

# Acts (Quality: good)

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[ 0 : 00 ] I will direct your attention this evening to the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and the eighth verse.

The eighth verse of the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

For now, this evening, as the Lord may help me, I want to consider the choice that was made by the church and confirmed by the apostles, and then particularly to look at the experience of this wonderful man who rose in a kind of meteoric glory in the history of the church and soon disappeared, nevertheless leaving behind him a testimony which has been of great strength and help to the church through the many succeeding generations.

In the fifth verse we read, And the same pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch, whom they set before the apostles.

And when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. Now, you will notice in those seven names recorded in the fifth verse that two particularly stand out in the subsequent history, that is Stephen and Philip.

[ 2 : 29 ] Philip, who at length attended to the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. But in the case of Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and one would judge, Nicholas too, no mention is made of them in the subsequent record.

Nevertheless, they were chosen, as well as Philip and Stephen, to bear the responsibilities of which we spoke this morning.

This tells us that a choice was made in a specific need within the church, but two of the characters chosen, God had a sovereign work for them to do, which exceeded the immediate apprehension of the church concerning them.

While the church chose them to attend to that daily ministration, my friends, God had a sovereign purpose toward Stephen and Philip to use them in a sphere far greater than that appearing initially to those that chose them.

We would also say that in the case of Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, that, although they seem to slide away into comparative insignificance and the history of Luke seems to lack all knowledge of them in their future usefulness, nevertheless, having been chosen by the church and having been set apart according to the mind of God in this work, we believe, they fulfilled their office and attended to these responsibilities.

[ 5 : 05 ] Now, my friends, the Church of Christ benefits by the silent work of the insignificant, as well as by the more public work of those who may be easier identified, may be more significant and apparent in their usefulness and fruitfulness.

And we do not ever wish to neglect an appreciation of the silent ministry that is exercised by those that go in and out and serve the church and serve God too in their particular office and function as God has appointed.

So while we, as it were, dismiss from the scene Prochorus and Nicanor and Timon and Parmenas, particularly, we would say that they continued to serve God and we believe that they purchased themselves a good degree according to the promise of God through the Apostle Paul in his epistle to Timothy.

In the case of Nicholas, the proselyte of Antioch, a proselyte is one that has been converted from another faith, probably a pagan background who was brought under the influence of Christianity and, we hope, to his real conversion.

Sometimes the name of Nicholas here is identified with the sect of the Nicolaitans which is spoken of by God in the revelation as a thing which God hates.

[ 7 : 18 ] Their practice being not only to have common belongings but also to have wives in common.

So that their practice was the breaking down of all separation with regard to marriage identity and, my friends, the evil that was hated by God and condemned in his letters through John to the varying churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

But I do feel that there is a question concerning the connection of Nicholas, the proselyte of Antioch here and that sect of the Nicolaitans which developed later in the history of the church.

Well now, particularly, I want to come to Stephen tonight as I mentioned in my opening remarks.

When we realize that immediately the matter was brought before the multitude of the disciples that they should look out seven men of honest report full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.

[ 9 : 04 ] The first one seems to be almost unanimously appreciated in the character or according to that character.

And the saying pleased the whole multitude and they chose Stephen. And they chose Stephen. And my friends, the Holy Ghost records a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.

Stephen. Oh, he was quickly identified as consistent with the premise given by the apostles as to the type of man suitable for this responsibility.

Stephen. And what a wonderful character, Stephen. Prepared of God for an early grave. Prepared of God to carry his profession in martyrdom not many days hence.

As I say, a meteoric profession of the name of Jesus Christ whom he so dearly loved and an ability given to him by the grace of God to confirm that profession with the pouring out of his own heart's blood.

[ 10 : 46 ] Nevertheless, in verse 8 we have, And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

He seems to have an especial measure of the Spirit. And is it not true throughout scriptural history, and again throughout the subsequent history of the Church, to appreciate that when God gives special gifts to a person, it is for a special use and need.

My friends, God doesn't give special grace to a man to be wasted. God doesn't give special gifts to a person to be lost. God is very sovereign and particular in the bestowal of his grace and gifts.

God gives special gifts to a man to be lost. God gives special gifts to a person, God gives special gifts to a person, it is for a special use. And sometimes we see this, that when God gives special gifts to a person, that person is subject to a special trial.

And so it was with Stephen. My friends, he had an especial measure of grace and ability given, but he soon was called upon to suffer the death of martyrdom in consequence of his profession of the name of Jesus Christ.

[ 12 : 38 ] Well now, the devil, as I mentioned this morning, attempted to split the early church with dissension.

And the apostles, by the grace and wisdom of God, had been able to negotiate a settlement which was agreeable to all and the devil lost the day.

The multitude were agreed. They united. This saying pleased the whole multitude. They rallied to the proposition.

My friends, it seems as though the devil lost the day. I might mention a point that I have hitherto neglected to mention with regard to the choice made by the disciples that all, Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon and Parmenas and Nicholas, they all are Hellenist or Grecian Jews.

that it seems those that had raised the grievance and had begun murmuring had the weapon clean removed from their hand by reason of the election or selection of everyone sympathetic with their side of the case to administer the charities that were for the benefit of widows and needy in the church.

[ 14 : 50 ] so that they may well have said hitherto, look, the apostles are sympathetic with the Hebrew position.

Well now they show that they are not biased in one way or the other. they are quite ready to hand over the responsibility to Grecian Jews, Hellenist Jews if this is the common vote of the church.

All they want is things done in the fear of God and every other consideration is inferior to them in that respect.

So my friends we find that all the seven that were elected were indeed of the Hellenist or Grecian viewpoint as opposed to the Hebrew viewpoint.

And now so the devil had lost the first engagement but this adversary is not slow.

[ 16 : 08 ] My friends don't let us think that our enemy is an enemy who soon tires who is ready to disengage at the first defeat.

Now he is a powerful bow. He is constantly on the attack. If he loses the advantage in one direction he swiftly turns and engages in another direction.

But blessed be God who is above all and over all though he may appear naturally speaking to gain an advantage over the early church by the martyrdom of Stephen.

Nevertheless my friends this sealing of the profession of Stephen by his own heart's blood and the wonderful spirit which is manifest in him throughout the church has a confirmation that he was indeed a true disciple of Jesus Christ possessed of the very spirit of his Lord and Master ready to seal his profession with his own heart's blood in anticipation of a promised place at the right hand of God forevermore.

Well then there arose certain of the synagogue which is called the synagogue of the libertines and Cyrenians and Alexandrians and of them of Cilicia and of Asia disputing with Stephen.

[ 18 : 05 ] Now I do think that Stephen had qualities and abilities that probably far exceeded those of the apostles in a way of learning.

He obviously by his apology in chapter seven was a man of outstanding ability. He had a wonderful mind. He was able by his knowledge and by his gift to summon the history of the Jews and to bring it to bear upon a certain issue that was under disputation.

My friends he was a man of wonderful powers. He was a man of great ability as well as great grace.

Now God used him in this disputation and we find that the more learned of the people were gathered together in conflict with Stephen.

But natural wisdom had to give place to gracious wisdom and spirit for we read and they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

[ 20 : 02 ] Now Stephen full of the Holy Ghost was able to completely overcome the evil purpose and intention of these various peoples tools to bring the gospel into discredit.

What a wonderful thing that God has raised up from time to time those to champion his cause.

Weak men but furnished with an ability and endued with all sufficient grace to engage the powers of darkness who seek to bring to discredit the cause of God and of truth.

We had them in our history at the glorious reformation God there gave to men a wonderful ability to stand firm for the principles of the gospel against the powers of Rome and my friends there they in strength left a testimony sealed with their hearts blood that the gospel of God's grace and the truth as it is in Jesus is indeed God's will and way to salvation salvation now when they were unable to overcome Stephen in what I might term straight argument they then turned to other methods and they suborned men which said we have heard him speak blasphemous words against

Moses and against God and they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes and came upon him and caught him and brought him to the council and set up false witnesses which said this man ceases not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us and all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an angel now my friends what a subtle work these of the synagogue of the libertines engaged in when they realized they couldn't overcome him in argument they then turn to other methods seeking to bring down this man made strong in the strength of the

[ 23 : 26 ] Lord his God it's a dreadful thing when people must need turn to such subtle means in an attempt to negate the testimony of a man speaking by the Holy Ghost isn't it what a terrible thing when men are suborned and people are stirred up and false witnesses are set up in an attempt to bring to naught one who under the anointing of the Spirit of God is bearing testimony to the truth of God well these people would have been wise to take note of the council of

Gamaliel when it is written as we considered last Sunday evening lest happily ye be found to fight against God for who has yet cast themselves against the bosses of the Almighty but to their own confusion at length well my friends so it happened that Stephen swiftly finds himself before the council oh this council again again engaged in much the same work resisting God and his spirit in the raising up and sending forth of men to declare the truth as he would have it declared and all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him now it's not an uncommon feature in a law court for the eyes of all to fix upon the accused there is that poor criminal in the dock and my friends here are the false witnesses here is the testimony of these people who have caught him and apprehended him and brought him to the council all speaking evil things about him nevertheless as they look upon him they see a man but a man but a man endured with such grace that his face face his face as it had been the face of an angel face of an angel can you conceive that which the Holy

Spirit herein conveys to our minds a man quiet a man composed a man convicted of the righteousness of his cause a man feeling the presence of God in his heart a man waiting upon God for words that shall be spoken remembering the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in that hour it shall be given thee what thou shalt say my friends not a man worried perplexed distraught trembling fearful apprehensive of the consequence that a man standing with God almighty at his right hand strengthening him supporting him moving him to save that which is right and convenient at every given opportunity day oh there's such a sweet quietness and composure under a realisation of the presence of God and the righteousness of one's cause life ends while the world twists and turn for every avenue of possible hope and deliverance there

Stephen stands committing his way unto the Lord trusting also in him whether for life or for death believing the Lord will bring it all to pass according to his sovereign pleasure for now to some degree the charges laid at Stephen's door have substance in them because these of the synagogue of the libertines were holding fast to Moses and the ceremonial dispensation Stephen and those apostles with him were testifying that those things found their fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ and that the dispensation of the law and the testimony embodied in the temple had now found its fulfilment in the spiritual application of it all in

Jesus Christ now these men though religious were obviously carnally minded they couldn't see above or through the carnal or natural or temporal significance of the ceremonial but my friends Stephen and those enlightened of the spirit could see that the old dispensation was but a type of the new and that now the ceremony and so forth had been nailed to the cross of Christ that it had found its fulfilment in his crucifixion and by his death and that we were now in another dispensation we were now in a gospel day that the old things had passed away and the very things signified by the old dispensation were now before our eyes well you see these things were viewed by faith and they still are the natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God a carnally minded man can only appreciate carnal things a natural man can only see with natural eyes but a man endued of the spirit of God a man enlightened from on high he sees further and deeper into these things of

[ 31 : 24 ] God and my friend Stephen could see their significance their application dispensation he could see the fulfilment of the old dispensation in the person the life the death the resurrection of Jesus Christ and therefore he spoke as Christ himself spoke of the discontinuance of the temple the discontinuance of the ceremony that they were no longer necessary and under this of course the Jews who were naturally approaching the teaching of Stephen and of the apostles my friends they couldn't understand it was beyond you know when we come into the spiritual things of God today the natural man can't understand when we talk of the new birth well those that are born again know of what we speak they know something of the change they know something of the new nature as opposed to the old nature but my friends those that know nothing of the new birth well it's a strange language to them we can trace out the influence of the new birth and the change upon the heart and life of a person but those that have never known the new birth they can't enter into it it's a strange experience to them and it is so with these men they couldn't go with

Stephen because they didn't understand it it was a foreign tongue to them they were still I was going to say entooled in the natural apprehension of spiritual things and it was far beyond them and above them and so in their ignorance they rail upon Stephen and upon the fellow apostles who are walking in the resurrection power and light and spirit of the gospel as it is in Jesus Christ now the high priest he asked the question are these things so then Stephen enters into a lengthy apology with regard to his position his belief and of course the belief of those that were joined to him in the same doctrine of the truth as it is in Jesus

Christ now one feature of Stephen's ministry is well worthy of our notice that is how he comes out flat against the tradition of the Jews the Jews were full of national pride they couldn't see anything outside of their own border they couldn't accept anything outside of the limit of their own nationality but my friends Stephen uses the truth the history the record of the Old Testament to show how God has been working outside of their own nation he opens his remarks in the second verse of this seventh chapter the God of glory appeared unto our father

Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia now the very beginnings of things in our national history was outside of our own border it was when our father Abraham was yet in Mesopotamia you see how he immediately lays the axe to the root of the tree of tradition he comes straight away to the point and he said look you Jews you are introspective you can't believe that anything outside of the limits of your own nation can possibly be the work of God doubtless these libertines and so on were questioning the work of God as it was going on through the instrumentality of the apostles the great multitudes of disciples were being taken up with the truth as it is in

Jesus and my friends because it didn't confine itself to the limits of their own tradition they held the whole lot in question oh how evil are such traditions that would limit the sovereign pleasure of our almighty God my friends God is an absolute sovereign an absolute sovereign let us be clear and definite and positive in our thinking in that regard he does not act consistent with the minds and imaginations of men he does as he will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth so straight away Stephen comes to the point which is a direct confrontation of the very traditions of the

[ 37 : 49 ] Jews before whom he was arraigned and he goes on and he says well eventually he was brought into this country wherein ye now dwell but God didn't give him any possession here at all no possession and he goes on and he said God gave him a promise that his seed should sojourn in a strange land and that they should bring them into bondage and entreat them evil for a hundred years now just think that God told Abraham that his posterity would sojourn in a strange land and that they would remain there in bondage entreated evilly for four hundred years

God sustained as it were his promise to Abraham in a strange land for four hundred years now how opposed was this teaching to the traditional approach of the Jew my friends they thought that only that which was in within their own limits could possibly carry the marks of God could possibly be consistent with the mind and will of the most heart and Stephen's saying look God told our father Abraham that the fathers would dwell for four hundred years in a strange land don't think don't think that only that which is within the limits the confines of our particular tradition can possibly carry the marks of the most high

God dispenses with all those limitations and God uses his own work and God uses his own way and does his own work independent of all the standards of fallen men and so Stephen goes on and he says and the patriarchs moved with envy sold Joseph into Egypt and God was with him in Egypt well it's unthinkable that God should be anywhere else present than in Jerusalem and Judah but he says look God took our father Joseph into Egypt and God was with him there my friends all the absolute I was going to say universality of the truth as it is in Jesus yes God is everywhere and God blesses everywhere don't let us seek to bring

God within the limitations of our tradition God is able to bless whom he will where he will and as he will according to his absolute sovereign will and pleasure God and so I could go on with this teaching but the time has gone in verse 12 of the seventh chapter we have but when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt there was famine in Canaan there was famine in Canaan and there was famine in Egypt and God didn't give wisdom to anybody in Canaan to make provision against the impending famine but he gave wisdom to Joseph in Egypt and the provision was to be made in Egypt and when our fathers needed sustenance they had to go down to Egypt to find it and you see these Jews oh it must have burnt into their very vitals to acknowledge that this thing was so in their own history recorded in the very scripture that was opposed to their traditional viewpoint but this man of

God under the influence of the Holy Spirit was able to bring it forth and to show them how empty and vain were all their traditions so Jacob went down into Egypt and died he and our fathers they all died in Egypt what a work God did in Jewish history in Egypt didn't he in Egypt not in Canaan not in Canaan but also in Egypt and my friends he goes and speaks of the raising up of Moses in Egypt and you know if any nation if any nation was aboard of the Jews it was the Egyptians but nevertheless there it was testifying loudly from their history that God worked in Egypt for the establishment of the nation for the preparation of a deliverer in the due time appointed to bring them forth from that 400 years of hard bondage and he goes on doesn't he and speaks and I cannot go into it all but if you care to study this out in your private reading you'll find that there's a great unfolding in

[ 44 : 12 ] Stephen's apology of God's sovereignty in Israelitish history well then of course Stephen comes to the point where he mentions the house of God Solomon built him a house how be it the most high dwelleth not in temples made with hands for seth the prophet heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool what house will you build me saith the Lord of what is the place of my rest hath not my hand made all these things the glory of the temple is to be done away to be done away was raised up for a purpose for a use it was a finger post pointing forward to Jesus Christ when the things of the temple have found satisfaction in the spiritual application the temple is to be done away so the

Jews glory in a building receives as it were the axe through the testimony of Stephen and crumbles and falls and the Jews writhe and hate the instrument that God has raised up to tell them that their traditions are useless valueless soon to be destroyed but God's work will go on God's work will go on ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears ye do always resist the Holy Ghost as your fathers did so do ye which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the just one of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers so he brings home to the Jews their solemn condition and position as men that fight against God resist the

Holy Spirit that have been guilty of the crucifixion of the promised Messiah my friends oh they eventually fill up they were cut to the heart gnashed on him with their teeth murder takes possession of them they can't spare now they must go in full fury God allows them the same God that raised up Gamaliel that Peter and others should be spared now suffers the same counsel to go to the point of murder and to murder this beautiful character this man that stood before them with the face as an angel of God declaring the truth the whole truth though it may be to their condemnation they take him out and they stone him they stone him but what a beautiful spirit yea even the spirit of his lord and master does

Stephen manifest in his martyrdom and they stone Stephen calling upon God and saying Lord Jesus receive my spirit and my friends his spirit rose to Jesus Christ who bought him with his own heart's blood Stephen's blood was meritoriously worthless but the blood of Jesus Christ that not long before had flowed freely from his head his hands his side and his feet meritoriously prevailed that all the sin of Stephen should be blotted out forevermore and that man of God should rise to his God Lord Jesus receive my spirit and he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice it seems as though the spirit of submission was in his heart as he died he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice forgiveness

Lord lay not this sin to their charge and he that forgiveth much to him much shall be forgiven and my friends Stephen died forgiven a forgiven sinner and his redeemed spirit rose to God where it now dwells and will continue to dwell for eternity to come roar and when he had said he fell asleep and ao au au au au au au au au au au au au re