

THE GLOWING WITNESS

ACTS 6:8-15

Do you know what an *epithet* is? An epithet is a descriptive phrase, linked to a name, that helps to describe a particular character or thing. History is replete with figures who are known by an epithet. Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia; William the Good, King of Sicily; Leopold the Able, Duke of Austria; Ivan the Terrible, Tsar of Russia; and Winnie the Pooh, Beloved Bear.

There are several characters in the Bible whose lives and legacies are described with an epithet. Enoch, the man who “walked with God;” Abraham, “the friend of God;” Moses, “the meekest man on the face of the earth” (Num.12:3); David, “man after God’s own heart;” Barnabus, Son of Encour-agement (Acts 4:36). These phrases summarized a notable, conspicuous characteristic about each of these men.

If you were given an epithet, what would it be? If people who know you best were to distill the very essence of your life and character in one concise phrase, what would they say?

I think it would be valuable to know, if for no other reason than to know if people identify who we are with something significant, something impactful, something eternally consequential. I mean, who of us wants to settle for just being considered “a nice guy,” or “the life of the party,” or “the prettiest girl in town,” or “a great athlete,” “a straight shooter,” “a wheeler-dealer,” or “a really cool dude?”

Nothing wrong with any of those descriptions. But I certainly would not be satisfied if any of them were the *most* notable, *most* conspicuous feature of my life. Because while those traits might endear me to people or earn their admiration, none of them are very substantive.

I don’t know about you, but I want my life to count for something that is more compelling than simply being *nice* or *funny* or *hard working*. I want my life and my legacy to be about something that is bigger than me, something that will make an impact on the people I encounter and the community where I live that endures long after I’m gone.

This morning we’re going to consider the life of a man who did just that. He’s one of my favorite characters in the Bible, and I like him all the more because my twin brother is named after him. It’s Stephen. And we immediately find out who Stephen is and what he was all about because his name is followed by an epithet. Look at **verse 8**. *“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.”*

Stephen, “full of grace and power,” was one of the seven men we were introduced to last week who were chosen to assist the Apostles in helping with some of the practical needs in the growing church. But even when these servants are named (beginning in verse 5) Stephen’s name is followed by another epithet. *“They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...” (6:5).*

Stephen was full of a lot of things, wasn’t he? He was full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace, and full of power. He exhibited these qualities and these traits to such a degree that when people encountered him, when people heard him speak, or when people observed his attitudes and actions, these were the most striking features about him. When people were around Stephen, they got to see what faith looked like, they got to be exposed to the Holy Spirit, they got to experience God’s grace and power. When people got close to Stephen these were the things that rubbed off on them.

So, when he is described as a man full of *faith* it means that he was willing to take Christ at His word, to put his complete confidence in His promises, and to risk all for the sake of the Christ. It means that he wasn’t hampered by fear, and he wasn’t plagued by doubt. He

wasn't inhibited, he wasn't wishy-washy, he didn't hold back, and he didn't waver. Stephen was full of the kind of faith that the writer of Hebrews describes in chapter 11, the kind of faith one must possess, he says, in order to please God.

When Stephen is described as a man full of the *Holy Spirit* it means that he was under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It means he was able, to some degree, to think the Spirit's thoughts after Him, and to speak the Spirit's words. It means that Stephen was displaying the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:25), because any time someone is full of the Holy Spirit these qualities are evident.

When Stephen is described as full of *grace* it means that he wasn't critical, he wasn't judgmental, he didn't jump to conclusions, he wasn't easily offended, and he didn't hold grudges. He saw the best in other people, he gave the benefit of the doubt, he was quick to forgive and slow to become angry.

And, finally, Stephen was full of *power*. Not his own power, but God's power. God was doing things through him—significant things, supernatural things. The last part of verse 8 says that Stephen “*was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*” By the way, this is the first reference in Acts to miraculous signs and wonders being done by anyone other than the apostles, which tells us that God does miracles through ordinary people who are full of faith and the Spirit. It also tells us that even though Stephen had a specific role in the church—ministering to neglected and needy widows—his ministry wasn't limited to that assignment. Stephen was a vessel of the Holy Spirit, which means that as long as he was filled with the Spirit, he could do whatever the Spirit enabled him to do.

The Spirit is not restricted by job descriptions. Just because you are not a pastor doesn't mean you cannot preach the Word. Just because you are not an evangelist doesn't mean you cannot win people to Christ. Just because you are not a licensed counselor doesn't mean that you cannot effectively minister to someone who is troubled. Just because you are not one of the twelve apostles doesn't mean you cannot perform miraculous signs and wonders.

If the Spirit wants to do something, and you are willing to be filled by Him and used by Him to do it, then there's no telling what He might do through you. The only things that restrict Him from using us to do extraordinary things for Jesus are our lack of faith, our fear, our unwillingness, or our sin.

Now, I'm not advocating that we leave this building and say, “Good, I'm going to go out and do some miracles this afternoon.” Or “I'm going to go out and win someone to Christ this evening.”

I don't believe that when verse 8 says that Stephen “did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people” it was because he just decided to go out and do them, any more than the apostles decided to go out and do them. Stephen and the apostles performed signs and wonders because the *Holy Spirit* had decided to do them, and they were simply ready and willing to be used by Him to do these things. It was the Spirit's timing, it was the Spirit's power, and it was the Spirit's sovereign choice to do them through His servants. Remember, the Holy Spirit is the main character in the Book of Acts.

Still, there *is* something admirable about Stephen. He could have ignored or resisted or disobeyed the Spirit's promptings. Instead, he must have said to the Spirit, “I'm available. I'm willing. Fill me and use me for whatever you want to do.”

That is a prayer that pleases God. But be aware, it's a prayer that may get you in trouble with other people. Look at **verse 9**. *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.

Jews from many nations resided in Jerusalem and belonged to synagogues that conducted their services in languages other than Hebrew. The men who belonged to the *Synagogue of the Freedmen* were Greek speaking Jews from North Africa and Asia Minor who had been liberated from slavery or imprisonment. Tarsus, Saul's hometown, was one of these cities, and it's possible that Saul himself may have been part of this group that began to argue with Stephen.

We are not told why they began to argue, but we can assume it was for the same reasons the religious leaders opposed the apostles. They were trying to protect what they held most dear—their religion and their traditions. The message of the Gospel was challenging these things. The demonstrations of undeniably divine power and the astounding growth of the church were threatening the underpinnings of Judaism. So, in order to protect and preserve their religion, they went after the ones they perceived were doing the most damage. They began by engaging Stephen in theological debates. **Verse 10,** *¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

Stephen was outnumbered but not outmatched. Why? Was it because he was so brilliant? Was it because his IQ was superior to theirs? No. The reason they could not withstand him is because he was full of wisdom and the Spirit.

What is wisdom? Wisdom is the ability to think God's thoughts after Him. To say it another way: Wisdom is having God's mind about a matter. So, if a person has wisdom, it means that his/her mind is tuned to God's mind so that he/she is able to discern what God thinks and then speak God's words.

That's what Stephen was doing here. Remember, he was full of the Holy Spirit, which meant that his mind was under the influence of the Spirit, which meant that the Spirit of God was giving Stephen the thoughts to think and the words to speak. Incidentally, Jesus had promised His followers that this would happen. He said in Luke, ***“For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:15).***

By the way, Jesus didn't promise to give wisdom so we could win arguments, or so we could render our adversaries speechless and thereby make them look foolish or feel ashamed. The promise for His disciples is that they would be able to communicate irrefutable truth—truth that would be so credible that no one would be able to deny or disprove it.

That does not mean, necessarily, that the adversaries would change their minds and believe the truth. I think we all know that just because someone hears irrefutable truth does not mean they will respond favorably to it. They may become even more agitated or hostile just because they feel bested by the truth. That is certainly what happened in this instance.

But before we look at their response, let me ask you this question: Does Jesus, by His Spirit, still give us wisdom so that we can think His thoughts and speak His words *today*? How do you do know? Because we are given this promise in the Book of James: *⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (1:5-6).*

That is the same wisdom, by the way, that Stephen had, and if you want it, you just have to ask God for it in faith, and He *will* give it to you. Which is precisely why, before I go to my office each day, before I sit down at my desk to prepare a sermon or a Bible lesson, before I begin to counsel someone, before I have a difficult meeting or go into a difficult situation, before I have any kind of meeting, I pray for wisdom.

I pray for wisdom because I believe the pro-mise—that if you ask God for it in faith, He

will give it. I pray for wisdom because I believe that God's perspective and God's opinions are the only ones that are completely true and reliable, and, therefore, are the only ones that really matter. I pray for wisdom because if I don't have His wisdom, I'm going to falter and flounder and think things and say things that are inaccurate and inconsequential. I do not trust my opinions or my perspectives, nor should you.

But it raises an important question. How do you know when you are under the influence of the Spirit's wisdom? How do you know when your thoughts are His thoughts, and your words are His words?

My answer to that question is: We *don't* always know. I find it interesting that Peter, in the context of instruction about spiritual gifts, said in his first epistle, "*If anyone speaks, he should speak as one speaking the very words of God*" (4:11 NIV).

If I follow that admonition and use my gift of teaching to speak as one speaking the very words of God, can you or I have confidence that my words are, in fact, the very words of God? I hope that they are. I pray that they are. But I'm not sure that all of them are.

When I'm counseling someone and I've prayed for wisdom, can I (or the person I'm talking to) have confidence that my counsel is the counsel of God? I hope it is. I'm pretty sure that sometimes it is, but I'm not sure that all of it is.

What I am sure about is that God has promised to give wisdom to those who ask for it in faith. What I am sure about is that God does use His servants on this earth to speak for Him. What I am sure about is that God wants to reveal His mind about matters. So, I proceed as though He *wants* to speak through *me*.

But I am also sure that God's wisdom may not be interpreted as wisdom by those who hear it. It may be interpreted as foolishness. It may be despised or rejected. That is certainly what happened in this case.

Look at **verses 11-14**. ¹¹ *Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."* 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,* ¹³ *and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,* 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."*

Sounds an awful lot like what happened to Jesus, doesn't it? After failing to silence Stephen through debate, they got some people to bring false charges against him, which allowed them to get a hearing before the Sanhedrin who, as we know, were already hostile to the Jesus movement.

The reason they charged Stephen with profaning the temple is because when Judea became a Roman province in A.D. 6, capital punishment was allowed only by the decree of the Roman governor, *except* for offenses by word or deed against the sanctity of the temple. In such situations the Sanhedrin was allowed to pronounce and execute the death sentence (Bruce, *Peter, Stephen*, 52-53). They tried to convict Jesus by using this same method but were unsuccessful and had to bring him before Pilate.

But notice what was going on during these false accusations. **Verse 15**. ¹⁵ *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

The word "gaze" means "to stare" or "to look at intently." Stephen's attackers were staring at him, presumably, because they saw something astonishing on Stephen's countenance. His visage became such that *they* concluded that his face was like the face of an angel.

Do you know what the face of an angel looks like? I don't, and I doubt if they did before they saw Stephen that day. But there must have been something unmistakably supernatural

about it. It didn't have the marks of tension and fear and worry that you might expect in such circumstances. I'll bet it glowed.

Ironically, they had accused Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and they had accused him of trying to change the customs Moses had handed down to them. Do you remember what Moses' face was like when he came down the mountain to deliver the law to the people of Israel? It was glowing, probably in the same way Stephen's face was glowing.

Stephen's angelic countenance is yet another evidence of him being full of the Holy Spirit. And as the pressure mounted, as the persecution increased, the Holy Spirit was manifesting *more* of Himself until Stephen the man was hardly recognizable. It was divine glory that became the most prominent feature about him.

There is an interesting verse in 1 Peter that makes me think about Stephen every time I read it. It goes like this: *"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you"* (4:14a). That Spirit of glory was certainly resting on Stephen. In fact, it seems like that glory was on a rheostat, and as the pressure increased, the glory kept getting brighter.

I believe the application from this passage is very simple. Just like Stephen, we ought to be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Not so we can glow like Stephen and call attention to ourselves. Not so we can win theological debates. Not even so we can perform miraculous signs and wonders. But so we can ready and available to be used by God to say what He wants to say and do what He wants to do in any given situation. At home, at work, at school, at church, on the basketball court, in the town hall meeting, in the restaurant, at the grocery store... *wherever* we are.

Do you realize that the same Spirit that filled Stephen dwells in us and wants to fill us, and that this same Spirit has exactly the same agenda as He did when Stephen was alive? He wants to reveal Jesus so that people who don't know Jesus will have an opportunity to believe in Him and be transformed by Him. And the most common way people get to encounter this Jesus is through Spirit filled followers like you and me.

Hymn: "Take My Life and Let it Be"

The Glowing Witness

Acts 6:8-15

Main Idea: There are conspicuously supernatural characteristics in the ministry of a person who is under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Under the Spirit's Influence (vv.8-10)

Stephen's Personal Profile (5a, 8a)

Full of Faith

Full of the Holy Spirit

Full of Grace

Full of Power

Stephen's Mighty Works (8b)

