

The Sound of *Many Waters*

Many Waters is a weekly article written by Ron Cipic, lead pastor of Grand River Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan. To comment or ask a question about this piece, write to Pastor Ron at pastors@grandriverchurch.org. Related Scripture verses for further study are cited at the end of this piece.

Power To Live, Power to Die

"When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes as the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' Having said this, he fell asleep."

~ Acts 7:58-60

Stephen was commissioned to serve as a minister (deacon) in the early church because he was "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Not only did Stephen help coordinate the feeding of widows, but he "performed great wonders and signs among the people." So full of the Spirit was Stephen that the enemies of the gospel "rose up and argued with him." However, Luke reports in Acts, chapter six, that "they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."

Jealousy and anger caused Stephen's opponents to trump up charges against him and drag him before the Sanhedrin, a group of religious leaders who had already proven their hatred for Christ by hanging Him on a tree. Stephen boldly declared to these leaders of Israel that Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets had all pointed to Christ but that they were "stiff-necked" men, men "uncircumcised in heart and ears" who like their fathers had "always resisted the Holy Spirit."

After indicting these leaders as enemies of the God of Israel, this man who was full of the Spirit gazed into heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He declared what he saw for all to hear. And the crowd that had gathered to see this man be falsely accused as a blasphemer went absolutely nuts. After all, Stephen was openly claiming that Jesus is Lord and Judge of all, this same Jesus who they had persecuted and killed on a cross. This was just too much for them to bear. The crowd rushed at Stephen, drove him out of town, and began to stone him mercilessly.

But just as Jesus had done on the cross, Stephen prayed for his enemies as he died. All authentic prayer is inspired by the Holy Spirit. So it was God Himself, the Spirit of Christ, who actually prayed through Stephen for these blood-thirsty, persecutors of His church. In the process, the Holy Spirit empowered Stephen to fulfill the Lord's command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." The Holy Spirit empowered Stephen to live as a Christian. He also empowered him to die as a Christian.

Stephen's life was the proverbial seed of grain sown into the earth, a seed that would bear much fruit. As a result of his death, many would enjoy eternal life. For among Stephen's persecutors was a man named Saul. This Saul would later be converted as he traveled to Damascus to persecute the church. This Saul would himself be filled with the Spirit and become the great Apostle Paul. Countless lives would be impacted through his life and Stephen's self-less prayer would be most miraculously answered. *RC*

Study Verses: Acts 6 and 7; Lu. 23:33-34; Matt. 5:43-48; Jn. 12:24; and Acts 9:1-31.

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