

# ACTS

## OF THE APOSTLES

# NOTES 22

## ACTS 6:8-15

### FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

After the Seven had been appointed to serve the widows of the Hellenistic Jews, Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,” was doing signs and wonders and was witnessing of Christ to his fellow Hellenistic Jews. They became angry, however, and jealous, and they began to persecute and misrepresent him.

Their anger, however, was not actually toward Stephen, although they probably couldn’t have identified that fact. They were reacting to the power of God. Stephen was actually living out the promise of Jesus to His followers, and the Jews were angry.

Just before He ascended, Jesus had said to his apostles, “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.”

Stephen was living out the fulfillment of that promise. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he was doing signs, wonders, and powerful preaching. These signs and wonders, however, were for a specific purpose. To be sure, they were God’s blessing on humanity, but even more importantly, they were markers of the authenticity of the apostles’ witness and of the power over the natural world that God had imparted to His apostles.

In John 4:48 we find this story: “So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.”

This story reveals at least two things. First, Jesus acknowledged that the signs and wonders God did through Him (and subsequently through His followers) actually did cause people to believe in Him. To those with receptive hearts, it was clear that the power behind these miracles was from God, and they were compelled to believe. Even more, however, Jesus was saying that saving faith had to be more than a response to signs and wonders. True saving faith could occur

without any visible sign, as the official demonstrated. He did not ask Jesus to heal his son before he would believe; rather, he asked Jesus to come and heal his child because he knew Jesus could do so. He believed Jesus before the child was healed.

Signs and wonders, as the gospels and Acts demonstrate, were intended to prove that Jesus’ power came from God, and God gave men His power to demonstrate His authority over all the created world. Signs and wonders were a way of identifying the Lord God and His gospel before a pagan and unbelieving world. Nevertheless, Jesus made it clear that faith in Him and the One who sent Him was what God desired, and this faith was not necessarily tied to miracles.

Verse 9 identifies the body of people who began to make trouble for Stephen: the Synagogue of the Freedmen. “Freedmen” were people who had once been slaves but who had been released, and in this case, the synagogue identifies these freedmen as Jews. Moreover, we know exactly what regions these rabble-rousers represented. Cyrene was the chief city in Libya and north Africa and was halfway between Alexandria and Carthage. We know that one of its population groups was Jewish. Cilicia was a Roman province in southeast Asia Minor adjoining Syria. Tarsus, the birthplace of Saul/Paul, was one of its principal towns. Asia was a Roman province in the western part of Asia Minor, and Ephesus was its capital. (NASB Study Notes from NASB Study Bible.)

These Hellenistic Jews were no happier with Stephen than the Jerusalem Jews were with Paul and John. Verse 10 tells us they were “unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” What caused their intense anger and inability to cope with Stephen’s wisdom?

Paul provides insight into this phenomenon. 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 tells us:

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God

through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

In other words, Paul explains that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the natural man. To those who have not been born again, God’s wisdom is inscrutable. Even more, Paul clarifies that Jews demand signs in order to believe. The prophets had foretold One who would bring sight to the blind and make the deaf hear and the lame to walk. They had been predisposed to recognize the Messiah by His signs.

Greeks, on the other hand, wanted wisdom. Their culture placed a high value on philosophy and reason, and things had to make rational sense in order for them to believe. The Hellenistic Jews were a composite of these two profiles. As Jews, they knew the prophecies and expected their fulfillment; as cultural Greeks, they had absorbed the love of philosophy and reason. While Stephen performed the signs of God, they resented the very physical reality of the gospel He preached: a Savior who lived as a man, died, and rose to death, shedding blood for sin. They could not accept such an ordinary Messiah. Moreover, Stephen’s wisdom was God’s w

2 Corinthians gives us even more insight into the reason for these Jews’ rejection of Stephen’s message. Paul explains in this chapter that in order to understand God’s wisdom, which is not the wisdom of this age, one must have the Spirit of God. Those without the Spirit cannot understand the things of the Spirit. The Hellenistic Jews to whom Stephen was preaching insisted on interpreting his messages through their syncretistic Jewish-Greek veil.

Jesus had forewarned that His witnesses would meet ridicule and persecution. In Matthew 10:17-20 He said, “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

Again Luke 12:11-12 records, “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, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Stephen was experiencing the precise things Jesus said would happen. He was met with disbelief, slander, trumped up charges, and finally arrest by the Council. Then, when they had him where they thought they wanted him, they still couldn’t avoid the reality of the power and presence of Jesus. They all looked at him, and they “saw his face like the face of an angel” (v. 15).

## FALSE WITNESSES

The false witnesses the Jews brought against Stephen accused him of speaking “against this holy place [the temple] and the Law.” Moreover, they said he was teaching that Jesus would “destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us” (v. 14).

Stephen was teaching that Jesus fulfilled the shadows of the law. He was the One toward whom the entire Mosaic law pointed, and He had rendered obsolete what they had observed since Moses.

Moreover, Jesus Himself declared that He was the I Am and that they would see Him seated at the Father’s right hand and coming in glory. Mark 14:62-64 records, “‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ And the high priest tore his garments and said, ‘What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death.”

Jesus’ own testimony of His identity and authority and glory with the Father resulted in the Sanhedrin’s condemning Him to death. He had also foretold His death and resurrection, using the metaphor of the “temple”:

“Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, ‘This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days’” (Mt. 26:59-61).

“So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (Jn. 2:18-22).

The Jews had misunderstood Jesus’ comparison of Himself to the temple and had understood his words in a very literal, material way. Even now, as Stephen spoke to the Hellenistic Jews, the significance of Jesus as the living reality

that fulfilled the shadows of the non-living temple and the animal sacrifices was lost on them. They were still reacting to Jesus, even after His death and resurrection which had rocked the Jewish world, in the same way the Pharisees had reacted prior to His death.

When Jesus called His body the temple—and furthermore, when Paul and Peter write that the bodies of believers are God’s temple, these statements are not referring to any holiness of the actual physical bodies of Jesus or of believers. Jesus used the temple metaphor of Himself because within Him resided everything that Jews had understood the temple to house: the Light of God, the bread of God, the Law of God, and the literal presence of God. Jesus IS GOD. The temple had stood as a physical shadow of the spiritual and literal reality of the Lord Jesus who would actually BE God on earth. He is the cleansing water of the laver; He is the perfect Sacrifice; He is the Law-giver and the living Law, the Light of the world, the Bread of life, Immanuel! Everything that defined Judaism was alive, not merely symbolized, in the person of Christ. He Himself is the perfect Israel; He Himself is the fulfillment of every single details that defined Judaism.

When Jesus said he would destroy the temple and raise it in three days, He was doing more than being clever; He was saying, “I am The Real Thing. I am what you have been acting out and observing and worshipping. I AM the temple...the real temple.” He wasn’t merely pointing out a similarity and putting two similar ideas together with a play on words. He was identifying Himself as the temple, and He was stating that the temple that stood in Jerusalem was the “unreal” thing.

Similarly, when Stephen preached Jesus to the Hellenistic Jews, He was declaring Jesus to be the real thing the fulfillment of all their ritual and cultural and historic shadows. They were enraged. They identified themselves by their Judaism; it set them apart and gave them uniqueness among their Greek neighbors. Because they were unwilling to know the Reality behind the shadows, they rejected Jesus because of their love of worldly wisdom and practices, and turned on Stephen.

## FULFILLING JESUS’ WORDS

Stephen’s persecution at the hands of his fellow Hellenistic Jews was a significant moment in the history of the church. The move of the gospel into the territories of the Jews living in Greek communities marked the spread of the gospel beyond the confines of Jerusalem. Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew, was the first Christian martyr. Jesus had said this sort of hostility would happen—but when it did happen, His disciples would know that it was not different than the world had treated Him.

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not

greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me” (Jn. 15:18-21).

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

Jesus had given the assurance ahead of time that when they were persecuted, His witnesses could know that it was not them personally that people hated; it was Jesus. Not only could they know they were taking the blows for Jesus, but they could also know that He had already overcome the world. Even when these terrible persecutions and deaths would happen, they could have peace, because their real peace was in Him. They would have tribulation in the world, but they would have peace in Him.

Stephen knew both the promise and the reality of this peace in Jesus at the very same time he was experiencing the cruelty of the world.

Jesus had also said, “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Mat. 10:21-22).

“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt. 24:9-14).

We, like Stephen, can know that persecutions will come. It is not ours to choose the nature of our persecutions, but when we choose Jesus, we will be misunderstood and even hated. We will experience coldness, shunning, false accusations, and we can expect to be marginalized.

Stephen’s story is an encouragement to the church—all of us who have come after him. As Stephen was facing ridicule and murderous rage, the Lord Jesus filled Stephen with His glory, and his tormentors saw that they were not attacking a mere man. Jesus glorified Himself through Stephen, and He was Stephen’s peace even in the midst of that rage.

## FACE OF AN ANGEL

Verse 15 tells us that as Stephen spoke, the people saw that his face was as the face of an angel. In order to have a bit of historic perspective on this phenomenon, we’ll look at a few

other instances recorded in Scripture where people's faces reflected God's glory.

Judges 13:2-7 records the story of the angel of the Lord appearing to Manoah's wife who became the mother of Samson. This Person told her that she would have a son who was to live as a Nazirite. The woman reported the incident to her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like the appearance of the angel of God, very awesome. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name, but he said to me, 'Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'"

Manoah's wife experienced a Christophany, an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ. We know this man of God was God because later in the story He accepted their worship. Manoah's wife recognized His divine identity because he "had the appearance of an angel of God."

God's glory is unmistakable. Even to those who do not know Him, when He manifests His glory, people know they are in the presence of Holiness. It may cause them to worship, as it did Manoah's wife, or it may cause them to be enraged, but God's glory is unmistakable.

Ecclesiastes 8:1 says, "Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed."

True wisdom, as we learned in 2 Corinthians 2, is from God and is understood only when one has the Spirit of God. True wisdom is reflected in the face of the one who receives God's spirit and His wisdom. Interestingly, this passage in Ecclesiastes states that true wisdom changes the hardness of one's face. When a person moves from unbelief to belief and receives God's Spirit, his face reflects the glory of God. His face shines.

Exodus 34:29-30 and 34-35 tell us of Moses' experience with God:

"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. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him... Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him."

Every time Moses met the Lord in the tent of meeting, his face would literally shine for a time after he was done. It was so bright that he would cover it so people couldn't see it—and, we learn in 2 Corinthians 3, so that people wouldn't see it fading. God's presence with Abraham made his face shine.

Another account of shining faces occurred at the transfig-

uration. Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the mountain in the presence of Peter, James, and John, and Jesus was transfigured before the disciples.

Matthew records the event like this: "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (Mt. 17:2). The three disciples beheld Jesus glorified with the giver of the Law and the representative of prophecy, and they were there when the Law and the Prophets disappeared, Jesus alone was left, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him."

The glory of Jesus surpassed and succeeded the Law and the Prophets, and given the biblical history of shining faces and beings, the glory that transfigured Jesus was the glory of God. It was not just His face that shone; His entire being was transfigured. Jesus has the full power and glory of God, and God's own glory is what lasts and fulfills the law and the prophets.

Paul further explains the glory of Jesus' fulfillment of the law and the prophets in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18. Here he describes the Spirit covenant for those who believe Jesus. He says, "Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

We ourselves have the glory of God when we believe and are born again of the Spirit. We receive God Himself indwelling us, and His glory shines in and through us. As we behold the Lord Jesus and continue in His word, as He told the Jews who had believed Him, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another, and when the Lord Jesus returns, our entire bodies will be glorified as well.

For now, our "inner man", our spirits, are being transformed and learn to overcome the deeds of the flesh. This transformation that occurs by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit is what shows on our faces. This presence of God

is what caused Stephen's face to shine, and the unbelieving Jews knew they were looking at heavenly glory. They knew his face shone like that of an angel.

## MEDITATE

Is God asking you to submit and trust Him in a way that you have not? Are there people whose trust and reliance on the power and word of God annoy you? Does your own trust in God annoy others?

God is asking you to "put all your eggs in His basket", to borrow a metaphor. He wants your heart to be undivided. You cannot maintain a hold on your deeds of the flesh or your

rationalization of God's word and experience His peace and His power. What is God asking you to lay down and entrust to Him? What do you most resent or fear giving up to God?

God does not show us how He will fill our hearts and lives in the places where we give up what we love or desire until we actually trust Him, but choosing Jesus over our particular beliefs or practices or loves is always infinitely more satisfying and resolved than is hanging onto our rights to have them.

God wants to increase His glory showing through you. He asks you to trust Him with your rationalizing and your fear of loss or shame or grief. He asks you to put all your held-back concerns into His hands, and He Himself will become the Truth in those circumstances of your life.

# ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

## STUDY 22

### ACTS 6:8-15

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FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

After the Seven were appointed to serve the widows of the Hellenistic Jews, Stephen, a man identified in verse 5 as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”, was doing signs and wonders and was witnessing of Christ to his fellow Hellenistic Jews. Now the Hellenistic Jews began persecuting one of their own.

1. How was Stephen demonstrating what the Lord Jesus had promised His disciples just before His ascension, and what was the point of his signs and wonders?

Acts 1:8 \_\_\_\_\_

John 4:48 \_\_\_\_\_

2. What was the “Synagogue of the Freedmen”, what regions do the cities in verse 9 represent?

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3. Why were the Jews “unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking”?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 \_\_\_\_\_

1 Corinthians 2:1-16 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 10:17-20 \_\_\_\_\_

Luke 12:11-12 \_\_\_\_\_

4. The Jews secretly brought in false witnesses to accuse Stephen. On what did they base their accusations that he blasphemed “against Moses and against God”?

vv. 12-14 \_\_\_\_\_

Mark 14:62-64 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 26:59-61 \_\_\_\_\_

John 2:18-22 \_\_\_\_\_

**5. How did the Jews' accusations and rage toward Stephen fulfill, in part, Jesus' words?**

John 15:18-21 \_\_\_\_\_

John 16:33 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 10:21-2 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 24:9-14 \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Stephen's face, as he spoke, was "like the face of an angel," and this fact enraged the Jews further. What other biblical accounts give us some insight into this phenomenon, and what can we conclude about Stephen as he spoke to the Jews?**

Judges 13:2-7 \_\_\_\_\_

Ecclesiastes 8:1 \_\_\_\_\_

Exodus 34:29-30, 35 \_\_\_\_\_

Matthew 17:2 \_\_\_\_\_

2 Corinthians 3:7-18 \_\_\_\_\_

## MEDITATE

**7. Have you ever met anyone who annoyed you because of their wisdom and the presence of the Holy Spirit in them? Have you ever been marginalized because of your commitment to Jesus and the life of the Spirit in you? How is God calling you to stand and witness for Him in a way that might be uncomfortable to you? Ask Him to be your strength and to show you how to be faithful and to allow Him to speak through you.**

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