 1 Kings 21:10-13 describes the false charge that Jezebel told the elders of the city of Jezreel to make against Naboth. Those verses say, “‘And seat two men, scoundrels, before him to bear witness against him, saying, “You have blasphemed God and the king.” Then take him out, and stone him, that he may die.’ So the men of his city, the elders and nobles who were inhabitants of his city, did as Jezebel had sent to them, as it *was* written in the letters which she had sent to them. They proclaimed a fast, and seated Naboth with high honor among the people. And two men, scoundrels, came in and sat before him; and the scoundrels witnessed against him, against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, ‘Naboth has blasphemed God and the king!’ Then they took him outside the city and stoned him with stones, so that he died.” Here, we see that the men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen decided to do a similar thing.

In order to carry out their plan, these false witnesses were told to stir up the people, the elders and the scribes by making these false charges. Then, the people came and seized Stephen and brought him to the council (the Sanhedrin). This was a very serious charge because Leviticus 24:16 says, “‘And whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name *of the Lord*, he shall be put to death.’” Here, we see that the men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen were so angry with the wisdom of Stephen that they were willing to make false charges against him in order to give them permission to stone him to death.

The Council or Sanhedrin could not answer the words of Peter when the man who was born crippled had been healed. They had no evidence to condemn the apostles the second time they were brought before the Sanhedrin and so all they were able to do was to give them a beating. However, now the Jewish religious leaders had to be concerned about more than just the apostles who had been with Christ. Now, they were even more upset because these were Greek-speaking Jews that had not known Christ. Instead, these Jews had become followers of Christ because of the preaching of the early church.

As a result, the Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen decided that the only way to stop Stephen was to use false witnesses as the religious leaders had done at the trial of Christ. Matthew 26:59-61 says, “Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two 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.’” We see that those who are in total rebellion against Christ are willing to do anything to try and stop the preaching about Christ.

In Acts 6:13-14, the false witnesses said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.” Here, we see that these false charges are similar to the charges made against Christ. They accused Stephen of continually speaking blasphemous words against the temple. The words that Christ had actually spoken and which had probably been repeated by many Christians are given for us in John 2:19-21 where we read, “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.” Here, we see that Christ was actually predicting His death. Peter explained that those who are not Christians twisted the words of Paul to their own destruction. 2 Peter 3:16 says, “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures.” The religious leaders of the Jews also twisted the words of Christ.

The false witnesses accused Stephen by saying that he taught that Jesus would change the customs that Moses had delivered to them. Matthew 5:17-18 records the words that Christ actually spoke when those verses say, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” Here, we see that the words of these false witnesses actually showed that they lacked spiritual understanding.

As the Sanhedrin watched Stephen, while the false witnesses were speaking against him, they were forced to see his face. They saw that his face was as the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15) The faces of the angels reflect the glory of the Lord. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.” Here, we see that it is possible for any Christian to reflect the glory of the Lord as we are being transformed into the image of Christ. One of the key things that we want to do is help our physical and spiritual children become transformed into the image of Christ so that their lives will also reflect the glory of the Lord. One of the things that has a great impact on the world is the presence and peace of Christ reflected in our appearance. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to reflect the glory of Christ.