

THE CROWN

ACTS 6:8-15 DECEMBER 11, 2019

Benjamin Clark is a name worth remembering. He worked as the executive chef at the Fiduciary Trust Company International, where he was responsible for planning meals and feeding over 250 employees. Which company he worked for isn't all that important. It's *where* he worked that's significant: The South Tower of the World Trade Center.¹ After the impact at the North Tower, Benjamin took it on himself to evacuate the 96th floor. "After several hundred people safely fled downstairs, Clark reportedly went back to lock up and make sure everyone had left."² He was last seen on the 88th floor, trying to help a woman in a wheelchair get out of the building.³ He died in the collapse at the age of 39.

Our passage this evening begins the story of another food service worker who paid the ultimate price in his efforts to save people. Stephen, one of the seven chosen to serve the widows, moves from church member to waiter to miracle worker to preacher to, finally, the Church's first martyr.

When he was introduced to us, Luke said that he was a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit." As he's further described tonight we'll see that he was, truly, one of the most remarkable Christians of the time. Listen to how one commentary describes him:

"Stephen was 'full of' or controlled by five factors: the Spirit, wisdom, faith, grace, power....Furthermore, he did great wonders and miraculous signs....What an outstanding leader!"⁴

It's true, he is *outstanding* on the pages of Scripture. As we read about this remarkable man and see his incredible potential, I can't help but wonder why God allowed his life to be cut short. It's one of those puzzlers that will pop up in the book from time to time. Stephen dies, Philip lives. James dies, Peter lives.

From the modern point of view, Stephen would've been a great candidate to become executive pastor. Or maybe director of the school of ministry. But, after a short burst of service, he's welcomed home into eternity. What might the Lord have been doing by allowing this tragic injustice to be carried out against His servant? Let's take a look as we finish out chapter 6.

Acts 6:8 - ⁸ Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

A few verses ago, Luke described Stephen as being full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Now, having been activated to serve in the Body of Christ, he's characterized as full of *grace* and *power*. It wasn't his own, it was the Lord's. It was the Spirit working in him, speaking through him, using him in remarkable ways. When it says he was full of 'grace,' does that mean God's grace toward him or his grace toward others? I think a case can be made for both. It's clear that God poured out His favor on Stephen, but we'll also see him act with a level of grace toward others that is hard to imagine. As he's being murdered by his own countrymen, he prays that God would forgive them. That's a grace

¹ <https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/remembering-benjamin-clark-executive-chef>

² <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2002/america.remembers/stories/heroes/clark.html>

³ <https://www.firerescue1.com/9-11/articles/13-heroes-to-remember-13-years-later-53kVvEgJI8M0fOvN/>

⁴ Bible Knowledge Commentary

matched only by Jesus Christ on the cross when He said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

And yet, that’s the *kind* of grace that we’re meant to operate with as Christians. *That* kind of good will and kindness, even toward our enemies. And we see here that it *is* possible.

We’re also told that Stephen was performing signs and wonders. This is a problem for those who say that miracles were only for the apostolic age - that the signs and wonders were really only meant to *authenticate* the message of the 12 and Paul, since the New Testament hadn’t be written yet. But here we have *another* Christian performing the same sorts of miracles. We’ll also see Philip doing the same. Neither of these men were apostles. So, while we agree that the miracles *did* authenticate the message of the apostles, we don’t have good Biblical reason to say that they were a temporary work of God that has ceased in our day and age.

Before moving on, I’d have us note that Stephen’s power was power *in action*. His life wasn’t just like a battery that *held* all sorts of energy, it was a *conduit*. We want to be conduit Christians who are about the business of serving, Christians who aren’t always storing up spiritual things for ourselves and never giving it out. We’re meant to be spiritual engines in gear.

Acts 6:9 - ⁹ Then some from what is called the Freedmen’s Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and disputed with Stephen.

It seems that Stephen was meeting in a particular synagogue which was made up of Jews who had been enslaved in foreign lands but now were free, or perhaps their descendants. And, it seems probable that Stephen could’ve even been a *member* of this synagogue before his conversion. After all, we know he was from outside Judea. He was a Hellenistic Jew. And here he finds himself, trying to preach the truth of Jesus Christ to these Jewish brothers.

Cilicia’s capital was the city of Tarsus. Saul, who would later become the Apostle Paul, was from that city. And when Stephen is murdered, there Saul is, standing in agreement. It’s a bit of speculation, but there’s good circumstantial evidence indicating that Saul would’ve been in that synagogue or at least in these debates, he being a great Pharisee at the time.

Acts 6:10 - ¹⁰ But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

So, in addition to being a faithful, humble, servant-hearted, miracle worker, Stephen also had one of the most powerful apologetics ministries the world has ever seen! Of course, it wasn’t his own intellect accomplishing these things. It was the Spirit in him.

But, with all due respect, the more we learn about this guy, the more surprising it is when we *don’t* see God deliver him from his enemies. I mean, compare Stephen to Bartholomew. Or Thomas the Twin (who is more commonly referred to as Doubting Thomas). Stephen could speak. He could serve. He could work signs. He could defend the faith. He’s the Steve Rogers of the early church!

Acts 6:11 - ¹¹ Then they persuaded some men to say, “We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God!”

These Jews from the Freedmen's Synagogue, who may have even been *friends* of Stephen previously, switch tactics. When *contending* with him didn't work, they move to *conspiracy*. And, from the start, we see the way in which their minds have been perverted. They think they are protecting the Jewish faith and defending the God of heaven, but look how twisted their thinking has become: They say, "We heard him blaspheming *Moses*." And they even place Moses before God Himself. You can't blaspheme Moses. These are men who think they are devout, but have been ruined by religion.

Here we have a sad contrast. While Stephen is working to convince people that the Messiah has come to set them free from sin and death, these *other* guys are convincing people to commit a crime in the hopes that an innocent man will be arrested and, ultimately, murdered. We notice that the men themselves weren't gutsy enough to falsely accuse Stephen. No, they found some impressionable friends and, essentially, said, "Ok, now *YOU* pull the fire alarm."

Acts 6:12 - ¹² They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, dragged him off, and took him to the Sanhedrin.

There's a thoughtfulness to what they're doing. They didn't want just any old rabble causing a ruckus. They made sure to get community leaders involved *and* the Scribes, who were legal experts. They're doing an excellent job of railroading Stephen and before we know it, he's in front of the Sanhedrin.

Throughout the process he has no lawyer, no protesters outside. But he's far from standing alone. The Lord Jesus Christ is with him in power, we'll see that. But we note that, for all her *spiritual* power, the Church at this point had absolutely zero *political* power or influence. No one was going to put a phone call in to the Apostles so they knew what was going on. But we've seen that their lack of political protection was ok. God still moved. Revival still happened. Lives were still changed.

Now, given the option, *of course* we prefer freedom and autonomy and the ability to engage in the political and governmental systems around us. But a scene like this one reminds us that our freedoms, though very good, are by no means the norm for God's people in most places and most eras. We should thank God for the rare privilege of freedom that we enjoy and remember it's neither *guaranteed*, nor is it *necessary* for the Church to thrive.

Acts 6:13-14 - ¹³ They also presented false witnesses who said, "This man does not stop speaking blasphemous words against this holy place and the law. ¹⁴ For we heard him say that Jesus, this Nazarene, will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us."

Of course, this was *not* what Stephen had said. Perhaps he had spoken to them about Jesus' prophecy that the Temple would be destroyed. Undoubtedly he had spoken to them of the *New Covenant* that Jesus had established. But, like his Lord before him, Stephen's message was distorted, misinterpreted and lied about. These accusers were so entrenched in *tradition* that they would not hear the Good News of the Gospel. They didn't even hear *themselves!* In their zeal to protect the Law, they're breaking the ninth commandment, in hopes that they'll be able to break the sixth commandment and get this guy killed.

“But we have customs handed down from Moses to us.” Many times Jesus pointed out to the religious leaders of Israel that these so-called Mosaic customs that they dedicated themselves to weren’t even Biblical. They were the constructions of men, masquerading as the word of God.

Traditions can be very good, but they can also be very dangerous. Traditions always *seem* like they’re these stone pillars that are unchanging and hold up our faith, but, traditions subtly shift and change, whether we recognize it or not. And, as we see here, they can actually be an obstacle in hearing what God is saying and seeing how He’s moving. Their obsession with their man-made traditions blinded them from accepting Stephen’s message of *truth*, even when he was working signs and wonders right before their very eyes. So, let’s be careful about how we use tradition.

Any honest listener in the Sanhedrin that day would’ve known that the Christians weren’t anti-temple. They came to worship *every day* in the temple! But there’s nothing honest about what’s happening to Stephen in this passage.

Acts 6:15 - ¹⁵ And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

The Lord makes His presence known here in a profound way. These accusers set themselves up as the defenders of the truth of Moses. They cast Stephen as the anti-God, anti-revelation blasphemer. And yet, it’s *Stephen* whose face was shining like Moses’ face had after being in the presence of God and speaking with Him and hearing His revelation. Signs and wonders aside, it should’ve been clear to everyone there whose side God was on in this courtroom drama.

Most of you know the rest of the story. In the coming verses Stephen will deliver a sermon before the court and, in the end, in a rage, these men will brutally murder him for his faith in Jesus.

Why would the Lord be ok with that? It’s clear God was present in these proceedings. He’s lighting up Stephen’s face. He opens up heaven to show that He and the Father were *literally* watching these things unfold in real time. Why not save him? Why not deliver him? This servant with such potential.

Well, we can’t answer for God. He has ways that we can’t find out. We *know* He is good and His plan is perfect. What we *can* see is what happened as a result of Stephen’s death. Stephen’s killing was the spark that led to a wide scattering of believers all through the empire. Interestingly, we’re told later (in Acts 11) that *Cyrenian* men took the message of Jesus all the way to Antioch which would experience a great revival, with large numbers of people being added to the church. Antioch would become the center of God’s work and it would be the place where the disciples were first called Christians. Cyrenian men who had, almost assuredly, been in the audience of Stephen’s debates.

His death was also instrumental in the conversion of the Apostle Paul, a man whose impact on human history is so great it cannot be measured. Stephen’s death was the groundbreaking which launched the unstoppable spread of Christianity which continues here and now all over the world.

I’m sure that, had he survived, Benjamin Clark would’ve plated some fine dishes in his career. Maybe he would’ve even competed on *Top Chef* and opened a restaurant or two. But, the hundreds of people who he saved and their families are *much* better off since he laid down his life on their behalf.

At the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, Benjamin's chef's hat is on display, commemorating his legacy not as a food server, but a life saver.⁵

Some of you may know what Stephen's name means in the Greek language. It means "crown." The *stephanos* was the wreath of flowers or leaves worn, most famously, by winners at the Olympic games.

Paul, a man responsible for Stephen's death, would later write, *multiple times*, that we as Christians are to live our lives in pursuit of the *stephanos*. That eternal reward which will never fade away. I'm sure it was hard for him to write those words and remember that terrible day when he held the coats and consented to an innocent man's murder. But, how fitting that Stephen became the first recipient of the Crown of Life, given to those who are killed for the Lord's sake.

I'm confident Stephen wasn't looking to be martyred that day, but the Lord, in His perfect knowledge, determined that Stephen's race would be a sprint, not a marathon. At the end of the races, both the winner of the 100 yard dash and the 26.2 miles each received the same crown, right? No one turns to the sprinter and says, "Why don't you run long distances?" No one turns to the marathoner and says, "What a waste! Why don't you sprint?" They have different giftings. Different callings. Each hoping to attain that crown. The *stephanos*. This is the image Paul gives us of the Christian life.

Stephen had a lot of potential from our way of thinking. Had we been making the decisions, we'd have given him a long career in the ministry. But God had a different race for him. One that was pivotal for human history. One that leaves a profound legacy. Stephen's life on the pages of Scripture *embodies* the pursuit of Jesus Christ and laying hold of the crown. The heavenly reward for faithful service. Not running aimlessly, but toward a specific purpose. Which is to honor God and be used by Him in whatever ways *He* sees fit, becoming more and more like Jesus as we go. Knowing that we will have to sacrifice along the way and may encounter *real* trouble, but being willing to run as hard as we can, as long as the Lord's course for us is.

⁵ <https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/remembering-benjamin-clark-executive-chef>